

Consumer motivations for providing electronic word-of-mouth in virtual pet communities

Marketing
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CONSUMER MOTIVATIONS FOR PROVIDING ELECTRONIC WORD-OF-MOUTH IN VIRTUAL PET COMMUNITIES

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of the study is to identify and describe consumer motivations especially for providing electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) in virtual pet communities. Virtual communities and especially eWOM communication are becoming more popular and affecting consumer buying-decisions by providing extensive information to consumers. Thus, it is important to understand consumer motivations behind this behaviour. Theoretical framework has been conducted after approaching theories from three perspectives: virtual communities, eWOM and consumer motivations for eWOM.

DATA

Qualitative research method, netnography, was chosen in order to provide deeper understanding of the underlying consumer motivations behind providing eWOM communication virtual pet communities. Data was collected from Kissamaailma.net virtual pet community's discussion boards in the Internet. Data set consisted of virtual pet community members' eWOM messages about cats and especially about feeding cats and cat food brands. Total number of analyzed messages was 1 134 and these messages were analyzed through content analysis and divided to motivation categories presented in the theoretical framework emerged from the literature review.

RESULTS

Findings of the study suggest that there are seven distinctive motivations that motivate consumers to provide eWOM in virtual pet communities: concern for other consumers and their pets, helping the company, social benefits, extraversion/self-enhancement, venting negative feelings, exertion of power over companies and advice seeking. Evident from the study is that concern for other consumers and especially their pets, advice seeking and social benefits are what motivate consumers most. Additionally, virtual pet communities and eWOM in them were found to be excellent information source to companies as well as consumers.

KEYWORDS

Electronic word-of-mouth, virtual community, consumer motivations, consumer behaviour, netnography

KULUTTAJIEN MOTIVAATIOT TUOTTAA ELEKTRONISTA WORD-OF-MOUTH VIESTINTÄÄ VIRTUAALISISSA LEMMIKKIYHTEISÖISSÄ

TUTKIELMAN TAVOITTEET

Tutkielman tarkoitus on tunnistaa ja kuvata erityisesti kuluttajien motivaatioita tuottaa elektronista word-of-mouth (eWOM) viestintää virtuaalisissa lemmikkiyhteisöissä. Virtuaaliyhteisöt ja etenkin eWOM viestintä niissä on yhä suosittumpaa ja vaikuttaa kuluttajien ostopäätöksiin tuottamalla paljon tietoa kuluttajille. Sen vuoksi on tärkeää ymmärtää kuluttajien motivaatioita tämän käytöksen takana. Teoreettinen viitekehys on luotu lähestymällä teoriaa kolmelta näkökannalta: virtuaaliyhteisöjen, eWOM viestinnän ja kuluttajien eWOM viestintään liittyvien motivaatioiden kautta.

LÄHDEAINEISTO

Tutkimuksen toteuttamistavaksi valittiin kvalitatiiviseen tutkimusotteeseen kuuluva netnografinen tutkimusmetodi, jotta saataisiin syvempää tietoa kuluttajien perustavana olevista motivaatioista tuottaa eWOM viestintää virtuaalisissa lemmikkiyhteisöissä. Aineisto kerättiin Kissamaailma.net nimisen virtuaalisen lemmikkiyhteisön keskustelupalstalta. Aineisto koostui virtuaalisen lemmikkiyhteisön jäsenien eWOM viesteistä, joissa käsiteltiin kissoja ja etenkin kissojen ruokkimista ja kissanruokamerkkejä. Viestien lopullinen määrä oli 1 134 ja näitä viestejä analysoitiin sisällön analyysin avulla. Viestit jaettiin teoreettisessa viitekehyksessä olevien teoriasta nousseiden motivaatioiden avulla erilaisiin kategorioihin.

TULOKSET

Tutkimuksen tulokset osoittavat, että on olemassa seitsemän toisistaan eroavaa motiivia, jotka motivoivat kuluttajia tuottamaan eWOM viestintää virtuaalisissa lemmikkiyhteisöissä: huoli toisista kuluttajista ja heidän lemmikeistään, yrityksen auttaminen, sosiaaliset edut, positiivisten kokemusten ja oman osaamisen esiintuominen, negatiivisten tunteiden tuulettaminen, valta yrityksistä ja neuvojen etsiminen. Tutkimuksen perusteella on selvää, että huoli toisista kuluttajista ja etenkin heidän lemmikeistään, neuvojen etsiminen ja sosiaaliset edut olivat kuluttajia eniten motivoivia tekijöitä. Lisäksi virtuaaliset lemmikkiyhteisöt ja niissä käyty eWOM viestintä osoittautuivat erinomaiseksi tiedon lähteeksi niin yrityksille kuin kuluttajille.

AVAINSANAT

Elektroninen word-of-mouth viestintä, virtuaaliyhteisö, kuluttajien motivaatiot, kuluttajan käyttäytyminen, netnografia

Table of Contents

| | |
|---|-----------|
| 1 INTRODUCTION..... | 1 |
| 1.1 Background..... | 1 |
| 1.2 Research gap..... | 2 |
| 1.3 Research question and objectives | 4 |
| 1.4 Limitations of the study..... | 4 |
| 1.5 Definitions of key concepts | 5 |
| 1.6 Structure of the thesis | 6 |
| 2 VIRTUAL COMMUNITIES | 7 |
| 2.1 Development of virtual community..... | 7 |
| 2.2 Definition and characteristics of virtual community | 8 |
| 2.2.1 Definitions of virtual communities | 9 |
| 2.2.2 Characteristics of virtual communities | 11 |
| 2.3 Virtual community classifications | 14 |
| 2.3.1 Virtual community types..... | 14 |
| 2.3.2 Virtual community members | 18 |
| 2.4 Summary..... | 21 |
| 3 ELECTRONIC WORD-OF-MOUTH | 22 |
| 3.1 WOM and eWOM | 22 |
| 3.2 Characteristics of eWOM | 24 |
| 3.2 Motivations for engaging in eWOM | 26 |
| 3.2.1 Motives for traditional WOM | 27 |
| 3.2.2 Motives for providing eWOM | 29 |
| 3.2.3 Motives for seeking eWOM..... | 35 |
| 3.3 Motivations for adoption of eWOM..... | 38 |
| 3.3.1 Information quality | 39 |
| 3.3.2 Source credibility | 40 |
| 3.4 Summary..... | 41 |
| 4 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK | 42 |

| | |
|--|------------|
| 5 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY..... | 48 |
| 5.1 Choice of Methodology | 48 |
| 5.2 Netnography | 49 |
| 5.2.1 Characteristics..... | 49 |
| 5.2.2 Possibilities and challenges..... | 51 |
| 5.3 Netnographic research process and procedures | 52 |
| 5.3.1 Cultural entrée..... | 52 |
| 5.3.2 Data collection and analysis..... | 54 |
| 5.3.3 Trustworthiness of research results..... | 56 |
| 5.3.4 Research ethics..... | 57 |
| 6 CASE DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS..... | 60 |
| 6.1 Case description..... | 60 |
| 6.2 Case analysis..... | 62 |
| 6.2.1 Concern for other consumers | 62 |
| 6.2.2 Helping the company | 66 |
| 6.2.3 Social benefits | 69 |
| 6.2.4 Extraversion / Self-enhancement | 74 |
| 6.2.5 Venting negative feelings | 78 |
| 6.2.6 Exertion of power over companies | 83 |
| 6.2.7 Advice seeking..... | 86 |
| 7 DISCUSSIONS | 96 |
| 7.1. Discussion of the empirical findings | 96 |
| 7.2 Refined theoretical framework | 100 |
| 8 CONCLUSIONS..... | 103 |
| 8.1 Theoretical implications | 103 |
| 8.2 Managerial implications | 104 |
| 8.3 Limitations and suggestions for further research | 105 |
| REFERENCES | 107 |

List of Figures

| | |
|---|-----|
| Figure 1. Member types in a virtual community of interest..... | 20 |
| Figure 2. Theoretical framework of consumer motivations for eWOM in virtual pet communities | 45 |
| Figure 3. Refined theoretical framework of consumer motivations for eWOM in virtual pet communities | 102 |

List of Tables

| | |
|--|----|
| Table 1. Definitions of virtual communities | 9 |
| Table 2. Characteristics of virtual communities..... | 11 |
| Table 3. Classification of virtual community types | 15 |
| Table 4. Classification of virtual community members | 19 |
| Table 5. Motives for traditional word-of-mouth communication behaviour | 28 |
| Table 6. Chosen discussion threads and messages..... | 61 |

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

The rise of virtual communities and communications in them has been one of the most prominent and visible form of consumer behaviour in the 21st century. The impact of this social phenomenon can be seen in many people's everyday life when they interact in the Internet with people they do not even know and form relationships with each other. These virtual communities form around many different topics and most importantly around different interests of consumers.

Important characteristic of virtual communities is the way the members interact and especially communicate with each others. Consumer's communication about brands has been of great interest for marketers for long time and it has been called in face-to-face interactions word-of-mouth communication (WOM). However, due to the development of information and communication technologies, consumers' communication environment has been changed and enriched (Vilpponen, Winter & Sundqvist 2006) and consumers are increasingly turning to computer-mediated communication for information to use in their decision making process (Dellarocas 2003; Kozinets 2002) which is called electronic word-of-mouth communication (eWOM). eWOM communication through electronic media allows consumers to not only obtain information related to goods and services from the few people they know, but also from a vast, geographically dispersed group of people, who have experience with relevant products or services (Ratchford, Talukdar & Lee 2001; Lee, Cheung, Lim & Sia 2006), in other words they form virtual communities.

These virtual communities and eWOM communications form around many different topics and most importantly around different interests of consumers. This research studies virtual communities around pets. Pets are important part of many people's life and according to the 2009/2010 National Pet Owners Survey conducted by the American Pet Products Manufacturers Association, Inc. (APPMA), 62% of U.S. households own a pet, which equates to 71.4 million homes (APPMA 2010). Pets are considered to be full members of a family and accordingly, pet owners want to take care of their pets in the best way possible and this includes buying the best products for them. The right and healthy diet is one of the most

important things when taking care of a pet. Thus, pet food market is a big business and according APPMA in 2009, \$45.5 billion was spent on pets in the U.S. (\$17.56 billion to food) and the estimation for year 2010 is that \$47.7 billion will be spent on pets in the U.S. (\$18.28 billion to food) (APPMA 2010).

As consumers want to find right products for their pets, they are faced with many rival brands and their marketing campaigns what make decisions more difficult. Marketer information is also considered to be less trustworthy according to consumer researches (e.g. Arndt 1967a; Bone 1995; Bickart & Schindler 2001) and therefore consumers are looking for information from various sources other than marketer related. One and important source of information are virtual pet communities where consumers can communicate about their pets and find information taking care of them.

Both scholars and practitioners of marketing are particularly interested in WOM communication behaviour in the context of virtual communities because of the extraordinary popularity, growth, and influence of such communities (Brown, Broderick & Lee 2007). Through virtual communities, consumers extend their social networks to people they have never met in person, then seek out these people regularly for their opinions about products and services (Hyuk & Morrison 2008). In the case of virtual pet communities, consumers share information for example about pet food brands. eWOM communication in virtual communities provides important information to consumers as well as marketers.

For better understanding this new consumer behaviour, it is important for scholars and practitioners to understand the underlying motivations behind consumers' eWOM communication. By studying the reasons consumers engage in eWOM can comprehend consumer behaviour in the Internet and therefore utilize and benefit from this communication. Virtual communities and eWOM communications in them are vast and quickly growing source of information for marketers and that is why it is important to study them.

1.2 Research gap

Virtual communities and the eWOM communications in them are considered to be important and powerful forces affecting consumers' attitudes and behaviour (e.g. de Valck, van Bruggen & Wierenga 2009; Kozinets 1999; Hennig-Thurau & Walsh 2003). Therefore they both have had lot of attention in marketing literature and research. There has been researches

concentrating on different aspects of virtual communities varying from why consumers belong to these communities (e.g. Bagozzi & Dholakia 2002), what makes a community successful (e.g. Iriberry & Leroy 2009, Lin & Lee 2006; Preece 2001) and how marketers can utilize virtual communities or create their own communities (e.g. Pitta & Fowler 2005; Szmigin, Canning & Reppel 2005; Kozinets 1999). Also consumers' communication in the Internet and in virtual communities has had attention in the form of electronic word-of-mouth communication. Motives for engaging in eWOM (e.g. Goldsmith & Horowitz, 2006; Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh & Gremler 2004; Phelps et al. 2004; Hennig-Thurau & Walsh 2003) and the communications effect on consumer behaviour (e.g. Bickart & Schindler 2001; Gruen, Osmonbekov & Czaplewski 2006) have been researched by various authors.

For better understanding this new consumer behaviour, it is important for scholars and practitioners to understand the underlying motivations behind consumers' eWOM communication. There has been quite many studies about eWOM motivations and different virtual communities as can be seen above but there has not been any studies relating to communities like virtual pet communities. As pets are important part of consumers' life and source of revenue for example in the form of pet foods, it is important to understand what consumers discuss about feeding their pets and pet food brands. Therefore what makes virtual communities around pets interesting and important focus area is that they have not yet been examined although they seem to have strong impact on pet owners' decision making and pet related markets are big and continuously growing.

In addition, motivations for eWOM have been previously researched by asking consumers about their motivations. However, consumer's answers can be biased and therefore don't tell the whole truth about their motivations. In this research motivations are studied by netnographic research method where only the written eWOM communications are analyzed. Therefore this research relates to two research gaps, one concerning motivations for eWOM communication in virtual pet communities and other concerning netnographic research method for examining consumer motivations.

1.3 Research question and objectives

The main research question for this study is the following:

What motivates consumers to provide eWOM in virtual pet communities?

This main research question is answered with the help of following questions:

1. What are virtual communities?
2. What is electronic word-of-mouth?
3. What motivations there are for engaging eWOM?
4. How do these motivations apply to virtual pet communities?

The objective of this study is to identify and describe motivations for especially providing electronic word-of-mouth communications in virtual pet communities. Research questions are approached from the perspective of consumer behaviour and motivation literature. The main research question is pursued to answer by reviewing present theories, and conducting empirical research with netnographic research method. The research is made from the member's perspective in the virtual community.

1.4 Limitations of the study

Electronic word-of-mouth can occur in various internet-platforms and through different eWOM communications technologies other than virtual communities like blogs and social networking sites. Examining all these different platforms and communication technologies would be almost impossible, especially taking into consideration the time and resource constraints. Therefore this thesis concentrates on eWOM in virtual communities. Virtual communities are also considered one of the most interesting and prominent phenomenon of people's social gatherings because of the strong interactions and relationships individuals have and form which each other when they don't even usually know each other.

In addition, virtual communities themselves include quite wide group of different communities as virtual community serves usually as an umbrella concept for different types of virtual communities. Although this thesis presents these different typologies for virtual communities, it concentrates on one of the virtual community types – virtual community of

interest – more thoroughly. Virtual community of interest is chosen here because of its characteristics which fit well with the research objective to study virtual pet communities.

The chosen area of interest of the virtual communities is in this research pets because there has not been much research about virtual pet communities. The research concentrates on cat communities because of the interest and previous knowledge of the author. Virtual communities around pets are interesting because consumers are highly involved with their pets and therefore really concerned with finding the best products and brands for taking care of them.

More specifically research concentrates on discussions about pet foods and right diet for your pets because it is one of the most important things when taking care of a pet. This topic is also important because the brands that are examined in this research include retail brands, and more specifically cat food brands. This is important because most research analyzing brand communities at present focuses on luxury brands and/or products that consumers are highly involved with, such as cars, motorbikes, jeeps, computers or personal digital assistants (i.e. Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001; McAlexander, Schouten & Koenig 2002; Algesheimer, Dholakia & Herrman 2005; Muniz & Schau 2005; Schouten & McAlexander 2005), and there is a very limited attempt to analyze products that target the mass market, such as chocolate spread (i.e. Cova & Pace 2006) and in this research cat food brands.

1.5 Definitions of key concepts

Key concepts of this thesis are virtual community, virtual community of interest, word-of-mouth communication (WOM), electronic word-of-mouth communication (eWOM) and netnography.

Virtual community can be defined as “cyberspace(s) supported by computer-based information technology, centered upon communication and interaction of participants to generate member-driven content, resulting in a relationship being built” (Lee, Vogel & Limayem 2003: 51).

Virtual community of interest can be defined as “a subgroup of virtual communities that explicitly concentrate on information exchange and/or social interactions around a specific topic of interest” (de Valck, Langerak, Verhoef & Verlegh 2007: 241).

Word-of-mouth communication (WOM) can be defined as “oral, person to person communication between a receiver and a communicator whom the receiver perceives as non-commercial, concerning a brand, a product or a service” (Arndt 1967b: 3).

Electronic word-of-mouth communication (eWOM) can be defined as “any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual, or former customers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the Internet” (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004: 39).

Netnography (or Internet-based ethnography) can be defined as “a new qualitative research methodology that adapts ethnographic research techniques to study the cultures and communities that are emerging through computer-mediated communications” (Kozinets 2002: 62).

1.6 Structure of the thesis

This study is divided into eight chapters. Chapter 1 is the introductory chapter which introduces the topic and its background, research gap, research questions and objectives, limitations of the study and the definitions of key concepts. Chapters 2 and 3 form together the theoretical part of the research where existing literature about virtual communities and eWOM communication and especially eWOM motivations are reviewed. Chapter 4 is dedicated to the theoretical framework for this thesis, which is based on the literature review. Chapter 5 explains the research methodology, by presenting and describing the chosen research method for the empirical part of the research. Chapter 6 presents the chosen case community as well as the analysis of the research findings. Chapter 7 contains discussion about the findings and refined theoretical framework based on the empirical findings. The final chapter, Chapter 8, is dedicated to conclusions. The chapter presents both theoretical and managerial implications of this study and also limitations and suggestions for further research.

2 VIRTUAL COMMUNITIES

Virtual communities have become a social phenomenon and changed the way people communicate and relate to one another (Rheingold 1993). Virtual communities are platforms for eWOM communication and therefore they need further attention before concentrating on eWOM. This chapter provides a review of the virtual community literature.

The first section gives short introduction to the development of virtual communities and how they are formed into what they are today. The second section provides definitions and characteristics of virtual communities. Third section entails different classifications for virtual communities and virtual community members. The last section is a summary about the theoretical review of virtual communities and chosen theories concerning this research.

2.1 Development of virtual community

It is important to understand the reasons behind development of virtual communities and communications in them. According to Firat & Dholakia (2006) there are two major forces contributing to what may be epochal changes in contemporary human history: unprecedented developments in several technologies and watershed transformations in culture. The cultural transformations have often been characterized as a shift from the *modern* to the *postmodern*. On the other hand, technology-driven electronic methods of communicating and transacting are aiding and accelerating these ongoing cultural transformations, as well as being affected by them. (Firat & Dholakia 2006)

Starting from the transformation in culture, postmodernism is a cultural episode characterized by a pluralism of (consumption) styles and ideologies, a need for hyper-reality and self-expression by means of consumption (Antonides & Raaij 1998: 56). According to Cova (1997), two discernible schools of thought exist around postmodernity: the individualist tradition and the collectivist/neo-tribalist tradition. The collectivistic tradition will help to explain how virtual communities have developed to what they are today.

In postmodernism people who have finally managed to liberate themselves from social constraints are now embarking on a reverse movement to recompose their social universe on the basis of an emotional free choice (Cova 1996, 1997; Cova & Cova 2002). This results in an active quest for alternative social arrangements and new communities (Goulding, Shankar

& Elliott 2001) which are called tribes (or neo-tribes) because they are reminiscent of primitive tribes according to Maffesoli (1996: 139).

These neo-tribes are networks of people gathering homogeneously together for social interaction, often around consumption and brands (e.g. Maffesoli 1996; Cova 1997; Kozinets 2001, 2002; Johnson & Ambrose 2006; Cova & Pace 2006). However, tribe is not like a segment where a group of homogenous persons share the same characteristics but are not connected to each other. Tribe is defined as a network of heterogeneous persons – in terms of age, sex, income etc. – who are linked by shared passion or emotions, styles of life, new moral beliefs, and consumption practices (Cova 1996, 1997; Cova & Cova 2001, 2002).

As these tribes attempt to revive the community archetype of the village or the district, it is important to understand that these communities are not solely definable in spatial terms anymore; some use the latest high-tech means of communication in forming virtual tribes (Cova 1996, 1997). Especially, the Internet has emerged as the virtual glue, which many people in postmodern societies are using to bond together in an increasingly fragmented world (Simmons 2008). A plethora of online tribal communities have developed where the tribal members have shared purposes and beliefs, interacting socially by adhering to tacit and explicit protocols, rituals, and roles using internet technologies that support interaction (Preece 2000: 10). These tribes in the Internet context are in this research called virtual communities.

Networked computers and communications in the Internet enable and drive enormous social changes. They empower people around the world as never before to disregard the limitations of geography and time, find another and gather together in groups based on a wide range of cultural and sub-cultural interests and social affiliations (Kozinets 1999). People take advantage of the global reach of the Internet to build new online relationships with people they have never met in person but with whom they share a common interest (Iriberry & Leroy 2009) like pets in this research.

2.2 Definition and characteristics of virtual community

In this section first the different virtual community definitions as well as the chosen definition for this research is presented. After that virtual community characteristics are presented and some of them are discussed in more detail.

2.2.1 Definitions of virtual communities

These social gatherings occurring in virtual space or cyber-space and discussed in this thesis have been variously termed ‘online,’ ‘virtual,’ or ‘computer-mediated’ communities (Kozinets 1999) and also in many other terms. Various disciplines have studied virtual communities, each one providing its own definition. Therefore there is no consensus with what virtual community means and various terms for virtual community and different virtual community types emerge from vastly growing literature and research. However, all agree with the importance of this social phenomenon. In Table 1 some of these different definitions for virtual communities are presented.

Table 1. Definitions of virtual communities

| Author(s) | Definition |
|------------------------------------|---|
| Blanchard (2004: 55) | Groups of people who interact primarily through computer-mediated communication and who identify with and have developed feelings of belonging and attachment to each other. |
| Fernback & Thompson (1995) | Social relationships forged in cyberspace through repeated contact within a specified boundary or place (e.g., a chat channel) that is symbolically delineated by topic of interest. |
| Hagel & Armstrong (1997) | Computer-mediated spaces where there is a potential for an integration of content and communication with an emphasis on member-generated content. |
| Ho, Schraefel & Chignell (2000) | A group of people whose shared needs and/or interests are largely communicated within, and mediated by Web-enabled interactions, e.g., within a Website. |
| Jones & Rafaeli (2000) | Symbolically delineated computer-mediated spaces, whose existence is relatively transparent and open, that allow groups of individuals to attend and contribute to a similar set of computer-mediated interpersonal interactions. |
| Kim (2000: 28) | Group of people with shared interests, purpose, or goal, who get know each other over time. |
| Lee, Vogel & Limayem (2003) | Cyberspace(s) supported by computer-based information technology, centered upon communication and interaction of participants to generate member-driven content, resulting in a relationship being built. |
| Rheingold (1993: 5) | 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. |
| Romm, Pliskin & Clarke (1997) | Groups of people who communicate with each other via electronic media. |

In this research the term virtual community is an umbrella concept that encompasses all terms for these social gatherings that occur virtually in the cyber-space as for example online communities, computer-mediated communities, (virtual) brand communities, communities of interest, consumption communities, (e-)tribes, social networking communities etc. but important thing to notice is that these all have different characteristics and purposes for functioning.

Rheingold is regarded to be the original proponent behind the term and concept virtual community and most authors adopt and use his definition of virtual communities (see Table 1.). Although Rheingold's definition is most commonly used for virtual communities there is plenty more definitions by other authors. These different definitions concentrate on and emphasize different aspects and characteristics of virtual communities. However, most of them also share some similar points. The similarities found in different definitions have contributed to the construction of a working definition by Lee et al. (see Table 1.).

Lee et al. (2003) found four similarities from virtual community definitions. The first is cyberspace. All of the definitions state that virtual community should be on the net, use computer-mediated spaces, or cyberspace what differentiates the virtual community from a physical community. The second aspect is the usage of computer-based information technology to support the activities in a virtual community. Commonly used computer-based information technology tools are for example e-mail, discussion forums, message boards and chat rooms. The third similar aspect is that communication and interaction are the main focus, and content or topics of virtual community are driven by the participants. The final shared aspect presented by Lee et al. (2003) is the successful virtual community relationship culminating after a certain period of communicating together. The most important aspect in virtual communities is not the different computer and communication technologies but the relationships between the individuals. Lee et al.'s (2003) definition is adopted in this research because they have taken into account similarities with different virtual community and constructed their definition according to them. Their definition takes into consideration all the aspects of virtual communities: cyber-spaces, computer-based technologies, consumer communications and relationships being formed.

2.2.2 Characteristics of virtual communities

Virtual communities can have many characteristics that can vary by the definition of virtual community and especially what kind of community is in question. However, scholars generally agree on the characteristics that are associated with a virtual community (Stockdale & Borovicka 2006). Table 2 presents some of the characteristics by various authors.

Table 2. Characteristics of virtual communities

| Author(s) | Characteristics |
|---------------------------------------|--|
| Balasubramanian & Mahajan (2001) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - an aggregation of people - rational members - interaction in cyberspace without physical collocation - social exchange process - a shared objective, property/identity, or interest |
| Lechner & Schmid (2000) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - a common language and world - common values and pursuing common interests - members connected via a medium on which they act in roles |
| Lin & Lee (2006) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - people interacting with specific purposes - the governance of certain policies - the facilitation of computer-mediated communication |
| McAlexander, Schouten & Koenig (2002) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - geographic concentration - social context - temporality |
| Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - consciousness of kind - shared rituals and traditions - sense of moral responsibility |
| Preece (2000) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - people - a shared purpose - policies - computer systems |
| Stanoevska-Slabeva & Schmid (2000) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - a common language enabling communication - a common world subject to discourse - common interests, values and targets - persistence of common meaning and continuity of communication - technological mediation - ubiquity: overcoming space and time barriers - replacement of physical presence with digital substitutes |

There are similarities and overlapping characteristics in these classifications. In this research the three core components of community by Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) and two of three differentiating characteristics of McAlexander et al. (2002) are discussed more. Muniz and O'Guinn's (2001) core components were chosen because they are widely accepted and used by others authors and researchers. Geographic concentration and social context were included

because social context brings more emphasis to the importance of social relationships forming in the virtual communities as well as geographic concentration brings out more concrete characteristics of virtual communities.

Consciousness of kind

Important characteristic for virtual community is that is formed around something shared by all its members. Virtual communities are developing around affinities, shared interests, professional disciplines, common practices and values (Nguyen, Torlina, Peszynski & Corbitt 2006). Communities tend to be identified on the basis of commonality or identification among their members (McAlexander et al. 2002) and according to Weber (1978: 42) for a virtual community to exist, members must have a shared feeling of belonging. Therefore one element of community is what Gusfield (1978: 32) refers to as consciousness of kind which represents the intrinsic connection that members feel toward one another, and the collective sense of difference from others not in the community. Consciousness of kind is shared consciousness, a way of thinking about things that is more than shared attitudes or perceived similarity (Muniz & O'Guinn 2001). The shared interest increases members' willingness to share information and the ability to communicate with one or many members of the community at any time, and the repetitive sharing of similar beliefs, leads to consistent attitudes and behaviours across community members (Brauer, Judd & Gliner 1995).

Shared rituals and traditions

The second characteristic of virtual community is the presence of shared rituals and traditions. Rituals and traditions perpetuate the community's shared history, culture, and consciousness (Muniz & O'Guinn 2001). According to Cova & Cova (2001; 2002) just as every lasting social relationship requires some kind of ritual to establish and sustain itself, so too a tribe and in this case virtual community relies on rituals to pronounce its existence and sustain membership. A ritual is defined as "a set of multiple, symbolic behaviours that occur in a fixed sequence and that tend to be repeated periodically" (Solomon 2003: 449). Traditions on the other hand are "sets of social practices which seek to celebrate and inculcate certain behavioural norms and values" (Marshall 1994: 537). According to Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) rituals and traditions represent vital social processes by which the meaning of the community is reproduced and transmitted within and beyond the community.

Moral responsibility

The third marker of a community is a sense of moral responsibility. Moral responsibility is a felt sense of duty or obligation to the community as a whole, and to its individual members and this sense of moral responsibility is what produces collective action and contributes to group cohesion (Muniz & O'Quinn 2001). Shared norms and values of the community are formed through continuous interaction of participating members (Watson 1997: 104) and encourage the development of consistent attitudes and behaviour by the members. According to Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) moral responsibility need not be limited to punitive strictures concerning life and death matters, but rather every day, but nonetheless important, social commitments. Moral systems can be subtle, and are highly contextualized (Muniz & O'Quinn 2001). However, this sense of duty and moral responsibility is not always shared by group members.

Social context

Interactions within a virtual community may be rich in social context or nearly devoid of it (Fischer, Bristor & Gainer 1996). Community members may have a great deal of information about one another or they may know nothing of one another but pseudonymous and openly demonstrated topic knowledge (Granitz & Ward 1996). Other aspect of social context of virtual communities is the information sharing between community members, not only demographical information about themselves but their experiences, opinions and feelings. In virtual communities participants can provide and exchange information on products, services, or common interests (Kim, Choi, Qualls & Kyesook 2008). The information change is especially affecting individuals' purchase decision processes. Various research papers suggest that virtual communities may act as important reference groups for their participants (e.g. Bickart & Schindler 2001; Constant, Sproull & Kiesler 1996; Kozinetz 2002). However, virtual communities represent a much broader concept than the sharing information. Concept of electronic word-of-mouth is often related with virtual communities. While members of virtual communities do provide eWOM, participation in a community also presupposes formation of relationships, long-term social interactions, and shared values and norms (Pentina, Prybutok & Zhang 2008). Therefore, within these communities, participants may not only exchange information, but they may also develop friendships on the basis of their common interest or passion (de Valck et al.2009). Besides sharing information, forming

social relationships and friendships is also important factor of virtual community's social context.

Geographic concentration

Virtual communities are not constrained by time or space and permit communication around shared interests between many to many participants (Kim et al. 2008). Previously consumer communities or groups were limited to face-to-face encounters but due to the technological developments people can meet and form communities in cyberspace. This communication through electronic medium breaks down the boundaries of geographical proximity and allows for continuous contact and communication among online members (Kim et al. 2008). Extending well beyond any geographic physical location, identification with other online community members creates a bond of trust and confidence in the information exchanged among members potentially leading to commitment to the community and long-term relationships (Kim et al. 2008). As virtual communities let people bond without being in close proximity, they are potentially a valuable social lifeline for those homebound due to illness, age, or handicap, or those isolated in rural settings (Johnson & Ambrose 2006).

2.3 Virtual community classifications

In this section first the different classification for virtual community types are presented as well as the chosen classification for this research is described in more detail. After that virtual community members classifications are presented and there as well the chosen classification method more thoroughly.

2.3.1 Virtual community types

As the number of virtual communities continues to increase and millions of people participate in them, researchers have attempted to classify communities to better study them (Iriberry & Leroy 2009). There are various ways to classify virtual communities and authors have presented various types of virtual communities based on different classification methods. Table 3 introduces some of these. From these classifications Hagel and Armstrong's (1997: 18) is considered the most important and relevant for this research. This is because it was based on consumer's needs and motivations and therefore suits well to the research topic about eWOM motivations.

Table 3. Classification of virtual community types

| Author(s) | Classified by | Types of virtual community |
|----------------------------------|---|--|
| Bressler (2000) | Motivation(s) of participants | Purpose, practise, circumstance and interest |
| Hagel & Armstrong (1997) | Underlying purpose or needs served in the community | Transaction, interest, fantasy and relationship |
| Hummel & Lechner (2002) | Group of actors, interaction, sense of place, and bonding | Games, interest or knowledge, business-to-business (knowledge and transactions), business-to-consumer (interest, commerce, and transactions) and consumers-to-consumers (interest, trade, and transaction) |
| Jones & Rafaeli (2000) | Community's focus | Basic human needs (interest, relationship, fantasy, transaction), user social structure or technology-base and motivation (purpose, practise, circumstance and interest) |
| Szmigin, Canning & Reppel (2005) | Dialogue or information focus, non-profit or profit maximisation organization | Help group, fan club, value exchange site and defence organization |

Virtual community types based on needs they fulfil

Researchers have generally differentiated between communities based on the need they fulfil (Iriberry & Leroy 2009). There are essentially four types of virtual communities in existence on the Internet depending on the types of consumer needs they meet (Armstrong & Hagel 1995). Virtual communities can be transaction-oriented, interest-oriented, fantasy-oriented, or relationship-oriented. Virtual communities can satisfy all needs in equal measure or concentrate more on one (Pitta & Fowler 2005). This can lead to several types of communities.

Transaction-oriented communities primarily facilitate the buying and selling of products and services and deliver information that is related to fulfilling those transactions (Szmigin et al. 2005; Kannan, Chang & Whinston 2000). Consumers can discuss the products and services, new product and service releases, innovative ideas and the best sales sources in given area or topic. In each of these communities, members share information of value to themselves and others. That sharing can be valuable to marketers. (Pitta & Fowler 2005) According to Kannan et al. (2000) these communities do not address the members' social needs in any manner, instead the focus is on interaction between members either to transact business or provide informational leads or consultations about other possible participants in transactions.

One examples of community of transaction is Amazon.com where visitors can get reviews about books from other readers as well as provide reviews of their own.

A community of interest comprises individuals who share a common interest, hobby or skill set (Pitta & Fowler 2005). Members of community of interest have significantly higher degrees of interactions than in a community of transactions and the interactions are usually on topics of their common interest (Kannan et al. 2000). In a community of interest members will share their experiences, preferences and information about the focal topic (Pitta & Fowler 2005). For example concerning this research topic, cat owners may discuss different cat breeds, how to take care of cats, what to feed them etc. These communities usually have chat rooms, message boards, and discussion groups for extensive member interaction (Kannan et al. 2000). Users tend to generate plenty of content themselves and thus communities of interest are characterized by significant amount of user-generated content (Kannan et al. 2000) and eWOM communication.

The third type of community is a fantasy-oriented community where users create new environments, personalities, stories and role-play (Kannan et al. 2000). Network environments give people the opportunity to come together and explore new worlds of fantasy and entertainment. A unique characteristic of these communities is the freedom they give participants to “try out” new personas and to engage in role playing games where everything seems possible. (Hagel & Armstrong 1997: 21) Participants' real identities are not important in many of these communities, but interaction with others is at the heart of the appeal (Hagel & Armstrong 1996). Fantasy oriented virtual communities are for example role play game communities like World of Warcraft.

Communities of relationship give participants the opportunity to share certain life experiences (Szmigin et al. 2005). The community of relationship is built around certain life experiences that are usually very intense and lead to personal bonding between members (Kannan et al. 2000). These form around some intense life experience such as the loss of a loved one, a disease diagnosis or other significant event. In such circumstances, consumers may find comfort in the experiences of others and, in doing so, form relationships with them (Pitta & Fowler 2005). Over time the relationships become increasingly important. Examples include the Cancer Forum, a community for cancer patients, and their close friends and family, communities focused on religion, divorce, and other topics (Kannan et al. 2000).

According to Hagel and Armstrong (1996), the four sorts of community are not mutually exclusive. When consumers shop for goods and services, they often seek advice from others before they buy, essentially blending the needs met by communities of transaction with those met by communities of interest. But currently, most communities target only one of the four needs. In so doing, they are missing an opportunity to exploit the on-line medium fully.

Virtual community of interest

Hagel and Armstrong's (1997: 18) typology for virtual communities is further discussed concerning communities of interest. It is the most interesting and suitable community type for this research because members have higher degrees of interaction than in a community of transaction and the interaction may be in the form of communication about brands. The common interest that is the basis for the community could even be brand or product. Transaction community is not considered although it concentrates on products and brands because it does not fulfil consumers' social needs and the focus of the community interaction is only to engage consumers in a specific transaction that can be informed by the input of other members of the community. However, it is important to realize that these communities are not exclusive and it would be better for the company and the consumer to combine these different communities because then community would fulfil more than one consumer's need at the same time. In order to keep this research simple enough, communities of interest are the main focus.

Virtual communities of interest can be described as affiliative groups whose online interactions are based upon shared enthusiasm for, and knowledge of, a specific activity or related group of activities (Kozinets, 1999). Communities of interest are a subgroup of virtual communities that explicitly concentrate on information exchange and/or social interactions around a specific topic of interest. In them, consumers form virtual communities that use the Internet to sharpen their knowledge on the topic of interest, to socialize and to play (Hogg, Laing & Winkelman 2003; Maclaran & Catterall 2002). Over time, as people learn more about each other and the subject, deep personal relationships may form (Pitta & Fowler 2005). As such, communities of interest can be discerned from virtual communities of transaction in which the buying and selling of products or services is the focal point (de Valck et al. 2007).

A virtual community of interest consists of a group of individuals united by a shared interest in a topic, such as cars, food, sports or medical issues. In this research shared interest is pets or more precisely cats. Communities of interest are formed to share knowledge and

experience (Hagel & Armstrong 1997: 18-20). Some researchers have taken an information systems approach by using the communication technology design through which communities are supported, such as e-mail lists, asynchronous discussion forums, synchronous chat rooms and text-based or graphical fantasy worlds, to categorize them (Stanoevska-Slabeva 2002). Other researchers have taken a sociological perspective to categorize virtual communities of interest by using the structure of interaction, such as the strength of the social ties between the community members (Jones & Rafaeli 2000).

Virtual communities of interest are relevant to business because they have the potential to: (1) shift the bargaining power from the supplier to the customer (Kozinets 1999); (2) spread positive word-of-mouth (Dholakia, Bagozzi & Klein Pearo 2004); (3) help firms learn from customers (Kardaras, Karakostas & Papathanassiou 2003); (4) increase website traffic (Hagel & Armstrong 1997); (5) raise entry barriers for competitors (Hagel & Armstrong 1997); (6) support new product development efforts, and; (7) increase customer satisfaction and loyalty (Shankar, Smith & Rangaswamy 2003). With these benefits in mind it is not surprising that many firms have begun to integrate communities of interest into their online strategies (cf. Godes et al. 2005).

2.3.2 Virtual community members

Different member classifications

Classification of virtual community members is important because it is generally asserted that consumers vary in the way they make use of virtual communities. Rather than simply agglomerating all members of virtual communities into a single category, classification allows much more subtlety in targeting and approach (Kozinets 1999). There are many different ways to classify virtual community members. In Table 3, different classifications for virtual community members are presented.

From these four member classifications, Kozinets' (1999) classification is chosen for further examination. This is because Kozinets' classification is widely referenced in virtual community literature and is most suitable for this research.

Table 4. Classification of virtual community members

| Author(s) | Classified by | Types of virtual community member |
|--|---|---|
| de Valck, van Bruggen & Wierenga (2009) | Visit frequency, visit duration, retrieving information, supplying information and discussing information | Core members, conversationalists, informationalists, hobbyists, functionalists and opportunists |
| Kim (2000: 118) | Membership life cycles | Visitors, novices, regulars, leaders and elders |
| Kozinets (1999) | Relations with the consumption activity and relations with the virtual community | Tourists, minglers, devotees and insiders |
| Several authors: Hagel & Armstrong (1997: 60) Nonnecke, Andrews & Preece (2006) Preece, Nonnecke & Andrews (2004) Schlosser (2005) | Posting opinions and taking part of the community versus not posting and taking part of the community | Posters and lurkers |

Virtual community member types

Kozinets (1999) has developed a framework for types of virtual community of consumption members and it is expanded here to virtual communities of interest. This is quite simple because the virtual community of consumption is formed around a shared form of consumption like in virtual communities of interest the community is formed around shared topic of interest.

According to Kozinets (1999) the formation of lasting identification as a member of a virtual community depends largely on two non-independent factors. First is the relationship that the person has with the consumption activity and in this research with the specific topic of interest. The more central the interest is to a person's psychological self-concept, then the more likely the person will be to pursue and value membership in a community that is centered on this topic of interest. The second factor is the intensity of the social relationships the person possesses with other members of the virtual community. The two factors will often be interrelated. (adapted from Kozinets 1999)

The two factors — relations with the topic of interest, and relations with the virtual community — are separate enough that they can guide our understanding of four distinct member 'types,' as shown in Figure 1 (adapted from Kozinets 1999). The first of the four types are the *tourists* who lack strong social ties to the group, and maintain only a superficial

or passing interest in the topic of interest (they often post casual questions). Next are the *minglers* who maintain strong social ties, but who are only perfunctorily interested in the central topic of interest. *Devotees* are opposite to this: they maintain a strong interest in and enthusiasm for the topic of interest, but have few social attachments to the group. Finally, *insiders* are those who have strong social ties and strong personal ties to the topic of interest and tend to be long-standing and frequently referenced members. (adapted from Kozinets 1999, 2002)

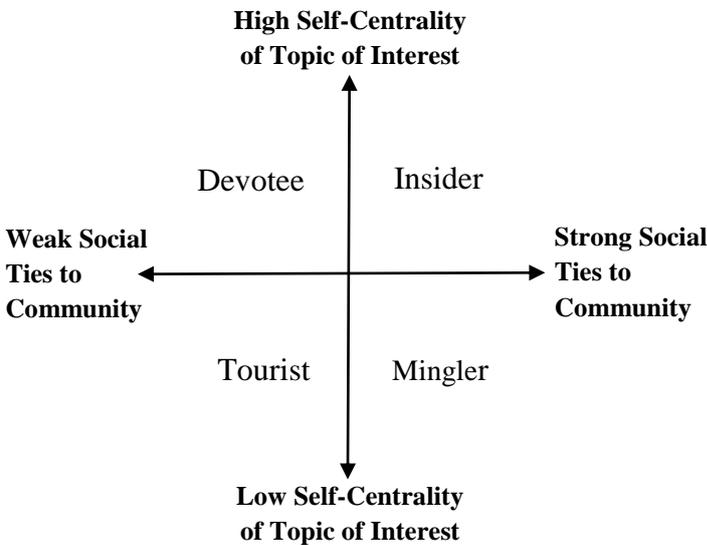


Figure 1. Member types in a virtual community of interest (adapted Kozinets 1999: 255)

According to Kozinets (1999, 2001) for marketing research, the devotees and the insiders represent the most important data sources. In many product and service categories, approximately eighty per cent of most products and services are consumed by approximately twenty percent of their customer base. The segment of these so-called heavy users, or loyal users, are the core of any industry and any business, and are usually the heart of any successful marketing effort. (Kozinets 1999).

2.4 Summary

Virtual communities are platforms where consumer eWOM communication occurs. It is important to understand the context where the studied behaviour and the underlying reasons behind it – here eWOM and motivations for eWOM – takes place in order to fully and deeply comprehend the phenomenon. There have been two forces affecting the formation of these virtual communities and new consumer behaviour in the form of eWOM communication: cultural transformation from modern to postmodern and technological developments, especially the Internet.

Virtual communities are defined in this research as “cyberspace(s) supported by computer-based information technology, centered upon communication and interaction of participants to generate member-driven content, resulting in a relationship being built” (Lee et al. 2003: 51). This definition is based on the analysis of other definitions and therefore it encapsulates all the important characteristics from other definitions. Virtual community characteristics of consciousness of kind, shared rituals and traditions and sense of moral responsibility from Muniz and O’Guinn (2001) as well as social context and geographic concentration from McAlexander et al. (2002) were chosen because they describe virtual communities in the most extensive way.

The term virtual community is in this study an umbrella concept that encompasses all terms for these social gatherings that occur virtually in the cyber-space but in order to get clearer picture virtual community types are categorized. In this research virtual communities are categorized based on the needs they fulfil by Hagel and Armstrong’s (1997) because it was based on consumer’s needs and motivations and therefore suits well to the research topic about eWOM motivations. The different community types are transaction-oriented, interest-oriented, fantasy-oriented, and relationship-oriented virtual communities (Armstrong & Hagel 1995). More emphasis was given to virtual communities of interest which are a subgroup of virtual communities that explicitly concentrate on information exchange and/or social interactions around a specific topic of interest (de Valck et al. 2007: 241). This is because in these communities members have higher degrees of interaction that can be related to brands and products. Also virtual community member classifications were discussed and Kozinet’s (1999) classification of tourists, minglers, devotees and insiders was adopted.

3 ELECTRONIC WORD-OF-MOUTH

Both scholars and practitioners of marketing are particularly interested in WOM communication behaviour in the context of virtual communities because of the extraordinary popularity, growth, and influence of such communities (Brown et al. 2007). According to Hyuk and Morrison (2008) through virtual communities, consumers extend their social networks to people they have never met in person, then seek out these people regularly for their opinions about products and services. This process exists both for virtual acquaintances with whom consumers have established relationships and for more public forums, in which users might not “know” one another but are connected through some common interest (Fong & Burton 2006). Dellarocas (2003) calls this phenomenon a “WOM revolution”.

This chapter describes eWOM communication occurring in virtual communities by first presenting definitions and characteristics of these communications and then continuing to motivations for consumers to engage and adopt eWOM information. The last section is

Although this chapter concentrates on eWOM, there are many discussions concerning traditional WOM. This is because eWOM theories are based on WOM literature and these both share many similar characteristics. Therefore discussions about WOM can be applied to eWOM.

3.1 WOM and eWOM

Word-of-mouth communication has received extensive attention from both academics and practitioners for decades. Before the advent of cyberspace, scholars such as Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955), Brooks (1957), Bearden and Etzel (1982), and Rogers (1983) researched face-to-face WOM communication (Fong & Burton 2006; Lam & Mizerski 2005). The power of WOM influencing consumers’ decision-making processes has long been known to researchers and practitioners, but the power of WOM has recently become even more important with the advent of the internet (Bickart & Schindler 2001; Dellarocas 2003; Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004; Sun, Youn, Wu & Kuntaraporn 2006). Previous WOM theories and observations about informal, unsolicited WOM were constructed in a marketing world untouched by the Internet (Brown et al. 2007; Dellarocas 2003; Godes et al. 2005; Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004). But due to the development of information and communication technologies, consumers’ communication environment has been changed and enriched

(Vilpponen et al. 2006) and consumers are increasingly turning to computer-mediated communication for information to use in their decision making process (Dellarocas 2003; Kozinets 2002).

Widely used definition for WOM and adopted in this research is from Arndt (1967b: 3) who defines WOM as the “oral, person to person communication between a receiver and a communicator whom the receiver perceives as non-commercial, concerning a brand, a product or a service.” More importantly for this research, WOM that takes place in the internet is called electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM). Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004) refer to eWOM communication as “any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual, or former customers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the Internet” and this definition is adopted in this research.

WOM is one of the most influential sources of marketplace information for consumers (Arndt 1967a; Alreck & Settle 1995). In general, WOM among consumers incorporates three different activities (Lampert & Rosenberg 1975). First, consumers seek information for immediate use aimed at risk reduction. Second, they obtain and store information for future usage, and, third, they share it in order to influence other people’s decisions. However, the web has created opportunities for eWOM communication through electronic media, such as email, online discussion forums, chat rooms, newsgroups, blogs, review sites, and social networking sites. eWOM communication through electronic media allows consumers to not only obtain information related to goods and services from the few people they know, but also from a vast, geographically dispersed group of people, who have experience with relevant products or services (Ratchford et al. 2001; Lee et al. 2006).

One of the most widely accepted notions in consumer behaviour is that WOM communication plays an important role in shaping consumers’ attitudes and behaviours (Brown & Reingen 1987). WOM has a powerful influence on behaviour, especially on consumers’ information search, evaluation, and subsequent decision making (Cox 1963; Brown & Reingen 1987; Money, Gilly & Graham 1998; Silverman 2001: 23-25). Traditional WOM has proven by various researchers to play a major role in consumer buying decisions by influencing consumer choice (Katz & Lazarfeld 1955; Arndt 1967a; Engel, Kegerreis & Blackwell 1969; Richins 1983; Richins & Root-Shaffer 1988). It provides information concerning product performance and the social and psychological consequences of the purchase decision (Cox

1963). Through multiple exchanges, one WOM message can reach and potentially influence many receivers (Lau & Ng 2001).

WOM has this unique ability to influence consumer decisions due to perceived source reliability and the flexibility of interpersonal communication (Engel et al. 1969; Day 1971; Tybout, Calder & Sternthal 1981; Richins 1983; Bolting 1989) and this applies to eWOM as well. Because WOM is a consumer-dominated channel of marketing communication where the sender is independent of the market, it is therefore perceived to be more reliable, credible, and trustworthy by consumers compared to firm-initiated communications (Schiffman & Kanuk 1995: 519; Arndt 1967a; Bone 1995; Bickart & Schindler 2001; Lau & Ng 2001). According to Brooks (1957), friends and acquaintances – those people to whom consumers talk every day – are the most influential sources in terms of opinions and subsequent behaviours, and personal contacts provide the most effective form of WOM. WOM recommendations are typically generated by consumers who are perceived as having no personal interests in recommending a particular brand or a certain product (Mee-Shew, Anitsal & Anitsal 2007). Therefore according to various authors WOM has greater influence on consumer behaviour than the traditional marketing tools of personal selling and various types of advertising as for example print ads, personal selling, and radio advertising in certain circumstances (e.g. Engel et al. 1969; Katz & Lazarsfeld 1955: 178; Goldsmith & Horowitz 2006; Herr, Kardes & Kim 1991).

3.2 Characteristics of eWOM

There are several differences between electronic WOM and traditional WOM. So although similar to the traditional form, eWOM has several unique characteristics (Lee & Youn 2009) and it has its own advantages and disadvantages which are discussed next.

eWOM communication is no longer an oral activity (Pollach 2008). It has moved to the Internet, where different websites facilitate WOM communication. Typically, WOM communication involves the spoken word, one friend or relative in a face-to-face situation sharing product information with another (Bickart & Schindler 2001). By contrast, online discussions involve personal experiences and opinions transmitted by the written word (Bickart & Schindler 2001). Without face-to-face contact and only written word, physical cues used to assess the identity of others are lacking (Gelb & Sundaram 2002; Kiecker & Cowles 2001). Although the spoken word may have the ability to exert a more powerful

immediate impact (Herr et al. 1991), the written word has a permanence that carries its own advantages (Bickart & Schindler 2001).

eWOM eliminates the restrictions on time and location. The asynchronous discussions are usually kept for some time to allow other users to participate or read the messages at their own pace (Hoffman & Novak 1997). The ability to refer back to online discussions might enable the consumer to absorb a greater amount of personal information and to acquire this information in more detail than might be possible from exposure to only the spoken word (Bickart & Schindler 2001). Users can therefore read and compare archived reviews of the product/service they are interested in. This easy accessibility makes eWOM attractive to Internet users; as a result, it has become a favourite source for consumer advice (Man, Chuan, Choon & Huaping 2009).

The communication network in eWOM is much larger than in traditional WOM. As more contributors and audiences are involved, the reach of such communication extends beyond small-scale direct personal connections to the Internet world (Man et al. 2009). The Internet allows people to reach many other people in a one-to-many process – similar to that of the mass media (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004), while for example email messages are like interpersonal communication in that they can be personalized to the individual (Phelps et al. 2004). Thus, eWOM has variety of avenues or means by which consumers can exchange information (Gelb & Sundaram 2002; Kiecker & Cowles 2001) as compared to traditional WOM.

eWOM often occurs between people who have little or no prior relationship with one another and can be anonymous (Dellarocas 2003; Goldsmith & Horowitz 2006; Sen & Lerman 2007). Because of this anonymity and confidentiality online, consumers don't have to reveal their true identities when seeking and giving advice (Gelb & Sundaram 2002; Kiecker & Cowles 2001; Goldsmith & Horowitz 2006). These unique characteristics of eWOM encourage consumers to share their opinions with other consumers, thus increasing the volume of eWOM (Chatterjee 2001). As a result, there is a greater likelihood that consumers will find other consumers with product expertise on the eWOM platforms (Duhan, Johnson, Wilcox & Harrell 1997).

Despite advantages discussed here, disadvantages also exist. Generally, it is difficult for consumers to determine the quality and credibility of the product recommendations when seeking advice from weak-tie communicators on the web (Chatterjee 2001; Schindler &

Bickart 2005: 37). eWOM communicators often do not feel much responsibility for the consequences of their recommendations because their postings will be read by complete strangers (Granitz & Ward 1996). Thus, there is a greater possibility for misinformation or inaccurate information to be passed on to consumers (Bailey 2005). More importantly, consumers often do not know the true identity of the eWOM communicators or their true motivation (Chatterjee 2001; Schindler & Bickart 2005: 37) which makes it difficult to trust their recommendations. However, as the quantity of eWOM communications is high nowadays, consumers can find recommendations from many sources and eWOM communicators which can make the recommendations more credible when compared to trusting only one unknown source.

Different virtual communities have flourished on the Internet and researchers are increasingly recognizing that these virtual communities are an unexplored resource of eWOM (Evans, Wedande, Ralston & van 't Hul 2001; Godes & Mayzlin 2004; Pitta & Fowler 2005). While WOM is difficult to directly observe in person-to-person contexts (Godes & Mayzlin 2004), virtual communities provide a trace of eWOM in archived threads that consumers and researchers can assess. According to Hung and Yijyan (2007) virtual communities also extend the two-way exchanges between close relations to multi-way exchanges among strangers across cyberspace. Thus, virtual communities provide a dynamic, multimedia, and social interactive platform for eWOM (Hung & Yiyen 2007).

The potential impact of virtual communities is large; recommendations can be made at virtually no costs, and they can spread quickly within and outside the virtual community network. Moreover, virtual community members share an interest, which produces affinity and creates a bond. (de Valck et al. 2009) These social network qualities coupled with the perceived credibility of consumer evaluations, make the virtual community a powerful platform for exploiting consumer-to-consumer recommendations, for example, by means of viral marketing campaigns, i.e., using online consumer-to consumer referrals as a means of multiplying the popularity of a brand, product, or company (Dobele et al.2007; Smith, Coyle, Lightfoot & Scott 2007).

3.2 Motivations for engaging in eWOM

Consumer knowledge sharing in the Internet environment has been a popular research area in recent years (Rafaeli & Raban 2005; Lee et al. 2006). Researchers are interested in

investigating the motives for seeking eWOM (e.g. Goldsmith 2006; Goldsmith & Horowitz, 2006) and for sharing or articulating the eWOM (e.g. Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004; Lee et al. 2006), providing implications for marketers to better understand online consumer behaviour.

Successful information sharing involves both contributing and receiving information (Zhang & Watts 2003). Current studies on eWOM focus mainly on the user's contribution behaviour, such as their sharing motivations or inhibitions (Rafaeli & Raban 2005). Relatively little attention has been paid to the receiving side—that is, the information receiver's perspective (Man et al. 2009) – in other words to the factors driving consumers to use for example online consumer reviews or information from discussion forums for purchase decisions. According to Cheung, Lee, Matthew and Rabjohn (2008) as a marketing researcher and practitioner, it is essential to investigate this phenomenon of information sharing in virtual communities. Discerning the most motivating aspects of information adoption in particular, could help electronic marketers better promote their brand and presence on the net.

In this section motivations to engage in traditional word-of-mouth and electronic word-of-mouth – both seeking and providing eWOM – are discussed in order to understand the underlying reasons why consumers engage in eWOM. With this knowledge marketers and researches can better understand consumer behaviour and therefore utilize and benefit from consumers' eWOM communication.

3.2.1 Motives for traditional WOM

Given the conceptual closeness of eWOM and traditional WOM communication, consumer motives that have been identified in the literature as being relevant for traditional WOM also can be expected to be of relevance for eWOM (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004). Several authors have suggested that WOM communication mainly arises when consumers' consumption-related expectations are disconfirmed (e.g. Anderson 1998) while others have stressed that the motives for engaging in positive WOM communication may differ from the motives that drive negative WOM communication (Sundaram, Mitra & Webster 1998). However, only a few studies have explicitly addressed the specific motives underlying WOM communication behaviour (Sundaram et al. 1998). Table 4 lists the motives for WOM communication suggested in the literature before continuing eWOM specific motives.

Table 5. Motives for traditional word-of-mouth communication behaviour

| Author(s) | Motive | Description |
|-----------------------------------|-------------------------|---|
| Dichter (1966) | Product-involvement | a customer feels so strongly about the product that a pressure builds up in wanting to do something about it; recommending the product to others reduces the tension caused by the consumption experience |
| | Self-involvement | the product serves as a means to through which the speaker can gratify certain emotional needs |
| | Other-involvement | word-of-mouth activity that addresses the need to give something to the receiver |
| | Message-involvement | refers to discussion which is stimulated by advertisements, commercials, or public relations |
| Engel, Blackwell & Miniard (1993) | Involvement | level of interest or involvement in the topic under consideration serves to stimulate discussion |
| | Self-enhancement | recommendations allow person to gain attention, show connoisseurship, suggest status, give the impression of possessing inside information, and assert superiority |
| | Concern for others | a genuine desire to help a friend or relative make a better purchase decision |
| | Message intrigue | entertainment resulting from talking about certain ads or selling appeals |
| | Dissonance reduction | reduces cognitive dissonance (doubts) following a major purchase decision |
| Sundaram, Mitra & Webster (1998) | Altruism (positive WOM) | the act of doing something for others without anticipating any reward in return |
| | Product involvement | personal interest in the product, excitement resulting from product ownership and product use |
| | Self-enhancement | enhancing images among other consumers by projecting themselves as intelligent shoppers |
| | Helping the company | desire to help the company |
| | Altruism (negative WOM) | to prevent others from experiencing the problems they had encountered |
| | Anxiety reduction | easing anger, anxiety, and frustration |
| | Vengeance | to retaliate against the company associated with a negative consumption experience |
| | Advice seeking | obtaining advice on how to resolve problems |

3.2.2 Motives for providing eWOM

Several researchers have investigated what motivates consumers to make contributions to the online knowledge reservoirs that virtual communities constitute. In this research Hennig-Thurau et al.'s (2004) model is adopted. In their study, they seek to identify eWOM communication motives, an integration of general WOM motives and motives derived from the specific features of eWOM on consumer-opinion platforms. In this research these features that emphasize consumer-opinion platforms are left out because this research concentrates on virtual communities and eWOM in them. In spite of this, Hennig-Thurau et al.'s (2004) model is useful in this research and many of the motives based on consumer-opinion platforms apply also to virtual communities.

Balasubramanian and Mahajan (2001) have provided a useful framework for considering the integration of economic and social activity within the context of a virtual community, resulting in the distinction of three types of social interaction utility: focus-related utility, consumption utility, and approval utility. Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004) build on Balasubramanian and Mahajan's three utility types and identify motives for engaging in eWOM communication and extend their framework to include two additional consumer utilities which are based on (a) the characteristics of opinion platforms and (b) their review of the motive-related WOM literature. They refer to them as moderator-related utility and homeostase utility. Moderator-related utility has its origins in opinion platforms' specific features which don't apply to virtual communities and therefore it is left out from this research. Homeostase utility on the other hand builds on findings from the traditional WOM literature and is therefore discussed here.

Four utility types

Focus-related utility is the utility the consumer receives when adding value to the community through his or her contributions (Balasubramanian & Mahajan 2001). This utility is based on the assumption that "adding value" to the community is an important goal of the individual. Based on the traditional WOM communication literature, Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004) identify four motives that fall under the umbrella of focus-related utility: *concern for other consumers*, *helping the company*, *social benefits*, and *exerting power*. These four motivations each relate to a desire to advance the primary purpose of the community and thus add value to the community.

Consumption utility refers to consumers obtaining value through "direct consumption of the contributions of other community constituents" (Balasubramanian & Mahajan 2001: 125). In virtual community context, consumption takes place when individuals read discussions and comments about products written by others, which also can motivate consumers to write comments. Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004) identified one motive that was associated with consumption utility: *post-purchase advice seeking*.

Approval utility is concerned with a consumer's satisfaction that comes "when other constituents consume and approve of the constituent's own contributions" (Balasubramanian & Mahajan 2001: 126). In virtual community context, such feedback can be either formal or informal. Informal approval may come when another user either publicly praises one's contributions to the community or privately communicates to the individual regarding the usefulness of the information provided (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004). Based on the WOM communication literature, Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004) have identified two concrete motives that are associated with approval utility: *self-enhancement* and *economic rewards*. However, economic rewards are not discussed here because they are specific characteristic of opinion platform and do not apply to most virtual communities.

Homeostase utility is based on the notion that people have a basic desire for balance in their lives (e.g. Zajonc 1971, cited in Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004). Balance theory suggests individuals will strive to restore equilibrium after their originally balanced state has become unbalanced (Newcomb 1953). In the context of dissatisfying consumption experiences, the source of unbalance comes from either a strong positive or negative consumption experience. Balance can be restored by discussing about it in virtual community. Based on the WOM communication literature, Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004) have identified two motives that are associated with homeostase utility: *expressing positive emotions* and *venting negative feelings*.

Hennig-Thurau et als. (2004) original review of the literature led them to suggest 11 distinct motivations consumers may have in engaging in eWOM communication on Web-based opinion platforms. However, in this research some of them do not apply to virtual community context and therefore eight motivates were presented: concern for other consumers, desire to help the company, social benefits received, exertion of power over companies, post-purchase advice seeking, self-enhancement, expression of positive emotions, and venting of negative feelings.

However, after an empirical assessment of the motives of eWOM communication Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004) formed eight motive factors. Six of the eight factors corresponded exactly to one of the theoretically derived motive categories discussed earlier: *venting negative feelings*, *concern for other consumers*, *social benefits*, *economic incentives* (left out in this research), *helping the company*, and *advice seeking*. The remaining two factors represented a combination of the previously posited motives. First factor combined the two moderator-related utilities (left out in this research) with the exertion of "collective power." As the moderator-related utilities do not apply virtual communities and aren't discussed here, the factor is changed to include only the exertion of power over companies. Second factor is labelled *extraversion/positive self-enhancement* as it encompasses those motives that focus on the communicator's psychological benefits of eWOM – integrating the original motive categories "to express positive feelings" and "self-enhancement" (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004). Next these seven categories are described and discussed more.

Seven motivation categories

Concern for other consumers

First motivation is concern for other consumers and it applies the work of Engel et al. (1993: 158), in that eWOM communication on virtual communities may be initiated because of a desire to help other consumers with their buying decisions, to save others from negative experiences, or both. Therefore, it includes both positive and negative consumer experiences with a product or company.

According to Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004) this motive is closely related to the concept of altruism, which is intensively discussed in the philosophical literature (e.g. Nagel 1970; Paul, Miller & Paul 1993, both cited in Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004), and sometimes referred to in the marketing literature (e.g. Carman 1992). Altruism is the act of doing something for others without anticipating any reward in return. Relating to concern for others motivation, altruism is guiding people to share consumption experiences with others. Consumers have the intention of aiding the receivers of eWOM in virtual communities to make a satisfying purchase decision.

Helping the company

The helping the company motivation is the result of a consumer's satisfaction with a product and his or her subsequent desire to help the company (Sundaram et al. 1998). Consumers believe businesses that have done a good job should be rewarded by positive WOM, and these customers demonstrated a certain kind of commitment to the business organizations (Mee-Shew et al. 2007). The intended effect of communicative activities is that the company will become or remain successful (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004).

Supporting companies is related to the general altruism motive and draws on the same psychological background as the first motive – concern for others (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004). Although this is an act of altruism, a separate category was created because the objective here was to help the company rather than the receiver of the eWOM. According to this interpretation, the consumer considers the company a social institution worthy of support in the form of eWOM communication (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004). In addition, this motive also can be supported by equity theory (e.g. Oliver & Swan 1989), which suggests that individuals desire equitable and fair exchanges. If a consumer feels he or she has received a higher output/input ratio than the company, then helping the firm by recommending its offerings over the Internet is one way the output/input ratio can be equalized.

Social benefits

One consequence of providing eWOM is that consumers become part of a virtual community through their articulations. Affiliation with a virtual community can represent a social benefit to a consumer for reasons of identification and social integration; thus, it can be presumed that consumers engage in eWOM communication to participate in and belong to virtual communities (McWilliam 2000; Oliver 1999). Consumers want to belong to these virtual communities because they feel that they and their values and interests are accepted there, they can express themselves and most importantly want to interact with similar-minded people. Consumers may write comments on for example discussion forums on virtual communities and such behaviour signifies their participation in and presence with the virtual community and enables them to receive social benefits from this community membership.

Exertion power over companies

Hennig-Thurau et al.'s (2004) model had platform assistance as a motivation for providing eWOM which combines the two moderator-related utilities and exertion of power over companies. As the moderator-related utilities do not apply virtual communities and aren't discussed here, the factor is changed to include only the exertion of power over companies.

Given the great number of potential receivers of eWOM communication, the long-term availability of the comments, and their accessibility by companies, a consumer's individual articulation of a consumption problem can contribute to the exertion of (collective) power over companies. Since negative consumer comments can influence the way a company and its image are perceived, public articulations may be used by consumers as an instrument of power. Therefore, eWOM communication provides a mechanism to shift power from companies to consumers, particularly in cases where criticism is articulated by many consumers simultaneously. (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004)

Advice seeking

In virtual community context individuals read discussions and comments about products written by others, which also can motivate consumers themselves to write comments. Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004) expect that consumers may articulate a comment online describing their experiences with a product and request other consumers to submit problem-solving information. According to them writing and/or soliciting information on may allow the contributor to gain more specific and useful feedback than simply anonymously reading comments (i.e., "lurking"). This post-purchase advice-seeking motive is concerned with acquiring the skills necessary to better understand, use, operate, modify, and/or repair a product (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004).

In addition to Hennig-Thurau et al.'s (2004) perception of advice seeking motivation, it is considered here to be relevant to take also into consideration advice seeking before purchase. As people more often try to find information and advice before purchasing a product than after, they also turn to virtual communities to find information by both reading others discussions (i.e. lurking) and sending questions for other members to answer. Thus, in this research all kind of advice seeking (before and after a purchase as well as other questions) that appears on the virtual community for example as a posted question on a discussion forum.

Extraversion / Self-enhancement

This motivation encompasses motives that focus on the communicator's psychological benefits of eWOM – integrating the original motive categories "to express positive feelings" and "self-enhancement" from Hennig-Thurau et al.'s (2004) model.

The self-enhancement motivation (Engel et al. 1993; Sundaram et al. 1998) is driven by one's desire for positive recognition from others. Consumers share their positive consumption experiences through eWOM communication in order to enhance their image among others by projecting themselves as intelligent shoppers or as consumption experts. According to Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004) this motive refers to the existence of certain self-related consumer needs – underlying behaviour which can be gratified only through social interaction. Electronic communication that is read by others allows consumers to signal a kind of connoisseurship or a level of social status that can become important to one's self-concept.

Consumer's impression of consumption experiences can be unbalanced because of a strong positive consumption experience but this balance can be restored by discussing about it in virtual community. Balance can be restored through expressing positive emotions that are experienced as part of a successful consumption experience (Sundaram et al. 1998). The reason behind the consumer's need to express positive emotions is that the consumer's positive consumption experiences contribute to a psychological tension inside him or her because of a strong desire to want to share the joy of the experience with someone (Dichter 1966). That tension may be reduced by discussing it in virtual communities, a behaviour that allows the consumer to share the experience with many others (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004).

Venting negative feelings

Consumer's impression of consumption experiences can be also be unbalanced because of a strong negative consumption experience. Therefore in relation to expressing positive emotions, venting negative feelings associated with dissatisfying consumption experiences can serve to lessen the frustration and reduce the anxiety associated with the event (Sundaram et al. 1998). A consumer's desire for catharsis is known to be a major driving force behind the articulation of negative personal experiences (Alicke et al. 1992; Berkowitz 1970). Accordingly, sharing a negative consumption experience through the publication of online comments can help the consumer to reduce the discontent associated with his or her negative emotions (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004).

3.2.3 Motives for seeking eWOM

In order to understand consumer behaviour in virtual communities and especially their communication behaviour, it is important to study why consumers seek eWOM communications from virtual communities in addition to why they provide eWOM communication. Hennig-Thurau and Walsh (2003) have studied motivations to seek information from virtual opinion platforms. Because this research concentrates on virtual communities and eWOM communication in them, some of the features that emphasize virtual opinion platform are either excluded or modified to suit the context of virtual communities. Although of these changes made, Hennig-Thurau and Walsh's (2003) model is valuable in this research and many of the motives based on virtual opinion platforms also apply to virtual communities.

Drawing on established theories and concepts of communication and consumer behaviour, Hennig-Thurau and Walsh's (2003) research used a deductive approach to examine motivations for consulting virtual opinion platforms. The deductive analysis began by identifying theories and concepts that would help explain why users read customer articulations on the Internet (i.e., identification of motives). They recognised following motivations from previous studies: risk reduction, reducing search time, determination of social position, dissonance reduction, belonging to a virtual community, learning what products are new in the marketplace, remuneration (excluded) and to learn how a product is to be consumed. Remuneration is excluded in this research because virtual community members aren't usually rewarded for reading contributions as in virtual opinion platforms.

Hennig-Thurau and Walsh (2003) modified these theoretically derived motives into five factors or motive dimensions: obtaining buying-related information, social orientation through information, community membership, remuneration (excluded) and to learn how a product is to be consumed. In *obtaining buying-relevant information* factor risk reduction and reducing search time were combined because both of them related to making a buying decision. *Social orientation through information* contains items from determination of social position and dissonance reduction. *Community membership* contains items from belonging to a virtual community as well as learning what products are new in the marketplace. Last factors correspond to the previously derived motives, *remuneration* (excluded) and *to learn how a product is to be consumed*, respectively. Next the chosen four categories are described and discussed more.

Obtaining buying-related information

In this dimension risk reduction and reducing search time are combined because both of them related to making a buying decision. In the context of opinion-leader theory (Chan & Misra 1990; Flynn, Goldsmith & Eastman 1996), Schiffman and Kanuk (1987) speculate on the communication motives of opinion followers (i.e., consumers who seek information from opinion leaders). Drawing on Dichter's (1966) motive typology for information givers, they theoretically derive corresponding motives for information-seeking behaviour. Schiffman and Kanuk (1987: 560) refer to risk reduction with regard to buying decisions and the reduction of search time as "self-involvement motivations". The first motive results directly from risk-related theoretical considerations. The second can be explained as an effort to reduce the time needed to procure a product, motivated by the consumer's self-perceived lack of time (Dhar & Nowlis 1999; Spears 2001).

By reading eWOM articulations from virtual communities, consumers can reduce risk relating to their purchase by finding information about products and other consumers opinions about them. As discussed, consumers find information from other consumers to be more credible than for example companies or marketers. eWOM articulations in virtual communities can reduce search time by having all the information about different products at the same place (for example discussion forum thread about good cat food brands). Consumer can get to know different products by being home on their computer and they don't have to go anywhere.

Social orientation through information

This dimension contains items from determination of social position and dissonance reduction motivations. The social function of consumption is the source from which Schiffman and Kanuk (1987, cited in Hennig-Thurau & Walsh 2003) derive "other-involvement motivations". Presumably consumers read product-related information on virtual communities in order to evaluate the product and its associated social prestige (i.e., to determine their social position) (Hennig-Thurau & Walsh 2003).

Cognitive dissonance means that having decided on a specific product, consumers often experience cognitive incongruence related to information about the alternative offers they have rejected. Cognitive incongruence may also be caused by conflicting information from other sources (e.g., a friend's recommendation vs. an advertisement). Incongruence can be reduced by neutral or unbiased information that confirms the consumer's assessment of a

consumption situation or the soundness of the consumer's choice. (Hennig-Thurau & Walsh 2003) Reading eWOM articulations in virtual communities can reduce this incongruence because information from other consumers is considered often to be more trustworthy than from companies and marketers. However, there is often conflicting opinions in virtual communities because members can have quite different tastes and decision criteria that can also cause cognitive dissonance.

Community membership

This dimension contains items from belonging to a virtual community as well as learning what products are new in the marketplace. The integration of items from the two factors suggests according to Hennig-Thurau and Walsh (2003) that users of opinion platforms view the exchange of information not related to an acute buying decision as part of the community experience. Accordingly, this dimension is labelled community membership.

Belonging to a virtual community motive can be derived by applying social-psychological Internet-related community research to readers of contributions who become members of a virtual user community (e.g. Fischer et al. 1996; Glogoff 2001). Such membership, manifested in the exchange of product opinions, is usually linked to an intrinsic motivation: "Consumers may be turning to the Internet to interact with others who share their 'consuming passions' " (Granitz & Ward 1996; 161). This motive is therefore called as belonging to a virtual community.

Learning what products are new in the marketplace motive is quite self-explanatory. This means that consumers are motivated to seek information from virtual communities in order to find out new products in the marketplace. For example concerning virtual pet communities, consumers want to know what new pet food brands there is so that they are able to buy best products for their pets. According to Hennig-Thurau and Walsh (2003) curiosity and novelty-seeking explain why consumers need to learn what products are new in the marketplace.

Learn how a product is to be consumed

This dimension contains consumer motivation to learn how a product is to be consumed. This motivation belongs to Schiffman and Kanuk's (1987: 548) "product-involvement motivation" as do learning what products are new in the marketplace. It might seem that this motivation should perhaps belong to the obtaining buying-related information. However, obtaining

buying-related information takes place before the purchase whereas learning how the product is to be consumed takes normally place after the purchase.

3.3 Motivations for adoption of eWOM

Understanding why consumers provide and engage in electronic word-of-mouth communication would be of no value unless consumers actually use the information communicated through eWOM and include it in their decision making process before a purchase. It is widely accepted that word-of-mouth communication plays an important role in shaping consumers' attitudes and behaviour (Brown & Reingen 1987). WOM has been shown to have a substantial impact on product choice (Kiel & Layton 1981), as well as in choosing services (Ennew, Banerjee & Li 2000; Keaveney 1995).

However, as more people utilize product information from the eWOM network to make purchase decisions, the process by which they evaluate the credibility of online consumer recommendations becomes particularly interesting (Hennig-Thurau & Walsh 2003). The anonymous nature of eWOM can make it difficult for consumers to determine the quality and credibility of the eWOM (Chatterjee 2001; Schindler & Bickart 2005). Determining the quality of online posts has become even more difficult now that marketers have attempted to influence eWOM by compensating consumers to review products and even going so far as to post their own reviews about their products (Chatterjee 2001). Because of this, consumers often look for a variety of cues when determining the quality of the online information (Greer 2003). Prior study has already demonstrated that credibility is one of the most important antecedents of eWOM adoption (McKnight & Kacmar 2006). A consumer who believes the on-line information to be credible has no reason not to adopt it.

Previous studies mostly focused on the underlying motivations of providing and seeking eWOM. Cheung et al. (2008) however examined the factors that drive consumers to adopt and use the messages (eWOM) from other consumers. They introduced information quality and source credibility as most important driving factors and next these two factors are discussed more.

3.3.1 Information quality

Information quality has long been discussed in the context of information systems. With the ability to publish information now in the hands of almost anyone, the quality of some online information will inevitably be diminished. In a computer-mediated environment, consumer-purchasing decisions of products and services can be determined by the perceived quality of information they receive. (Cheung et al. 2008) When customers perceive that the information meets their needs and requirements, they are willing to critique the value of each product or service based on their purchase decision criteria (Olshavsky 1985). Therefore, determining customers' perception of information quality on the web is an important element for assessing their potential buying behaviour. More and more research about online information quality is currently taking place. Cheung et al. (2008) examined four commonly used dimensions of information quality: relevance, timeliness, accuracy, and comprehensiveness.

First, *relevance* of messages is important as most Internet users are conscious of their time (Cheung et al. 2008). Madu and Madu (2002) urged that Internet users rarely read web pages in detail but rather scan the pages to find the information they need. Users want to find the information that they want quickly and with little effort (Nah & Davis 2002). It is therefore important to have only the most relevant information present in the online community. Secondly, *timeliness* of messages concerns whether the messages are current, timely, and up-to-date (Cheung et al. 2008). Madu and Madu (2002) urged that when the website is not updated consistently, the website cannot deliver the expected performance and therefore provide no added value to users. Thirdly, *accuracy* of messages concerns their reliability (Cheung et al. 2008). It also represents user's perception that the information is correct (Wixom & Todd 2005). According to media richness theory (Daft & Lengel 1986), quality, accuracy, and reliability of the information exchanged are important across a medium. Lastly, *comprehensiveness* of messages refers to their completeness (Cheung et al. 2008). Sullivan (1999) suggested that the more detailed the information, the wider the breadth of user categories and user-orientation of that web site, and thus resulting in a greater likelihood of user acquisition and retention.

3.3.2 Source credibility

In WOM communication, source credibility is an essential requirement for the persuasiveness of a message (Pollach 2008). Source credibility refers to a message recipient's perception of the credibility of a message source, reflecting nothing about the message itself (Chaiken 1980). It is defined as the extent to which an information source is perceived to be believable, competent, and trustworthy by information recipients (Petty & Cacioppo 1986, cited in Cheung et al. 2008). The role of credibility in informational influence has been found to most significantly alter a recipients' opinion in the direction advocated by the communicator when the material was attributed to high-credibility source than when it was attributed to a low-credibility source (Hovland 1951). In addition, Eagly and Chaiken (1993, cited in Cheung et al. 2008) found that the persuasiveness of a message depends on the number of positive attributes the communicators possess. Information provided by highly credible sources is perceived to be useful and reliable, and thereby facilitates knowledge transfer (Ko, Kirsch & King 2005).

Past research suggests that individuals following the peripheral route can be influenced by the source's attractiveness, likeability, and credibility (Cheung et al. 2008). Online source credibility depends on the receiver's perception of the sender's trustworthiness and expertise (Kiecker & Cowles 2001) and they are the two key dimensions of source credibility.

According to Cheung et al. (2008) in the online environment, people have almost unlimited freedom to publish and express their feelings towards certain products or services without disclosing his/her real identity. It is therefore left up to users to determine the expertise and trustworthiness of the contributors in order to either adopt or reject the information presented (Cheung et al. 2008). People's lack of trust in other people's expertise is moderated by their product involvement and product knowledge (Xue & Phelps 2004). Thus, people who are knowledgeable in a particular product group are in a better position to judge whether a product review is credible and valuable to them (Pollach 2008). If the consumer thinks that the comments are posted by high-credibility (high degree of expertise and trustworthiness) individuals, he/she will then have a higher perception of the usefulness of the comments (Cheung et al. 2008).

3.4 Summary

Important characteristic of virtual communities is the way the members interact and especially communicate with each others. This communication in the traditional face-to-face interactions has been called in word-of-mouth communication (WOM). In this research WOM is defined as the “oral, person to person communication between a receiver and a communicator whom the receiver perceives as non-commercial, concerning a brand, a product or a service” (Arndt 1967b: 3). Due to the development of information and communication technologies consumers are increasingly turning to computer-mediated communication for information to use in their decision making process (Dellarocas 2003; Kozinets 2002) which is called electronic word-of-mouth communication (eWOM). eWOM is defined here as “any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual, or former customers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the Internet” (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004: 39).

In order to better understand virtual consumer behaviour and especially eWOM it is necessary to understand the reasons behind the behaviour. Therefore it is important to know consumers motivations engaging to eWOM, both motives for providing and seeking eWOM. For understanding consumer motivations for providing eWOM, Hennig-Thurau et al.’s (2004) model was presented. From their model the following motives were chosen because they suited the virtual community context: concern for other consumers, helping the company, social benefits, exertion of power over companies, advice seeking, extraversion/self-enhancement and venting negative feelings. In addition, consumer seeking or retrieving motivations for eWOM where based on the Hennig-Thurau and Walsh’s (2003) model. Their model was also adapted to suit virtual community context and four factors or motive dimensions were discussed: obtaining buying-related information, social orientation through information, community membership, and to learn how a product is to be consumed.

Last section presented two motivations affecting the adoption of eWOM messages: quality and source credibility. It is important to understand why consumers provide and seek electronic word-of-mouth communication but this would be of no value unless consumers actually use the information communicated through eWOM and include it in their decision process before making a purchase.

4 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This chapter presents and describes the theoretical framework of this research which is based on the theoretical discussions presented in previous chapters modified to fit the chosen research context. Empirical part of this research is going to be based on this theoretical framework.

The objective of the theoretical section was to show what kind of motivations for eWOM in virtual communities might exist. In order to truly understand motivations for eWOM in virtual communities, it was important first get to know the background and reasons behind this and after that concentrate on the actual research phenomenon. This was established through literature review about virtual communities and eWOM before continuing to motivations related to eWOM. The main points from the literature review and the decisions concerning them in the summaries can be found in the end of these chapters. This chapter will discuss only choices concerning virtual communities and especially the motivations for eWOM because that is the main focus in the research and which therefore forms the theoretical framework.

Virtual communities and virtual community types

Virtual communities are the context where the eWOM communication takes place and therefore needs to be taken into consideration in the theoretical framework. In this research the term virtual community serves an umbrella concept that encompasses all the terms for social gatherings that occur virtually in the cyber-space. However, in order to get clearer picture of the phenomenon, virtual communities are categorized to different types according to the needs they fulfil. The categorization of Hagel and Armstrong (1997) is adopted where virtual communities are divided into transaction, interest, fantasy and relationship communities. From these virtual community types more emphasis was given to virtual communities of interest because in these communities members have higher degrees of interaction that can be related to brands and products. As a last specification, pets were the chosen interest and therefore this research concentrates on virtual pet communities. This is because pet communities haven't been researched before although pets are important part of consumers' lives and consumers are spending more and more money on their pets and taking care of them.

Consumer motivations to provide eWOM

Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004) have created a typology for providing motives of consumer online articulations (i.e. eWOM). They identified eWOM communication motives as an integration of general WOM motives and motives derived from the specific features of eWOM on consumer-opinion platforms which were excluded from this research because of their applicability to the context on virtual communities.

First they reviewed social interaction and consumer utilities related to eWOM and virtual communities which were focus-related utility, consumption utility, approval utility, moderator-related utility (excluded) and homeostase utility. Based on these utilities they recognised 11 motives: concern for other consumers, desire to help the company, social benefits received, exertion of power over companies, post-purchase advice seeking, self-enhancement, economic rewards (excluded), convenience in seeking redress (excluded), hope that the platform operator will serve as a moderator (excluded), expression of positive emotions, and venting of negative feelings.

These motives were empirically assessed and from these Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004) formed eight motive factors which were modified to suit this research and its objectives. The following motives for providing eWOM which are included in the theoretical framework: concern for other consumers, helping the company, social benefits, exertion of power over companies, advice seeking, extraversion/positive self-enhancement and venting negative feelings.

Consumer motivations to retrieve eWOM

On the other hand, Hennig-Thurau and Walsh (2003) have created model for consumer motivations to seek or more specifically retrieve other customers' on-line articulations from Web-based consumer opinion platforms. In this research their model is modified to better describe virtual communities rather than opinion platforms. The specific features of eWOM on consumer-opinion platforms were therefore excluded from this research because of their applicability to the context on virtual communities.

Hennig-Thurau and Walsh (2003) used a deductive approach to examine motivations starting from identifying theories and concepts that would help explain why users read customer articulations on the Internet. They recognised following motivations from previous studies: risk reduction, reducing search time, determination of social position, dissonance reduction,

belonging to a virtual community, learning what products are new in the marketplace, remuneration (excluded) and to learn how a product is to be consumed. Remuneration is excluded in this research because virtual community members aren't usually rewarded for reading contributions as in virtual opinion platforms. These motives they derived from the theory were further modified to five factors or motive dimensions: obtaining buying-related information, social orientation through information, community membership, remuneration (excluded) and to learn how a product is to be consumed. These motives except remuneration are applicable to virtual community context.

However, it is impossible to interpret what motivates members who are seeking information from virtual communities just by lurking because they only retrieve messages and therefore do not provide them. This research is conducted by netnographic research where motivations are studied only by interpreting written eWOM communication. Therefore it is impossible to use Hennig-Thurau and Walsh's (2003) motivations in the same way as they originally used them.

However, these motivations were considered to be helpful in the analysis of Hennig-Thurau et al.'s (2004) advice seeking motivation and bring more depth and different aspects of advice seeking to the analysis. In order to take these motivations into consideration they are applied to the advice seeking motivations from the Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004) model. Thus, Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004) model's advice seeking motivation is further categorized based on the motivations in Hennig-Thurau and Walsh's (2003) model, in other words based on the four chosen motive dimensions mentioned above.

Theoretical framework combining the chosen models

This theoretical framework (Figure 2) is based on the combination of the models of Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004) and Hennig-Thurau and Walsh (2003). It also takes into consideration the context of virtual communities where the eWOM behaviour occurs and the classification of virtual community types by Hagel and Armstrong (1997) is applied.

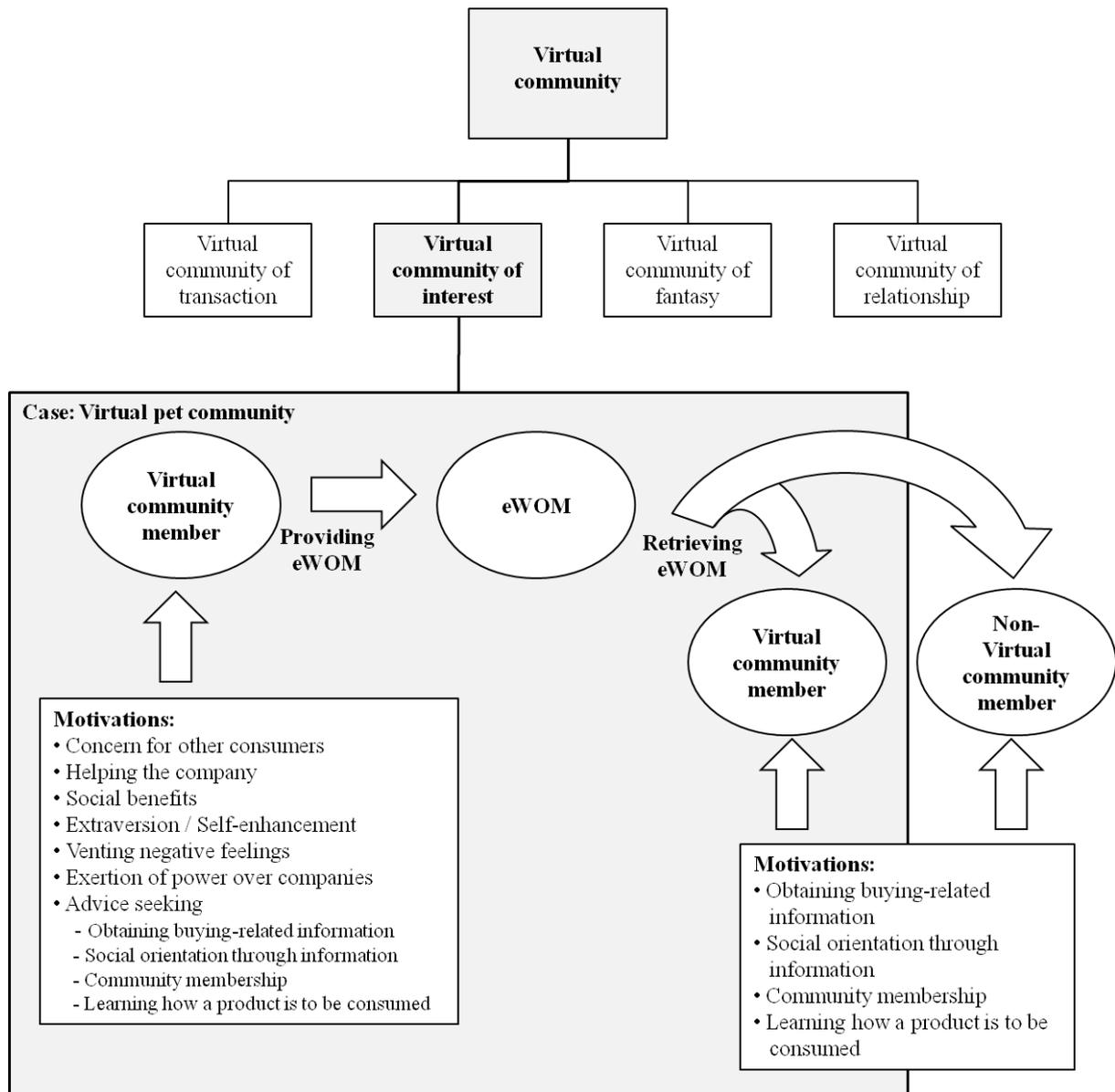


Figure 2. Theoretical framework of consumer motivations for eWOM in virtual pet communities

The top section of the theoretical framework shows the research context of virtual communities where the eWOM communication takes place in this research. As discussed virtual community serves as an umbrella concept and below it virtual communities are categorized to the four chosen types by Hagel and Armstrong (1997). Virtual communities of interest were chosen for concentration and there virtual pet communities as the specific research topic.

In the bottom section of the theoretical framework, eWOM communication and the interactions and motivations related eWOM are illustrated. In the left side of the model is the

virtual community member who provides eWOM. This person is virtual community members because in most of the virtual communities you have to be a member of the community in order to provide eWOM. In this side there are the motivations which affect virtual community members to provide eWOM. Motivations include combination of Hennig-Thurau et al.'s (2004) and Hennig-Thurau and Walsh's (2003) motivations: concern for other consumers, helping the company, social benefits, extraversion/self-enhancement, venting negative feelings, exertion of power over companies and advice seeking, which consists of obtaining buying-related information, social orientation through, community membership and learning how a product is to be consumed.

The right side of the model is related to retrieving the eWOM communication from the community. There are both virtual community members and non-virtual community members who retrieve the information. This is because often you don't have to be a community member in order to read and retrieve information from virtual communities. These non-virtual community members are often called lurkers because they do not contribute to the community and only take information to benefit themselves. In this side there are motivations which affect both the virtual community members and the non-members to retrieve information from the virtual community. These motivations apply to both groups because Hennig-Thurau and Walsh (2003) haven't taken into consideration differences between these different groups in their motivation model. Their motivation include the same motivations adopted in the advice seeking motivation: obtaining buying-related information, social orientation through, community membership and learning how a product is to be consumed.

However, only the providing motivations are studied in the empirical part of the research because as discussed previously, it is impossible to study retrieving motivations because most of the times consumers retrieving eWOM do not provide messages which are the basis of this research.

It is important to notice that these motivations both for providing and retrieving eWOM can be overlapping because consumers can have different motivations to engage in eWOM at the same time. This makes analysis of the written eWOM articulations more complicated but not impossible. There is usually one underlying motivation which seems stronger than the other motivations.

In this research motivations for providing eWOM have been studied from virtual pet community perspective what hasn't been done in previous researches. In addition,

motivations for eWOM have been previously researched by asking consumers about their motivations. Therefore there is a need to study motivations in different kind of methods in order to test theoretical models without possibly biased consumer answers. In this research motivations presented in the framework are studied by netnographic research method where only the written eWOM communications are analyzed.

5 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This chapter explains the research design and methods used in the empirical part of the thesis. The goal of the empirical research is to provide insight on eWOM motivations in virtual pet communities. The research method chosen for this research is netnography. First section describes choice of methodology and reasons behind these choices. Second section specifies the netnographic research design and its characteristics. Also in this section opportunities and challenges of netnography are discussed. Third section continues describing phases of the research process and procedures: entering research community, data collection and analysis, trustworthiness of the research results and research ethics.

5.1 Choice of Methodology

The aim of this study is to explore eWOM motivations in virtual pet communities. As the research area is still fairly unexplored and more understanding is needed, it was decided to use qualitative research method. Also the research questions require qualitative research because the concept of motivation is quite abstract. Exploring eWOM motivations through quantitative research methods is possible but in this research but the objective was to get information about the deeper meanings concerning motivations. As Silverman (2000: 56) states, qualitative methods allow deeper understanding of phenomena which supports the aims of this research. Qualitative research involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world which means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them (Denzin & Lincoln 2000: 3).

Qualitative data can be collected in various ways; since eWOM takes place on the Internet, data is naturally found on the Internet. Material was gathered from virtual pet community's discussion board in the Internet. Virtual pet community offers natural setting for research and therefore eWOM occurring in the virtual communities provide rich and pure material for the research. For exploring eWOM motivations in virtual pet communities, netnographic research method is chosen. Netnographic research method was chosen because it provided the most suitable data for this study. Netnography has been used as a marketing research technique, in which publicly available information – typically information found in online discussion groups – is used to 'identify and understand the needs and decision influences of relevant online consumer groups' (Kozinets 2002: 62). Motivations for eWOM have been previously

researched by interviews and questionnaires – asking consumers about their motivations. However, consumer's answers can be biased and therefore don't tell the whole truth about their motivations. In this research motivations were studied by netnographic research method where only the written eWOM communications are analyzed.

5.2 Netnography

5.2.1 Characteristics

Netnography is based on ethnographic research method. Ethnography is an anthropological method that has gained popularity in sociology, cultural studies, consumer research, and various other social scientific fields (Kozinets 2002). Ethnography is a research process in which the ethnographer closely observes, records, and engages in the daily life of another culture – an experience labelled as the fieldwork method – and then writes an account on this culture, emphasizing descriptive detail (Marcus & Fisher 1986:16).

Ethnographic methods have been continually refashioned to suit particular fields of scholarship, research questions, research sites, times, researcher preferences, and cultural groups (Kozinets 2002). Netnography is an ethnographic variety that refers to an ethnography that is undertaken in computer-mediated environments mainly in the Internet. Technological advancements like the Internet have changed how consumers form relationships and groups and therefore traditional ethnographic research has to be adapted to examining virtual communities. It is increasingly recognized, among researchers and marketing practitioners alike, that virtual communities organized around market related topics form apt research sites (e.g. Schau & Gilly 2003; Kozinets 1998, 1999, 2002; McAlexander et al. 2002; Muniz & O'Guinn 2001; Muniz & Schau 2005). After all, these communities contain detailed descriptions about the way consumers behave and their motivations to do so (de Valck et al. 2009).

Kozinets (1997, 1998, 2001, 2002) is credited with introducing the term and concept of netnography in the late 1990s. He is one of the leading researchers utilizing netnography in the fields of marketing and consumer behaviour, and has defined netnography, or Internet-based ethnography, in terms of both *product* and *process*. As a product, a netnography is 'a written account of on-line cyber-culture, informed by the methods of cultural anthropology' (Kozinets 1997: 470). As a process or research methodology, netnography is a 'new

qualitative research methodology that adapts ethnographic research techniques to study the cultures and communities that are emerging through computer-mediated communications' (Kozinets 2002: 62). In this research netnography is considered as a process and therefore above definition is adopted.

Netnography has been used as a marketing research technique and it has been used especially in the field of online consumer behaviour (Sandlin 2007). Information found in online discussion groups, chat rooms and other online formats to share ideas can be used to identify and understand the needs and decision influences of relevant online consumer groups (Kozinets 2002). It views online gatherings of consumers interested in similar lifestyles, products and brands, as virtual communities. Netnography is used to understand virtual communities in the same ways that anthropologists seek to understand the cultures, norms and practices of face-to-face communities (Sandlin 2007). Netnography 'allows the researcher to gain access to consumer discussions by observing and/or participating in communications on publicly available online forums' (Nelson & Otnes 2005: 90).

Netnography has been used in the fields of marketing and consumer behaviour to examine a number of topics and consumer groups, including virtual cooking community (de Valck et al. 2009); the web community 'my Nutella The Community' (Cova & Pace 2006); American and Chinese digital camera discussion boards (Fong and Burton 2006); online apparel discussions (Kim & Jin 2006); brides-to-be planning intercultural weddings (Nelson & Otnes 2005); followers of the defunct Apple Newton PDA (Muniz & Schau 2005); new social movements of consumer activism such as those focused on anti-advertising, anti-Nike corporation and anti-genetically engineered foods (Kozinets & Handelman 2004); study of personal web pages and consumption meanings (Schau & Gilly 2003); the consumption of nostalgia through the retrobrands Volkswagen's New Beetle and Star Wars: Episode I – The Phantom Menace (Brown, Kozinets & Sherry 2003); online coffee communities (Kozinets 2002); Star Trek fans (Kozinets 2001); consumer boycott communities (Kozinets & Handelman 1998); X-Files fans (Kozinets 1997) and many more. However, evident is that virtual pet communities and especially eWOM motivations overall have not been studied netnographically.

5.2.2 Possibilities and challenges

Monitoring virtual communities with netnography has several advantages over the traditional qualitative methods that are used to study the drivers of consumer behaviour, such as focus groups, personal interviews, and market-oriented ethnographies (de Valck et al. 2009). First, member interactions can be observed in a context that is neither created nor directed by the researcher; we may peek into naturally occurring information exchange and influencing strategies among the community members, and listen in on how they talk about brands and products (de Valck et al. 2009). Netnography captures consumers in their own, natural environments, providing researchers ‘with a window into naturally occurring behaviour’ (Kozinets 2002: 62), as consumers chat with one another, discuss information and search for information online. Second, the community can be observed without any invasion of privacy or interference with its activity. Focus groups, personal interviews, and traditional ethnographies cannot be conducted unobtrusively (de Valck et al. 2009) but netnography, on the other hand, can be conducted entirely unobtrusively, if desired (Kozinets 2002). Finally, virtual communities can be examined from behind the researcher's desk and they are accessible 24/7 (de Valck et al. 2009). Therefore, in contrast to traditional ethnographies of consumer communities, online community research is less time consuming, less costly, and timelier, because of continuous access to informants (Kozinets 2002).

However, there are also challenges. There is a massive amount of data online, rendering these groups and their messages highly accessible to any curious investigator with access to a web browser. However, raw or medium-rare data are not information, and knowledge has differential degrees of power. It is easy to become overwhelmed by netnography's data tidal wave. (Kozinets 2006) The amount of information online is therefore one challenge for netnographic researcher to find the relevant information about the research phenomenon and interpret it. Interpretation also depends considerably on researcher's own skills and background so there is no one truth or right result. Other challenge is that netnography is also limited by the textual nature of much of the communicative exchange, which misses much of the richness of in-person communication, with its tonal shifts, pauses, cracked voices, eye movements, body language, movements toward and away from, and so on (Kozinets 2006). Within a textual reality, the anonymity that is sometimes advantageous at obtaining disclosure prevents us from having confidence that we understand our discloser. We do not have any reliable means of telling about the persons researched online. We subsequently have no firm basis for making comparisons or offering conclusions that are in any sense reliably

generalizable (Kozinets 2006). However, while we might not know the real person behind the person online, we can understand how they behave and construct their lives and realities online.

5.3 Netnographic research process and procedures

Kozinets (2002) has presented common ethnographic procedures that help shape researchers' participant observation which include (1) making cultural *entrée*, (2) gathering and analyzing data, (3) ensuring trustworthy interpretation, and (4) conducting ethical research. These procedures are discussed next.

5.3.1 Cultural *entrée*

According to Kozinets (2002) there are two initial steps that market researchers will find useful as preparation for conducting a netnography. First, researchers must have specific marketing research questions and then identify particular online forums appropriate to the types of questions that are of interest to them. Second, they must learn as much as possible about the forums, the groups, and the individual participants they seek to understand. Unlike in traditional ethnographies, in the identification of relevant communities, online search engines will prove invaluable (Kozinets 2002).

Data for this research is collected from virtual pet community that uses discussion forums as communications tool. This research focuses on online forum discussions, because their unique and expressive content allows researcher to peek unobtrusively into actual eWOM communication and ongoing interpersonal influence in its naturalistic and real-time setting (de Valck et al. 2009). They provide a venue where participants come together to give and seek information, and thus they provide an important channel for eWOM to take place (Fong & Burton 2006).

More precisely, the topic of interest for the studied virtual pet community is cats. This decision to concentrate on virtual pet community around cats was made because the author has previously been a cat owner and had been contemplating getting a new cat and looking information from virtual pet communities. The information in these communities was noticed to be extensive and rich and people really write and rely on others comments. In addition, the topic was chosen because cats are important part of consumers' lives and for example in U.S.

there is 93.6 million owned cats (APPMA 2010). Consumers also spend a lot of money of taking care of their cats and in 2009, \$10.41 billion was spent on pet foods in U.S. (APPMA 2010).

In order to identify relevant virtual pet communities around cats, a search was conducted on Google by using keywords such as cat community, cat online forum, cat discussions forum etc. Choice of the virtual cat community was based on the following criteria as suggested by Kozinets (2002): (1) a more focused and research question-relevant segment, topic, or group; (2) higher "traffic" of postings; (3) larger numbers of discrete message posters; (4) more detailed or descriptively rich data; and (5) more between-member interactions of the type required by the research question.

Kissamaailma.net was chosen as the investigated community because it was on the top of Google's research list for almost every keyword used and it was also considered to be good example of a virtual pet community according the Kozinets' criteria. First of all it was naturally relevant from the research questions perspective. Second, it has quite high traffic of postings (for example 92 messages on 26th of July). Third, there is large number of members in the community (544 members on 26th of July). Fourth, this community has rich and detailed data (57 965 messages on 2 722 topics on 26th of July) and this is based on previous knowledge of the community as well as from getting to know the community and learning more in this research process phase. Lastly, there is plenty of discussions concerning cats and especially about feeding cats which is chosen to be one constraint concerning which discussions to concentrate on.

It would have been good to research more than one cat community and also communities around dogs and other pets. However, it was decided to concentrate only on one virtual community because of time and resource constraints. The scope and depth of the eWOM discussion in the virtual pet communities is so vast and rich and therefore it was more relevant to concentrate only on one community in order to get deeper understanding about the community and its members' motivations to engage in eWOM discussions.

As Kozinets (2002) has pointed out before initiating contact or data collection, the marketing researcher should be familiar with the characteristics of the virtual communities. Although there was some previous knowledge about virtual pet communities and Kissamaailma.net community, some time was spend among the community as a whole to get reasonable

understanding of the characteristics and norms of the community before concentrating on discussions relevant to this study.

5.3.2 Data collection and analysis

After virtual communities are chosen, marketing researchers are ready to begin collecting data for their netnography. According to Kozinets (2002) there are two types of data collected when conducting a netnography: (1) the written communications occurring between and among participants in the online setting (which, for analysis, are typically copied and pasted into word processor documents on the researcher's computer); and (2) the researcher's own field notes, in which he or she describes, reflects upon, and analyses what he or she is observing during the research process.

As a distinct advantage over traditional ethnographers, netnographers benefit from the nearly automatic transcription of downloaded documents. With the addition of vastly lower search costs than face-to-face ethnography, data are often plentiful and easy to obtain. In this environment, the netnographer's choices of which data to save and which to pursue are important and should be guided by the research question and available resources. (Kozinets 2002) To handle the sometimes overwhelming amounts of data that netnography can generate (Dholakia & Zhang 2004), Kozinets (2002) suggests first classifying messages as to whether they are primarily social or informational, and primarily on or off topic.

Data analysis is often simultaneous with data collection and these phases of research process are therefore difficult to distinguish from each other. As starting data analysis, the netnographer must contextualize the online data, which often proves to be more challenging in the social cues-impoverished online context of netnography (Kozinets 2002). Different kind of software solutions can be used to analyze data which can expedite coding, content analysis, data linking, data display, and theory-building functions (Paccagnella 1997). However, some of the most useful interpretations of netnographic data take advantage of its contextual richness and come as a result of penetrating metaphoric and symbolic interpretation (Sherry 1991) rather than meticulous classification (Kozinets 2002). Therefore, in this research no software solutions are used.

Data collected with netnography is analyzed through content analysis. Content analysis is one of the classical procedures for analyzing textual material, no matter where the material comes from – ranging from consumer interviews to eWOM discussions on the Internet. One of its

essential features is the use of categories, which are often derived from theoretical models: categories are brought to the empirical material and not necessarily developed from it, although they are repeatedly assessed against it and modified if necessary (Flick 2002: 190). As the aim of this research is to study motivations for eWOM discussions which are in the form of textual material with the help of theoretical framework categories, content analysis is the best way to do the analysis. As the theoretical framework works as directing tool rather than fixed categorization for analysis, my research follows direction of the abductive content analysis. Abductive content analysis is something between inductive and deductive content analysis. In the deductive analysis theoretical background is verified with empirical data and in comparison inductive analysis generates theory from the empirical data. In the abductive analysis both the empirical data and the theoretical models are combined and theory and empirical data are used interactively to further develop theory.

Primary data set consisted of naturally occurring textual data obtained from the discussions forums of the Kissamaailma.net virtual community. Data was gathered and downloaded from the community forums and discussions sites to understand the essence of the community and its communications: what motivates members to engage in eWOM discussions, and how it is represented in texts. Using the Kozinet's (2002) approach, postings were separated into those that were relevant to the research and those that were off topic. Because there is over 55 000 postings in the community forum it is obvious that some restrictions were needed. There were quite few phases when defining which discussions were taken to study and decisions were made according to which were thought to be most relevant.

In the first preliminary research empirical analysis was focused on the discussions areas where the community members engaged in collective exchange of experiences, interpretations and outlooks on feeding cats and the right diet for their cats. This was because it was considered to be interesting topic and full of rich eWOM communications because it is one of the most important things when taking care of pets and topic that people most discuss about. One important factor was that discussions about feeding cats strongly relate to buying behaviour and therefore results could be beneficial to cat food companies and brands. However, in the cat feeding topic category there were over 3 000 messages and because of time and resource constraints it was decided to further limit studied discussion. Every discussion thread relating to cat foods and feeding your cat was read through and narrowed down to discussions threads most representative for this research. It was decided to concentrate only on discussions threads related to cat food brands and not other cat related

topics like raw food discussions. After that discussion threads were narrowed down to those which had over 20 replies.

After these constraints, 1 134 messages were left for deeper analysis. This data was collected to word document with consisted over 300 pages of text. This data was analyzed through content analysis and divided by Hennig-Thurau et al.'s (2004) and Hennig-Thurau and Walsh's (2003) categories of eWOM motivations. In the analysis example messages of virtual community members' posting are used to illustrate discussed motivations and how these motivations can be seen in the community. As the community discussions were in Finnish, messages were translated to English. Because of the amount of messages and time and resource constraints, these message translations weren't checked and back-up translated by an outsider source. Chosen postings were from 04.01.2007 – 08.08.2010 time period. The whole discussions threads were chosen to study rather than messages from specific time period because reading the whole discussion would help to get a bigger picture from the community and its discussions.

Reflective field notes were written during the whole data collection process. In these field notes, netnographers record their own observations regarding subtexts, pretexts, contingencies, conditions, and personal emotions that occur during the research (Kozinets 2002). Kozinets (2002) recommends this procedure because these written reflections often prove invaluable to contextualizing the data. Writing field notes helped to discover emerging themes from the discussions and narrowing down postings collected.

5.3.3 Trustworthiness of research results

During the course of netnographic data collection and analysis, the market researcher must follow conventional procedures so that the research is reasonable or trustworthy (Kozinets 2002). It should be noted according to Kozinets (2002) that in most qualitative consumer research, the concept of "trustworthiness" is used rather than "validity".

Kozinets (2002) warns that trustworthiness can be a particularly sticky issue with netnography because of the fully textual nature of the data collected from online participants. Dholakia and Zhang (2004) and Zwick and Dholakia (2004) also state that issues of informant identity are potentially problematic in online research. That is, in online contexts, participants might be more likely to present a self-image that is significantly different than their 'real' selves, which could possibly undermine the trustworthiness of the data collected. In addition, in virtual

communities, demographic characteristics of participants cannot be collected or verified. Dholakia and Zhang (2004) explain that with online research, a researcher cannot be sure that people are who they actually claim to be. To address some of these issues, Kozinets (2002) urges researchers to make the unit of analysis the speech act or communication, and not the individual. To ensure the most trustworthy data possible, Kozinets (2002) urges researchers to immerse themselves in the culture of the community through long-term engagement.

In this research, communication of virtual community members is analyzed not the members communicating. Therefore there is no need to know demographic characteristics of the community members or their “real” selves. The content of an online community's communicative acts is analyzed rather than the complete set of observed acts of consumers in a particular community. This is a crucial difference between netnography and traditional ethnography according to Kozinets (2002). Stories of online misrepresentation are numerous and important. Generalizations to markets or communities other than the one studied, online or offline, must have corroborating evidence. To be trustworthy, the conclusions of a netnography must reflect the limitations of the online medium and the technique (Kozinets 2002).

5.3.4 Research ethics

As in any form of research, netnographers must address the issue of ethics. Netnography, however, differs significantly from traditional face-to-face methods such as ethnography, interviews and focus groups because it utilizes information that has not been given intentionally and confidentially to the marketing researcher. In this method, netnographers are professional lurkers (Kozinets 2002) as some of the virtual community members.

Kozinets (2002: 65) has described two major ethical issues surrounding online research, including netnography: (1) whether online forums to be considered a private or a public site, and (2) what constitutes “informed consent” in cyberspace. Haggerty (2004: 405) states that these ethical issues remain unresolved among qualitative researchers conducting research online, explaining that some researchers view online data as ‘public pronouncements, comparable to letters to the editor, and as such amenable to academic analysis without the necessity of ethical review’. On the other hand, some researchers argue that users of the Internet ‘operate with an assumption of privacy and confidentiality’ (Haggerty 2004: 405);

these researchers are more likely to advocate for the use of informed consent and disclosure on the part of the researcher.

Kozinets (2002) favours this latter position, urging researchers to (1) fully disclose their presence in the community and explain their research; (2) ensure participants of their confidentiality and anonymity; (3) seek feedback from participants; and (4) obtain informed consent before using specific quotations in one's writing. Other researchers, however, including for example Langer and Beckman (2005), justify their use of completely covert netnography – in which participants were not informed of the researchers' presence or research – when researching the 'sensitive topic' of cosmetic surgery, by arguing that revealing themselves as researchers would have potentially endangered the research project if participants had opposed the research. They also argue that the message boards are open to researchers because they are 'public communication media' (Langer & Beckman 2005: 197).

As can be seen, guidelines for ethical research in cyberspace have been the topic of recent debate and clear consensus on these issues, and therefore on ethically appropriate procedures for netnography, has not emerged (Kozinets 2002). However, the key seems to be the access criteria for observation of and/or participation in such virtual community communication: if access is restricted (e.g. by use of passwords) and thus reserved for members only, we can talk about a (semi-) private communication within the community and should apply those guidelines and procedures, Kozinets recommends. If access is not restricted, i.e. if anybody can participate in the communication without any restrictions, this can be defined as public communication.

In this research, Kissamaailmat.net is considered to be public community. Although registering is needed to write comments and get more information for example about the other members, everyone can read postings in the community's discussion boards without registering.

Therefore based on the fact that the community is regarded as a public communication media, it was decided not to inform community members about my identity as of the researcher. No member checks were made, as participation in the form of reading discussions does not require formal membership. Also members were not informed or asked for permission to use direct quotations from their messages in the virtual community. However, anonymity of the members was protected by not using their community nick names although most of the names that they used were pseudonyms and not their real names. Quoted members are referred as

numbers and no other information for example about their demographics is discussed in this study.

The biggest difference in the procedures of this study compared to Kozinets' recommendations is related to ethics and member checks. As it could have been difficult to obtain similar data in another way, data collection occurred as in covert research. However, chosen procedures are considered here to fully satisfy ethical standards for content analysis of public media texts. Due to the fact that these quotations are intentionally public postings by the community members – it would be unnecessary to seek permission to use direct quotations. Moreover, the disclosure of the researchers' presence or contacting community members to obtain their permission to use any specific postings, as suggested by Kozinets (2002), would weaken one of the major advantages and strengths of content analysis, namely its unobtrusiveness. It could potentially endanger the whole research project if participants in the virtual community opposed to the research.

6 CASE DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

This chapter presents the empirical part of the study. The aim of this study is to find consumer motivations for providing eWOM in virtual pet communities through netnographic research method and content analysis of the gathered data. This chapter concentrates on first presenting the description of the studied virtual pet community and then describing the consumer motivations found in the eWOM discussions in the chosen virtual pet community.

6.1 Case description

The chosen subject for analysis is cats and the case company in this research is a virtual pet community called *Kissamaailma.net* (<http://www.kissamaailma.net/cgi-bin/yabb/YaBB.pl>). *Kissamaailma* is a discussion forum on the Internet for people who are interested in cats. It isn't stated on forum when the community was founded but by investigating the community and register information it was found out that the community was created 04.05.2004.

From the technical perspective and features, *Kissamaailma* does not differ much from other discussion forums. *Kissamaailma.net* is powered by YaBB 2.4 which is a free forum software package and which is quite popular. Everyone are able to read messages from the forum but only registered members can comment on previous discussions and start new discussions. In addition they can send private messages to other members and start votes concerning different issues. In the discussion forum, members can add pictures and links as well as normal text material. There is also own search engine on the forum which can be helpful when finding information on specific topic.

Members

Kissamaailma had 544 members on July 26th. Community seems to be popular with the cat owners and others who are interested in cats and people come there repeatedly. Since it is a virtual community, there are no time or place constraints. Only small constraint is that the discussions are in Finnish so information is limited to people who understand Finnish. All the members share similar interest about cats and taking care of them and they share their opinions and experiences concerning cats. Members can differ quite much from each other but the passion for cats connects them together.

The amount of information about other members of the community increases when you are registered member. However, even if you aren't registered, you can find quite much information about the community members: nickname, status (depends on how many messages have you posted), online/offline, picture, favourite quotation or other text, number of messages, locality and sex. This is little bit surprising because it seems that more and more consumers want to keep their information private.

Discussions

On July 26th there were 57 965 messages about 2 722 topics in Kissamaailma discussion forum. It clearly shows that community is popular and its members are active in writing messages. Kissamaailma consists of different discussion areas related to cats and other issues as well. The main categories are info (information about rules etc.), introductions of the members and their cats, cat wellbeing which is discussed more next, different cats (breeds, kittens etc.), market, other cat related stories, other discussions and archive where is old discussions about cats. In this research emphasis was on feeding cats which goes under the cat wellbeing category together with other topics like getting a cat, cat breeding, health, psychology and behaviour.

Below (Table 5) are the chosen discussion threads from the virtual community. The process leading to chosen discussion threads was discussed in the ethnographic research process description.

Table 6. Chosen discussion threads and messages

| Name of the discussion thread | Messages | First message | Last message |
|---------------------------------------|-----------------|----------------------|---------------------|
| Pet store dry foods | 415 | 01.04.2007 | 08.08.2010 |
| What food do you feed to your cat? | 187 | 06.03.2008 | 08.05.2010 |
| Mjau-cat food | 97 | 10.10.2008 | 26.03.2010 |
| General questions about feeding a cat | 95 | 08.08.2009 | 01.08.2010 |
| Feeding times for overweight cats | 71 | 20.04.2009 | 22.07.2010 |
| Interested about Applaws dry food | 53 | 31.07.2009 | 27.01.2010 |
| When cat doesn't want to eat wet food | 50 | 25.07.2009 | 16.05.2010 |
| About the content of cat foods | 38 | 21.11.2009 | 11.06.2010 |
| Pirkka cat food | 32 | 27.11.2009 | 20.04.2010 |
| Whiskas - jelly foods | 28 | 05.07.2010 | 31.07.2010 |
| Adult food vs. kitten food | 24 | 15.11.2008 | 06.04.2010 |
| Dry cat food with water | 23 | 14.01.2010 | 19.01.2010 |
| Primcat-foods | 21 | 28.06.2010 | 13.07.2010 |
| Total amount of messages | 1134 | | |

More information about the community and especially about the discussions of the community members are described more next in the case analysis.

6.2 Case analysis

This section concentrates on describing the consumer motivations found in the eWOM discussions in the virtual pet community Kissamaailma. Gathered material was analyzed with the combination of two theoretical models for consumer motivations: providing eWOM (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004) and retrieving eWOM (Hennig-Thurau & Walsh 2003). eWOM discussions were analyzed by categorizing them according to the motivations from theoretical framework: concern for other consumers, helping the company, social benefits, extraversion/self-enhancement, venting negative feelings, exertion of power over companies and advice seeking. Next these motivations and themes in them are presented and analyzed.

6.2.1 Concern for other consumers

In the classification of Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004), eWOM communication may occur because consumers want to help other consumers with their buying decisions or save others from negative experiences, or both. By analyzing the data is quite clear that this category motivates most of the community members to provide eWOM. This can be seen in the way people answer questions and share information especially without anyone asking.

The most simple way of showing concern for others and desire to help others is by answering questions made by other members. In the studied virtual pet community concentration was on discussions about cat foods and feeding cats and the following question and answer describe the typical way of helping others.

I'm asking from you more experienced ones, that what kitten dry food would you recommend? We still have that Whiskas dry food but they don't seem to very good 😞 (Member 1, 'Pet store dry foods, 02.07.2007)

It could be said that the main rule is that pet store dry foods are good and grocery store dry foods are bad. (There are exceptions). I was told in a pet store that if you have to buy something from a grocery store, Purina One is ok. I myself however feed Royal. RC's and Nutro's kitten dry foods are at least also good 😊 (Member 2, 'Pet store dry foods, 03.07.2007)

Concern for others can be seen in various ways in the studied community. On one hand members want to warn others of bad products and save others from having the same negative experiences which can be seen in following message about light dry cat foods.

I wouldn't either strongly recommend light dry foods. Their impact on cat's skin and fur is so big. Especially during winter time you can see in our house if there is light food in the cup 😊 We have also loosed weight with normal food; we have only decreased sizes of the portions. (Member 3, 'Pet store dry foods', 22.08.2007)

By referring her previous experiences regarding light dry cat foods Member 3 wants to warn the other member asking about light foods as well as others searching information. However, answer isn't restricted only on stating that she wouldn't recommend light foods but Member 3 offers other solutions to people who are struggling with their cats' weight issues. This shows that concern for others especially in virtual pet communities goes much further than just answering to what is asked.

On the other hand members want to help others by sharing their own positive experiences and give others the opportunity to buy good products. In the following message member tells about a cat food brand she buys and states why it is good:

We eat wet food brand called Ok cat which you can find on very cheap price from cat shows (12 x 400g = 8€). Our cats like its taste and it is good quality as well. I recommend it 😊 (Member 4, 'What food do you feed to your cat?', 23.09.2008)

The concern for others can be best seen when members share information on their own initiative and not only answering previously asked questions by others. Members for example inform others about changes in cat foods, good offers or as in the below discussion about one cat food brand ending its import to Finland. This below discussion started from a rumour that one member heard and as the members found out more information they informed about it in the community. The discussions ends with one member citing brand's official website where is confirmed that the brand is being taken off the markets in Finland.

[...] Oh yes, about Nutra. I heard a rumour that importing Nutra's food would totally end in Finland. I'm not sure if there is any truth to that 😊 (Member 3, 'Pet store dry foods', 17.07.2008)

I went yesterday to pick up new bag of Nutra Gold from the nearby Musti & Mirri store. I had to buy normal Adult because they didn't have any Indoor Cat.

I asked reason for that and they said that apparently Nutra is going to stop importing foods. ...[] (Member 5, 'Pet store dry foods', 29.07.2008)

I went to make sure and it really is that Nutra Gold is going off the market and thus soon you cannot get it anymore. 😞 (Member 6, 'Pet store dry foods', 18.08.2008)

[]... I just got answer from Musti and Mirri:

“Unfortunately Nutra Gold is taken away from our selection. The product doesn't unfortunately have enough sales in Finland.” (Member 6, 'Pet store dry foods', 18.08.2008)

By telling others that the brand is going off the market, members are trying to help each other so that they don't need to wonder why there isn't that food anymore at the stores and also give them time to stock up brand's food and also think about what they are buying next. This information also started other discussion in the same thread about what brand to buy next.

Concern for others category can include both positive and negative experiences. Positive messages can be about new products that are good quality or about positive changes in existing brands. However, many of the postings are more warnings not to use specific products because of their bad ingredients or some other reasons. The following message shows the concern for others by member alarming others of the bad ingredients changes in a cat food brand.

Royal Canin Indoor has wheat in it.

I made this observation when I was stocking up my closets again. I'm not sure if I would have even noticed that if I hadn't compared the old bag with the new content list for fun.

It was the first time that there was these renewed bags in the store where I buy foods for my boys.

I just checked from Royal Canin's website that there is still the old content list without the wheat. Whereas version for the long furred cats seems to have updated content list, because there wheat is listed.

Has anyone else noticed this change? (Member 7, 'Pet store dry foods', 26.09.2007)

As it appears from the posting, wheat is not healthy for cats because cats are carnivores and cannot therefore utilize and digest carbohydrates which include different grains and sugar. Feeding wheat to your cat increases the risk of diseases. Wheat is common cause for allergies

and urinary tract problems that can be very painful and even life-threatening to cats if owners keep feeding wheat to their cats. Therefore by informing others about the negative changes, member shows that he/she wants to help others to buy best products and prevent any harm caused to cats.

One difference or rather an adjustment to Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004) conception of concern for other consumers emerged from analyzing the data. In the studied community and as most likely in other virtual pet communities it is evident that the members are not concerned about the other members as much as the pets they own. Members show more concern for pets and that the owners will take care of their pets in the best way. Therefore in the case of virtual pet communities concern for other consumers could be changed to *concern for other consumers and their pets*.

The role of pet owner and his/her decisions is very important when taking care of a cat. Cats are defenceless creatures and they have to rely on their owners to take care of and protect them. Cat owners are therefore responsible for their cats' wellbeing and this evokes information searching as well as information sharing because people want to get help as well as help others.

Concern for pets and that other members take care of cats in the best way can be seen in the discussions about their responsibility as a cat owner. Posting below about choosing cat foods shows how the wellbeing of a cat comes before any other thing as for example money. These messages are a part of a discussion where one member thought it is ok to have one of the cat's meals to be lower quality and that it does not have any harm to his cat's health.

So the thing I was trying to say is that if one meal of the day is replaced with so called "lower quality food", I don't think it would have any harm to the cat's growth/health. Only difference you can notice is in the wallet ...[] (Member 8, 'Dry cat food with water', 18.01.2010)

*I wish people would understand that producing cat food is a **business**. Producing food as cheap as possible (in other words using cheaper ingredients like grain) makes better business when marketing is done well. However, the consumer has the responsibility in the end. Every food package that has picture of a cat on it isn't suitable food for cats. And these lower quality foods can be found in pet stores as well. It doesn't make the food necessarily good when it is purchased from pet stores and not from the regular stores. You rarely get quality on a low price, that's just how the life is. Meat as an ingredient costs more so isn't it quite obvious that meat-based foods also cost more. 😊*

However, their consumption is considerably lower than cheaper foods. You don't need to eat so much when the food is full of good ingredients, less is enough. Also the amount of faeces decreases when cats are able to utilize more of their food. (Member 9, 'Dry cat food with water', 18.01.2010)

The later message clearly emphasizes owner's responsibility of taking care of her cat. The concern this member has for the wellbeing of cats is so strong and can be noticed from the way she tries to convince others and especially by proving many reasons for buying higher quality foods. This is also a good example of how concern for others and their pets appears as providing rich and detailed information to other members. Many of the members want to make inexperienced members understand the reasons behind statements about what brand is good and not just tell them what to buy and what not to buy.

6.2.2 Helping the company

In the Hennig-Thurau et als. (2004) classifications for motivations to provide eWOM, helping the company motivation is the result of a consumer's satisfaction with a product and his or her subsequent desire to help the company. Member is so satisfied with the company that they want to "reward" them by giving positive eWOM and help the company to be or remain successful.

In this study, the definition of company has to be specified. Different cat food brands are included in this company category because it can be quite difficult to consumers to differentiate brands from the companies, especially because products are remembered better based on their brand and not as much based on the company. One company can also have quite many different competing brands and consumers don't often realize that some brands are from the same company. However, as brand's often have different products and product categories, in the helping the company motivation only eWOM communications about the company or brand – not specific products – are taken into consideration.

Normally, helping the company motivation manifests itself through positive eWOM discussions about the company or brand. The following messages show how virtual community members discuss positively about different cat food brands.

We are praising Leonardo – very high quality and meat-rich food, which tastes to our pigs very well and keeps their fur and also stomachs in shape. ...[] (Member 10, 'Pet store dry foods', 01.06.2008)

We have had also Virbac quite much and the cats like it a lot! The bag is emptied quite fast even though we have at least two different dry food bags open. Cats get some variety when there are many sorts available all the time (you can also see what tastes the best)! 😊 But indeed, Virbac is good brand and our cats like it very much! (Member 11, 'Pet store dry foods', 17.01.2007)

Primcat wet food tastes to my cat very well. It has 97 % meat, so it is also healthy. The treats are also tasty and are 100 % meat. Dry food has 80 % moistness and it is rich of meat. I don't think that I can find any bad points about Primcat foods. 😊 (Member 12, 'Primcat-foods', 02.07.2010)

In these messages, members are providing positive comments about the three different brand's positive characteristics and especially about characteristics that are valued by cat owners. For example the quality of the food, amount of meat and the positive effects to cat's fur are emphasized. Also one important factor helping the company is that cats also like to eat the food. Cat food being healthy and good quality is not a guarantee that the cat will eat it. Often as with children the healthiest foods aren't the tastiest ones and therefore it is important to find good quality food that the cat likes. By stating these positive things about the cat food brand, members are helping the company.

Virtual community members also demonstrated a certain kind of commitment to the cat food companies and brands by telling others that they normally use company's products. However, some members show their commitment more extremely by stating for example that they always buy specific brand like in the two messages below. Telling that they always buy specific brand creates a strong image that the brand must be good if the member always buys it. Words like always or never are so powerful that by using them you get attention from others. Member doesn't even have to specify why he/she always buys that brand in order to evoke positive feelings about the brand to other members.

[...] I might be little bit foolish but I'm used to give Hill's almost always. It tastes so well so why wouldn't I give it to my cat... [] (Member 13, 'Pet store dry foods', 26.02.2008)

I always buy Royal Canin dry food and today we opened the 10 kilo bag of Sensible which is new product to us. It seems to taste well, so here in Romppula we will give it full five stars. 😊 (Member 14, 'Pet store dry foods', 23.09.2007)

Members also show their commitment to the brand by telling their negative experiences with experimenting with other brands. In the following message member tells how happy she is with the brand and that she changed back to it after having bad experiences with other brand.

I'm recommending Hill's dry food. Our cats eat it enthusiastically and their furs shine and they are energetic. As I have mentioned in different forum, I used momentarily cheap Friskies food with bad experiences. I changed back Hills and cat(s) became "normal" again.

Hills dry food contains corn and rice but still it has been the best food that I have given to my cats. ...[] (Member 15, 'Pet store dry foods', 31.07.2009)

In addition, community members discuss about other companies than cat food companies as for example pet stores, chain supermarkets and internet retailers. For example Zooplus is popular online pet shop in Finland as well as other countries and many cat owners order cat foods and other supplies from there. Many members in the virtual community recommend Zooplus to others by stating positive things about the company like its cheap prices, discounts and fast delivery like in the following messages:

[]... You should compare prices for example in Musti and Mirri as well as in Zooplus. Especially if you order together with a friend, you get discounts from Zooplus and it is also open 24/7 in the Internet 😊 and the goods come fast and have always been undamaged at least for me. (Member 16, 'Pet store dry foods', 20.01.2009)

[]... It was really great surprise when I compared Zooplus' prices to local pet store prices. That 2 kilo bag cost over 20 € in the pet store, when you got the same bag from Zooplus with 14 €... It seems that our cat's food comes exclusively from Zooplus from now on. ...[] (Member 17, 'Pet store dry foods', 20.07.2010)

Also different pet stores get positive comments from the members although it is stated in the virtual community rules that vets, pet stores etc. are discussed on a general level without names. Thus, in spite of this rule, members discuss specific pet stores like the following comment shows.

It was nice surprise to notice that the local pet store sold Orijien cheaper than Zooplus 😊 Now the cats' dry food is going to be changed to that. (Member 18, 'Pet store dry foods', 08.06.2010)

Member 18: Out of curiosity, on what price and from where you bought Orijien? (Member 19, 'Pet store dry foods', 08.06.2010)

2,5 kilos bag 25,40 €

Pikku Vahti, Turenki (Member 18, 'Pet store dry foods', 09.06.2010)

Often the intended effect of these communicative activities is that the company will become or remain successful and sometimes this communication goes beyond the community itself. Sometimes members want to help the company so much that they send feedback directly to the companies how they could be better and produce better products. Helping the company to improve their products and telling in the virtual communities about how the companies have changed their products based on their feedback as in the below message is clearly helping the company to be successful.

I wanted to inform here as well that I send email to the producers of Mjau-cat food giving them feedback about the sugar used in their tetra-packages. I received answer today, where was told that because of the customer feedback all the sugar has been removed from the tetra-packages. There is still tetras on sale where sugars are still stated the ingredients, although there isn't sugar anymore and renewing packages is in progress. 😊 This food is very liked in my household but I have bought it to my cats only as an experiment because of the sugar. So if here is any other friends of Mjau cat food, there isn't any sugar in their products anymore although it says so! (Member 20, 'Mjau-cat food', 10.10.2008)

This message clearly shows the members motivation to help the company sending feedback to the company and also informing other members about the changes. Of course there are some personal interests motivating the member as well because my sending feedback to the company is helping the member himself/herself to buy good products. However, the message is still clearly helping the company as well.

6.2.3 Social benefits

According to Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004) one motivation for providing eWOM is that consumers become part of a virtual community through their articulations. They think that it is nice to chat among like-minded people and meet nice people by belonging to a virtual community.

Building relationships and wanting to belong to a community can be seen from the way people act towards each other. In the virtual community members are usually very nice and polite to each other. Thanking others for answering their questions and advices is a common thing and can be considered to be a part of building good relationships. The below discussion is one example of how one member thanks the other for her quick advice and also tells how well the advice worked.

I ended up buying Hill's kitten dry food (tuna flavoured) for Siiri based on the seller's recommendation in the nearby M&M. I didn't realize to ask in the pet store that how should you begin to serve it to the kitten which hasn't eaten dry food before 😬 I probably should first put some water in it in order that the food softens little bit? Or what have you done with the kittens' first dry food meals? (Member 21, 'Pet store dry foods', 06.06.2007)

^ Our three week old kitten was given dry food as it is, in other words not soften for example with water. It tasted well 😊 (Member 3, 'Pet store dry foods', 06.06.2007)

Thank you Member 3 for your quick answer! 😊 I think I'm going to follow your hints and offer the dry food as it is.

Added afterwards: It tasted well! 😊 First the cat looked at the food in amazement before having the courage to taste 🤢 (Member 21, 'Pet store dry foods', 06.06.2007)

Belonging to a community leads to relationships being formed among the community members. By communicating in the virtual community, members get to know each other and often they follow how others and their cats are doing. For example in the next discussion one member has been following the life of other member and her kitten and comments on how fast the kitten has gotten older.

I bought last week dry food for Siiri for the first time that didn't say Kitten anymore but Adult, because the little miss is turning one year old very soon 😊 Now at least I have more choices with dry foods! ...[] (Member 21, 'Pet store dry foods', 24.03.2008)

^ This is going to be off topic, but is Siiri really so "old" already. Just a moment ago she was such a little bundle of joy! 😊...[] (Member 13, 'Pet store dry foods', 24.03.2008)

^(Yes indeed, the missus is growing fast 😊)...[] (Member 21, 'Pet store dry foods', 24.03.2008)

In some cases the relationships have been transferred to real life and members are meeting each other face-to-face. There is for example one member who is one of the administrators of the community and she is really knowledgeable about cats and cat foods. She is often advising others with their problems and providing a lot of information. She has discussed about her work in a pet store and this has probably led to others visiting her in the shop as can be seen from the below message.

[...] Schesir's dry food bought from Member 3 tasted well. 😊 If have to sometime come and buy more. Do you Member 3 know that can you get them in a bigger bag from somewhere? From you? From somewhere else? 😊 (Member 13, 'Pet store dry foods', 29.12.2007)

In other case, two of the community members have seen each other in a cat show where one member gave a gift to the other resulting to a thank you message in the community.

OT, those Royal Canin books were really nice and matter-of-fact as well as had some amazing pictures. 😊 I myself have both of them; actually I got them from Member 22 as a gift in a cat show (because she had them already). Thank you "Member 22's real name" also through this way. 😊 (Member 23, 'Pet store dry foods', 09.05.2008)

Interesting in this second message is the fact that member is referring to the other member first by her community nick name and then by her real name. This isn't normal behaviour in the community where members usually refer to each other by community nick names even though they would know each other very well. First message is a good example that members normally respect each other's privacy and don't use their real names. However, it is obvious from these messages that relationships are been built between virtual community members also outside the virtual community.

Belonging to a community means that you feel like you are a part of a group and share an emotional bond to the other members. This can be seen as comforting other members when something bad has happened and on the other hand being happy when something good has happened. In the below messages many community members try to cheer and encourage one of the member who is having troubles with her cat.

We have taken one step back and took the dry foods back as a part of the diet. 😊 Kauko got no less than a urinary tract clot because of struvite stones although he hasn't had any dry food this year except few as a treat occasionally. ...[.]...

I have been again quite confused with these diet things 😊 (Member 9, 'Pet store dry foods', 17.05.2009)

Good luck Member 9 and hopefully Kauko will get better! ...[.] (Member 24, 'Pet store dry foods', 17.05.2009)

Oh dear Member 9, I understand that you are confused because of those big hardships 😊

[/]... Don't give up, because your diet is going so well 😊 (Member 25, 'Pet store dry foods', 17.05.2009)

About those dry foods (thank you for Member 9 and Member 23 for the encouragement 😊), I have also closed the dry food snack bar. I have been very pleased with the decision! ...[/]... We are also here rooting for Member 9 and Kauko 😊 (Member 26, 'Pet store dry foods', 17.05.2009)

Thank you all for the encouragement 😊 ...[/] (Member 9, 'Pet store dry foods', 17.05.2009)

Often discussions deviate from the topic of the thread and even if messages are related to the topic they don't entail normal kind of information sharing or searching as most of the messages do on virtual community discussion forums. These conversations belong to social benefits motivation because the members don't share information or at least what could be considered to be important and relevant information about cats and cat foods but rather the messages are a way of socializing and having fun with other community members. Often messages deviate so much from the discussion topic that members start their message that the message is off-topic or OT which is commonly used abbreviation for an off-topic issue. These often fun and humorous discussions are therefore motivated by social benefits gained from providing eWOM.

This below discussion started from a quite normal message where one member wrote about her experience with dry cat food and how the dry food she bought smelt awful. This started discussion first about member's opinions about the smell of the dry food and then continued to humorous discussion about how the members or other people in their life have tasted dry cat food. It is quite obvious that there isn't any vital informational value in this conversation rather than having fun with the other members.

We have a bag of Applaws and it smells absolutely horrible. I just cannot feed it to my cats because the whole kitchen and downstairs stinks. ...[/] (Member 27, 'Pet store dry foods', 19.11.2009)

[/]... Oh, that's quite strange! We have the chicken-salmon flavour and you would think that it would be the smelliest kind, but I don't think it smells so much 😬. (Member 28, 'Pet store dry foods', 20.11.2009)

^I don't think it smells particularly bad either. If I would stuff my head in to the dry food bag, maybe then I would smell it but not otherwise... (Member 20, 'Pet store dry foods', 20.11.2009)

I think that Applaws smells quite odd. Different than the other dry food. (Member 29, 'Pet store dry foods', 20.11.2009)

I don't think either that Applaws smells bad at all 😊. Indeed it smells when you open the bag for the first time, but not otherwise. However, I remember that I ate cat dry food sometime when I was little because it smelt so nice 😊...[] (Member 30, 'Pet store dry foods', 20.11.2009)

[]... P.S. ^My little sister also ate market dry food when she was little. Maybe they have put there some smell that appeals to humans 😊. (Member 31, 'Pet store dry foods', 20.11.2009)

[]... OT This seems to be one way of how "crazy" cat persons originate 😊 (Member 32, 'Pet store dry foods', 20.11.2009)

I at my age still taste sometimes my cat's dry foods out of curiosity. However, I don't think it tastes so good. 😊 (Member 33, 'Pet store dry foods', 20.11.2009)

I might then be the craziest in this forum because I think Virbac's dry food tastes actually good 😊 (Member 34, 'Pet store dry foods', 20.11.2009)

My husband would have eaten Hill's kitten dry food as a snack, if I hadn't mentioned that they indeed aren't free although we got the bag from the pet clinic with the kitten package 😊. He tasted also wet food on the other day because according to him it smelt good 😊. (Member 28, 'Pet store dry foods', 20.11.2009)

And last but not least, the final message below reveals why it is important that community members are nice to each other and have fun and socialize with each other. One of the most important reasons that motivate members to belong to the community and also provide eWOM messages themselves are these social benefits gained from the community membership as you can see from the below message.

This is really OT, but I have to say that I'm really glad that I found this forum. People are so nice and the advices are encouraging and respectable. There are honestly different kinds of forums where answers are like "if you are so idiot, you shouldn't even take a cat" 😞 ...[] (Member 35, 'Pet store dry foods', 22.05.2008)

This message clearly shows that the social benefits are strong in the studied community and this is one important factor affecting the popularity of the community.

6.2.4 Extraversion / Self-enhancement

This motivation encompasses motives of expressing positive feelings and self-enhancement from the Hennig-Thurau et al.'s (2004) model. In the expressing positive feelings motivation, after a successful consumption experience consumer wants to express positive feeling related to this great experience and share his/her joy with someone. In this case, consumer wants to share his/her experience with the virtual community members and these experiences are often related to finding a really good cat food brand or finding a product on a good price.

Next message is an example of a good consumption experience where the member has bought good product that her cats love. In addition, member was given a gift in the pet store which made the consumption experience even more delightful and this together with the good product motivated member to express her joy about the great experience.

I bought RC's dry food for the first time and already the smell of this food made my cats crazy. The food was meant for finicky cats. We got also two books about cats as a gift from Royal Canin because we have bought so many bags of dry food from the store in question. 😊 (Member 36, 'Pet store dry food', 09.05.2008)

Consumption experiences are often successful and lead to providing positive eWOM because consumer is positively surprised about the product or the buying process. Often when you don't expect something to be good, when it turns about to be so, you are more positively surprised compared to a situation where you know and expect the product to be good. This can be seen from the below message where the member is positively surprised about a product from which she didn't have any high expectations.

I was waiting for a packet from Zoopluss and bought Mjau wet food for my cats for the time being. I don't remember if I have bought it before and if I have, it hasn't been good enough for the cats. To my amazement I noticed that Mjau is surprisingly good quality and doesn't contain grain, sugar etc., only meat and other animal materials as well as minerals and vitamins! And this time it tasted to my cats really well and even the grandma ate a big pile of it. Certainly Mjau will stay on our cats' menu from now on 😊 (Member 9, 'What food do you feed to your cat?', 02.08.2008)

The lower expectations could be because this cat food brand can be bought from normal grocery stores and there is a strong norm in the community as well as in other virtual cat communities that grocery store brands aren't so great quality than the pet store brands.

Therefore the member was positively surprised that the product was good and wanted to share her joy about the good buy.

Below is other example where a member was positively surprised about the good quality of a grocery store brand which clearly demonstrates again that being positively surprised is an important reason behind the expressing positive feeling motivation.

I was positively surprised when I was digging cat food cans in the store and noticed that Pirkka's heart pâté seemed to be quite good cat food.

The heart pâté contains: meat and animal by-products (from which minimum 4% is heart) and minerals.

The 400g can cost 66 cents and our boy was crazy about it 😊 It was nice to have some change and for once the foods were affordable. (Member 37, 'Pirkka cat food', 27.11.2009)

These two messages show that often the reasons for being positively surprised are related to the good and high quality ingredients, low price and the cats liking the food. Especially the last reason is important because according to the community members' messages, cats can be very finicky of their foods and often like the foods that aren't the healthiest for them. Therefore members are so happy when they find good quality foods at a low price which their cats eat like crazy.

However, there are other reasons for sharing positive consumption experiences through eWOM communication. In the self-enhancement motivation consumers share their positive experiences in order to enhance their image among others by projecting themselves as intelligent shoppers or as consumption experts. In addition, in this research also other comments that not necessarily relate to only consumption experiences are analyzed. Consumers can discuss about cat foods without having bought them. Most brands and companies have their products' ingredient lists in their websites and therefore commenting food quality is possible without needing to buy it. In addition, although Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004) relate this motivation category to positive experiences, often the self-enhancement relates to telling what products are good and what are not and therefore it is vital to take also the negative experiences and comments into consideration and analysis.

It is quite difficult to distinguish self-enhancement and concern for others motivations from each other by reading members' messages. It comes down to what in this research is considered to be just helping others to buy good products and take care of their cats and what

is more presenting yourself as an expert and clever customer. The following comment is one of the many messages where member is helping others but there can be seen some attempts to show off her intelligence.

[/... Most important thing when deciding dry cat food is that it is meat based, in other words the first ingredient in the list is meat (in some form), and that it contains animal materials as much as possible and materials from the vegetable kingdom as little as possible and enough fat. You shouldn't even try any light-products, you would only get bad-furred cat. You should give kitten food to kittens till they are about one year old but here you can also use your common sense. If your kitten starts to get much rounder by eating kitten food, you can change him to adult food already before the one year age. ...[] (Member 9, 'Pet store dry food', 22.05.2008)

By using phrases like “most important thing”, “you should” and “you shouldn't even try” member is showing that she thinks that she is an expert in this area and can advice others and tell them what they should and should not do. Telling other members what they should and should not do is a common way of showing own expertise in the community.

Sometimes providing lots of information and long and detailed lists about feeding cats and foods can be sign of a member trying to project himself/herself as a cat food expert. In the next message one member has provided quite long and detailed list about her opinions about what cat foods are bad and good and why. Member also uses quite many complex words and terms, like BHA (Butylated hydroxyanisole), BHT (Butylated hydroxytoluene) and tocopherol and this can be interpreted to be a way to show own expertise.

Brands that I would not feed to my cats under no circumstances:

- Royal Canin, they use carcinogenic BHA as a food additive which can cause cancer and it is therefore prohibited in human foods (BHA/BHT replaces the natural E-vitamin tocopherol which is useful antioxidant to improve immunity and digestion).

-Iams, one of the cruellest animal experimenters. More information <http://www.iamscruelty.com/>

And all the other foods that have BHA or in code language E320, E321. Unfortunately, really many pet food producers use this material in their foods.

Corn gluten is also harmful. In paper, it raises the protein values, but too bad that the amino acid consistency is wrong for the cat so it can't utilize it.

Foods that don't have BHA, artificial flavours, preservatives or food additives and have high-quality ingredients:

-Leonardo,

http://www.belcando.fi/index.php?option=com_content&task=blogcategory&id=50&Item...

-Applaws,

<http://www.petpoint.fi/cgi/main.cgi?showpage=sublink&lang=1&mainlink=10&sublink=...>

- Acana, <http://www.championpetfoods.com/acana/fi/products.php>

- Orijen, <http://www.acana-kauppa.com/index.php?cPath=25>

- James Wellbeloved, (however, it doesn't have quite as good ingredients as the previous) http://www.shetland.fi/JW_tuotteet/JW_CAT.html

When choosing dry food you should be careful with what is listed first in the ingredient list. If for example two first ingredients are corn, rice or animal by-products, I would leave the product on the shelf. Meat materials must be first!

You should choose food which has over 50% of dry meat and plenty of animal fats. Then the poor digestion of grains and unnecessary carbohydrates won't affect so badly the cat's life. When serving grain-free wet foods or meat daily in addition to that, everything is going to be fine! (Member 38, 'Pet store dry foods', 11.11.2009)

Below is other example about showing that you are a clever customer that feeds her cat the right and good brands. This differs from the other messages in that here member doesn't directly advice others what to do but tells about what brands she feeds to her cats. Member also refers to her background as working around cats and thus implies her expertise and knowledge to choose good products.

Because of my work, my cats eat balanced food. All kinds of foods have thus been tested:

Jone has primarily eaten RC's Weaning dry food which tastes excellently and the pieces are small enough to cat this old. Now Jone has tried RC's Growth dry food which has tasted better than the Virbac Baby Cat dry food.

Raija has tried just about everything, mainly RC foods as for example outdoor cat food, fit food, Persian cat food, hypoallergenic food, young female food etc. Perhaps young female and hypoallergenic foods weren't so tasty at one time but Persian cat food is Raija's favourite (maybe because of its higher fat percentage).....[]...

Teppo has mainly eaten Young Male food that tastes well and Virbac foods, which have sold like hot cakes and therefore I don't bother to buy it so often so that the cats don't get too fat 😊 Along with dry food Teppo has eaten Whiskas wet foods but I have to be very careful that no kidney stones are formed. (Member 39, 'Pet store dry foods', 26.02.2008)

In addition to showing their expertise and cleverness as a consumer, community members also make them feel good about themselves by showing their dedication to cats. This is also a part of the self-enhancement motivation because stating your dedication to cats is a way to enhance your image in the eyes of the other member. Below, one member shows her dedication to cats by telling that she has stayed up all night finding information about cat foods.

One sleepless night I went through almost all of the dry food ingredient lists of the cat food producers I knew because I tried to find good fat food for our fatty. To my recollection Brit Care's food for castrated cats was the best one according to my criteria and I thought of buying it when I go to Musti and Mirri store for the next time. Besides the ingredients, not using animal experiments and product being hypoallergenic are reasons affecting my decision. (Member 28, 'Pet store dry foods', 30.11.2009)

6.2.5 Venting negative feelings

In the Hennig-Thurau et al.'s (2004) classification venting negative feelings motivation results from dissatisfying consumption experiences and providing eWOM acts as a way for consumer to ease the frustration and anxiety related to the event. Most of the studied virtual pet community members as probably other virtual pet community members as well as pet owners overall, think very passionately about their cats and want to take care of their cats in the best way. For example if a product has been harmful to their cats, members can get really frustrated and vent their feelings to other community members and thus providing negative eWOM about the product.

Messages can be quite heated which can be seen from the expressions and language used in the community. Using swear words seems to be one way to show and vent negative feelings but this isn't very common and severe. Mostly these comments are related to cat food products that haven't had good effect on their cats as the following post shows:

*[...] We don't buy RC anymore either, it is overprized and marketed sh*t in a fancy package. Our last experiment was on last spring (I even bought the big*

food bags because there isn't Hill's in our nearest store anymore). Sami got fat, the cats suffered from indigestion and their fur got worse.

Things got back to normal the instant we changed back to Hill's. (Member 40, 'Pet store dry foods', (29.11.2009)

However, eWOM articulations don't have to have curse words or other strong expression in order to belong venting negative feelings motivation. The next message is quite a bit milder than the previous message. Still it clearly belongs to this motivation because the member vents his feelings about cat food brand changing their food content to worse and even encourages others to send feedback to the company. It is clear that this brand has been good quality before and popular among the community and therefore changes to worse cause anger with the community members.

I bought again this week couple of Mjau-tetras, crab and bass flavoured. When I got home I examined the ingredient list of the renewed package and gladly noticed that sugar has been removed from the ingredients. But what on earth – there is grain added as a new ingredient! I even had to check from the old packages has the product always contained grain but it isn't mentioned there. The biggest reason why I have been buying Mjau is the fact that it doesn't have grain. Now I'm really angry because it has been really tasty and the price-quality ratio has been rather good in my opinion. I already gave feedback on their website, so you other regular buyers of Mjau do that as well! (Member 41, 'Mjau-cat food', 17.05.2009)

Sometimes the frustration is so strong that members might say something that they don't necessarily mean or they make the situation sound worse than it is. Therefore one aspect related to venting negative feelings is that often people react fast after a bad consumption related experience and write negative eWOM. They don't often take time to think about the issue before reacting. This can be seen in the next discussion about bad experiences with a cat food brand where one member posted a quite angry message about a brand causing other member to be worried about using the same brand. However, it comes clear that member posting the angry message was little bit hasty and quickly cleared that the brand is not necessarily bad for all cats.

We will not have even one bit of RC dry food in our house anymore 😞 I just came with Peku from the vet over 300€ poorer. He has gone through hydration, blood tests and X-ray because of vomiting. It is most likely that indeed the RC dry food caused this to Peku. Luckily he is so brave and they were able to take

the blood test finely without sedation 😊 (Member 3, 'Pet store dry foods', 16.07.2008)

^ [...] Was it allergy or what? Should I be worried because I feed RC to my cats. (Member 42, 'Pet store dry foods', 16.07.2008)

I don't think that you need to worry although you use RC 😊 This was only a single case and every cat is an individual that differs from others. RC doesn't suit Peku but for example Laku can eat it as well as Lula. However, I won't be feeding them it either because the risk of Peku eating it is too big.

RC is quite good food 😊 There is just something that causes this strong allergy to Peku. ...[] (Member 3, 'Pet store dry foods', 16.07.2008)

In this research also venting negative feelings about products and brands overall is included and therefore messages aren't restricted to only consumption experiences. Consumers can and do discuss negatively about cat foods without buying them. They can find the ingredients from the packages without buying the product and nowadays almost all companies have their brand's ingredients listed in their websites. As ingredients are the biggest reason affecting buying decisions about cat foods and can be obtained without buying the product, everyone can discuss about the quality of almost all cat foods. You don't necessarily have to have experience of the product in order to evaluate and comment on it. Thus, it wouldn't be smart to leave these discussions outside of the analysis.

Below message is an example of venting negative feelings about cat food content based on information found in the cat food company's site.

*Here is one example about what cat food should not be like:
http://www.zooplus.com/shop/cats/canned_cat_food_pouches/schesir/schesir_cans/15...*

*I don't understand how that kind of food can be marketed as a cat food. 😞
Otherwise according to my knowledge this brand is good but that is quite blatant exception. There is meat in the food, but I however think that apples and whatnots are as unnecessary as tomatoes. Besides, the text in the Zoopluss website is at the very least quite suspicious. [...] (Member 43, 'About the content of cat foods', 29.11.2009)*

As it appears from the message community members are frustrated with the cat food companies that produce low-quality foods. Especially adding unnecessary ingredients like vegetables and grain creates anger among the members. Cats are carnivores and therefore don't need these ingredients and more importantly can become sick because of them. Thus,

the cat food companies in spite of this commonly known fact still continue to produce low-quality food and adding all these unnecessary ingredients.

In addition, there seems to be quite much frustration related to the fact that cat food producers don't even reveal all of their cat food ingredients and percentages which are the most important thing when deciding what products to buy and evaluating the quality of the products. The next messages belong to discussion about Royal Canin (RC) cat food brand not revealing the percentage of meat in their foods and how the members find this very suspicious and vent their feelings related to the issue.

I just had to tell you that it's very suspicious that Royal Canin don't tell their percentage of meat. I even asked about this by email because it has puzzled me for such a long time. (Member 42, 'Pet store dry cat food', 12.03.2008)

Why the hell they don't tell that? 🙄 Well, now we don't buy RC dry food anymore... I don't want to give just whatever to my cat in spite of how good it is thought to be. ...[] (Member 13, 'Pet store dry cat food', 12.03.2008)

Community members also vent negative feelings related to other members and consumers who are feeding their cats these bad and low-quality foods. As discussed in the concern for other consumers' motivation, the wellbeing of a cat comes before any other things, such as for example money. One very heated discussion topic in the community is about grocery store versus pet store or low-quality versus high-quality cat foods and especially dry cat foods. Dry cat food brands found from the normal grocery stores are considered to be very low quality because they have so much grain in them and this can cause cats' painful diseases and ailments. Below messages are all part of discussion about one member feeding his cat with dry cat food from market and asking if the dry food he gives is bad, why it is sold. This discussion clearly shows how angry other members can get because of people like this who don't understand that they are causing harm to their cats.

[]... I don't buy dry food from pet clinics because they are overpriced. I have always fed my cat Kitekat dry food during the nights and there haven't been any ailments. (Member 44, 'Pet store dry cat food', 16.04.2010)

*[]... Because you have always offered your cat Kitekat's sh*t dry food, doesn't in any way mean that they would be good for your cat. How old was your cat again, one year old? The damages of the sh*tty dry food don't appear in a year – not necessarily in couple of more years. Peku was also able to eat Whiskas dry foods still couple years back, but not anymore because his wheat-allergy has become so bad. Kitekat dry food even looks perhaps the worst from the market*

foods: it has dry suspicious looking colourful bits in it. Even Whiskas dry food looks more delicious.

*Did you even know that Kitekat and other sh*tty dry foods become more expensive than high quality (e.g. James Wellbeloved, Mastery) dry foods? Cat has to eat that low-quality food so much more in order to get full which can be seen in the owner's wallet. I couldn't afford to feed double amount of these sh*tty dry foods compared to high-quality foods and in addition you would have to go to the vet many times when your cats get sick because of wrong diet. (Member 3, 'Pet store dry cat food', 16.04.2010)*

^By the way, it hasn't been expensive because Neko eats only small amount of that dry food...[]... Neko hasn't had any wheat allergies or health problems because of food (that I'm aware of). If those dry foods I have given are so bad, why are they sold then? I think they look quite nice and it is good to have some colour to the plate.

When you don't have a job and money, you have to cut back on everything. (Member 44, 'Pet store dry cat food', 16.04.2010)

They sell butter, tobacco and many other things which aren't healthy to people as well. I consider that it is more important that I feed right food to the animal rather than the food plate looks nice. I don't care at all how the animals' food looks like. As animal owner and being often short of money, I have always bought food first for the animals and then to us people. I'm responsible for health of the animals and feeding them, because I have brought them in to my home. Our cat Taavi had grain allergy symptoms appeared when he was seven years old and often the consequences of unsuitable food don't appear straight away. I don't understand why people have to feed vegetables to carnivores although these animals cannot utilize them when on the other hand only few try to feed meat to herbivores. Why the hell it is so difficult to understand that cats are carnivores. 😞 (Member 45, 'Pet store's dry cat food', 16.04.2010)

These messages clearly emphasize how community members think about owner's responsibility of taking care of his/her cat. The concern these two members have for the wellbeing of their members cat and also cats overall is so strong and can be noticed from their frustration on people feeding wrong foods to their cats.

However, this frustration and concern for cats can sometimes lead to eWOM comments that go little bit overboard as the following posting show which is also a part of the above discussion.

[]... Edit. As an addition, what you save in feeding costs by doing that, you are likely to have to pay multiple times more in vet costs from sorting and taking

care of urinary and other ailments... Or do they take the sick cat to put down because that way you can save money and then get new cats for free? (Member 9, 'Dry cat food with water', 18.01.2010)

[]... That was quite tacky comment. If my behaviour is so bad and you give comments like that, give some real facts where it is said that for example my suggestion of using 1/3 of the meals with more vegetable-based diet is HARMFUL to cat's health.

By this I mean published researches, not vet's opinions and not to mentions researchers paid by pet food producers. (Member 8, 'Dry cat food with water', 19.01.2010)

I admit, that was quite an overstatement but it was mainly meant to get everyone to think about where it is good to save money and where it isn't.

Edit. I just want to still specify that that comment wasn't directed to any particular person rather than to all who feed low quality food to their cats because of saving money. ...[] (Member 9, 'Dry cat food with water', 19.01.2010)

In this case the other member realized that she had gone too far and admitted that. However, normally discussions don't become so heated. But again, this shows that many of the members take very seriously taking care of a cat and especially people not doing that. There are many people in the world that treat their cats very poorly and this frustration and sadness caused by this unpleasant fact can therefore be directed to people in the community that are just trying to do what they think is right and although they haven't perhaps treated their cats right are trying to find information and wanting to learn.

6.2.6 Exertion of power over companies

According to Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004) a consumer's articulation of consumption related problem can contribute to the exertion of (collective) power over companies. Negative consumer comments can influence the way a company and its image are perceived and therefore this eWOM communication can be used by consumers as an instrument of power. Exertion of power over companies and venting negative feelings motivations are closely related to each other because venting negative feelings often entails negative comments about a brand or a product which can be also seen as exertion of power. Therefore these motivations are discussed consecutively and citations used from the virtual community are similar with each other.

The following message is typical example what can be considered to be exertion of power as well as just venting negative feelings.

Member 3 wrote 07.04.2007 at 23:53:21:

All BRIT foods seem to contain grain. 😊 Even version meant for allergic cats contains grain. This very very illogical, because grain is very allergenic food ingredient to cats.

Yes, I noticed the same thing. Well, this was anyway the first and last time that we had those dry foods, because even with a battle our finicky cats didn't eat it.

😊 (Member 6, 'Pet store dry foods', 08.04.2007)

eWOM communication provides a mechanism to shift power from companies to consumers, particularly in cases where criticism is articulated by many consumers simultaneously. Having more negative comments about company can be considered to be exertion of power over companies and when having only one negative comment or few it can be considered to be venting negative feelings. This can be considered as one difference between exertion of power and venting negative feelings.

The following discussion about one cat brand becoming more expensive shows consumers exertion of collective power by stating many times that the food is expensive and also stating that because the brand is now more expensive they will change to other brand.

Have you heard that Royal Canin's dry food is becoming more expensive starting by 1.8.? 😊
<http://www.lemmikkipalstat.net/foorumit/Forum6/HTML/004586.html>

Oh no, we feed Royal Canin to my cat... if it becomes as expensive as like Hill's, I'm afraid that my mum won't buy it anymore...[] (Member 46, 'Dry cat food with water', 29.07.2008)

[]... They really have awful prices. ...[] (Member 46, 'Dry cat food with water', 29.07.2008)

[]... RC's dry food has really become expensive! Almost 5€ 😊 (Member 42, 'Dry cat food with water', 19.09.2008)

Hey, tell me what dry food brand should I buy? Now I really stopped buying RC, because it became so much more expensive" Luckily, I have still many kilos of RC in the closet. 😊 ...[] (Member 47, 'Dry cat food with water', 21.09.2008)

We changed from RC to Purina Pro Plan. That RC cost so much that I had to try some other brand. 😊 ...[] (Member 48, 'Dry cat food with water', 26.09.2008)

This discussion as many others in the virtual community show how much companies could benefit from reading these eWOM discussions and find out the reasons why your brand is or is not successful.

Exertion power might not remain as virtual community members criticizing a company or a brand but members can also encourage and provoke other members to give usually negative feedback directly to the company. Even one member can have quite a bit power over a company when he/she can rally others giving negative feedback also. This following message was also discussed in the venting negative feeling motivation and clearly shows that community members really ask each other to give feedback, especially negative one.

I bought again this week couple of Mjau-tetras, crab and bass flavoured. When I got home I examined the ingredient list of the renewed package and gladly noticed that sugar has been removed from the ingredients. But what on earth – there is grain added as a new ingredient! I even had to check from the old packages has the product always contained grain but it isn't mentioned there. The biggest reason why I have been buying Mjau is the fact that it doesn't have grain. Now I'm really angry because it has been really tasty and the price-quality ratio has been rather good in my opinion. I already gave feedback on their website, so you other regular buyers of Mjau do that as well! (Member 41, 'Mjau-cat food', 17.05.2009)

Often only stating that others think alike can be considered to be one way of exerting power over companies. In the next message, one member tells how she has told a cat food company that others think like she does.

[...] I send feedback to Mjau's sales in Finland about those mistakes today. I'm waiting with great interest what they are going to answer. I mentioned as an inducement that it seems that many would be interested this good product but these content mistakes start to look suspicious. If they would be able to fix the problem, we would then reward them by buying sugar- and grain-free products. If we also click after that, perhaps they will learn? 😊 (Member 49, 'Mjau-cat food', 04.07.2009)

Often by implying that many others think same way has the power or members want it have the power to make companies change their products and behaviour. As this member clearly states, she said to the company that if you fix the problem they will buy your products. The last sentence about the clicking is a joke referring to when owner trains his/her dog or other pet they often have this clicking device which sound is like a treat after the pet has behaved

correctly. It is a case of classical conditioning. By implying companies being commanded like a dog, member clearly states that she has a lot of power over the company as well as their pet.

6.2.7 Advice seeking

Advice seeking motivation is in this study combination of Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004) model for providing eWOM and Hennig-Thurau and Walsh's (2003) model for seeking eWOM. Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004) models advice seeking motivation is further categorized based on the motivations in Hennig-Thurau and Walsh's (2003) model. Advice seeking is therefore in this study divided into the following motive dimensions: obtaining buying-related information, social orientation through information, community membership and to learn how a product is to be consumed. Next, these dimensions are discussed and analyzed concerning studied virtual pet community.

Obtaining buying-related information

In this advice seeking dimension risk reduction and reducing search time are combined because both of them are related to making a buying decision and finding information before. Consumers can reduce risk relating to their purchase by finding information about products and other consumers' opinions about them in the form of eWOM. Other consumers answers help to make right buying decisions and consumers can benefit from others' experiences before buying a product or using a service. Consumers also want reduce the time needed to purchase a product and by reading eWOM they get information faster than elsewhere and save time during shopping when informing oneself on such sites before shopping.

All questions in the virtual community related to obtaining information about products and brands before purchase are included to this advice seeking motivation. Normally advice seeking about products follows the below style of one member asking a question and other one answering. Most of the questions as the below are related to finding best food brand for your cat.

What dry foods there are for kittens in pet stores; what brand would you recommend? (Member 50, 'Pet store dry foods', 30.11.2009)

Almost every manufacturer has dry food for kittens. You should examine closely their content descriptions and choose a brand which has as much meat as possible. Another important thing is that does the dry food contain any grain

and what grain if it does. Corn and rice seem to be better than e.g. wheat. (Member 51, 'Pet store dry foods', 30.11.2009)

Advice seeking can mean asking quite broad questions about products as in the following question:

If all supermarket cat foods are unhealthy to cats, what brand you can get from the pet stores is the best one? (Member 52, 'Pet store dry foods', 06.01.2007)

These kinds of questions are very hard to answer because there isn't just one right answer as there are so many competing brands and products in the market as well as members have different criteria for good brands. However, if the member asking the questions doesn't know much about cat foods, he/she isn't able to ask more specific questions. Thus his/her need to obtain buying relevant information could be considered to be greater than someone's who already knows about the products.

However, more often questions can be very specific in nature because most of the members seem to have good base knowledge about feeding cats and cat foods. In the following message it is quite clear that the member has quite good basic knowledge about cat food brands as she asks quite many specific questions about cat foods. It seems that as the amount of information grows also the amount of questions and especially detailed questions increases.

Virbac foods were sold in the clinic and I took a brochure. It seems to be quite good choice especially because it has even little bit of something preventing kidney stones. Now I however have couple of issues to considerate: in what size packages are those Adults sold? I didn't have the time in the clinic to look closer and in the brochure there is only picture of 3 kilo bag. At least Member 32's cats have eaten it, how has it tasted? I was just thinking that do I dare to buy the 3 kilo bag to Eetu without testing or should I find some sample bags to begin with. And then, which one should I buy: Adult duck or fish (which one would taste better etc.)? Both have ok content list, only thing that I'm considering little bit odd is capelin, what on earth is that, fish? 🤔 And then the price, how much would for example that 3 kilo cost or some smaller bag? I think there has been discussion about this but I don't feel like digging it up. (Member 23, 'Pet store dry foods', 16.01.2007)

Also the last sentence shows how important finding the information easily and fast is. Although, in this case the member didn't want to look through all the previous discussions in virtual community, she considered seeking advice in the virtual community would reduce her search time.

Often to obtain buying-related information, members have to provide quite much information themselves. Otherwise other members couldn't give as good advices. It is quite common that members first describe their background and situation as for example problems with food and then ask advices to their problems. Often these descriptions are like stories or narratives and contain a lot of humour.

I bought Hill's Adult few months ago after a long time and tasted very well to the boys. But the problem is that it tastes little bit too well, so in other words at least Nemo has started to gobble down the food and vomiting. 🤔 So then I tried to mix it with Hill's Oral Care dry food because the bits are bigger and forces cat to chew. But they were yuck-food. Similar RC foods didn't go down either. And then (especially at night) they cry out for better food because there is bad-dry food in the cup. What other large-sized dry foods there are? (Member 53, 'Pet store dry foods', 29.02.2008)

In most cases members are obtaining information about products by asking have others used specific brands and how has the food been according to the owner as well as how has it tasted to their cats. In the following message members is asking about a brand and opinions about it.

Has anyone tried Prof. cat dry food? How has it tasted? What have you liked? I got already opened bag from my co-worker because his/her cats didn't want to eat that brand anymore.

Ingredients:

Meat and animal by-products (min. 26 % chicken), grain (corn, wheat 1-3 %), oils and fats, vegetable protein extract, fish and fish by-products, minerals,

Contains: antioxidants approved by EU (doesn't contain colouring, flavours or preservatives)

Nutrition facts:

Protein 32,5%, fats 21,5%, fiber 2,0%, ash 7,5%, moisture 8,0%

(Member 54, 'Pet store dry foods', 03.03.2009)

By stating the brand's ingredients and nutrition facts, member is trying to provide others enough information to base their opinion on and therefore trying to reduce answer time. Providing enough necessary information in the eWOM message reduces search time because other members don't have to find information about the product themselves and therefore the answering is done more quickly.

Social orientation through information

This advice seeking dimension contains items from determination of social position and dissonance reduction motivations in the Hennig-Tuhrau and Walsh's (2003) model.

In the determination of social position, consumers read product-related information on virtual communities in order to evaluate the product and its associated social prestige. Members want to see if they are the only ones thinking of a product in a certain way. They also like compare their own evaluations with that of others.

Do any others' cats eat NutraGold dry food? I bought NutraGold Adult Indoor 3 kilo bag for my cats and it sold like hot cakes. Today the last bits from the bag went in to the cup. Therefore we still continue with this brand, price isn't so bad either for unemployed. ...[] (Member 5, 'Pet store dry foods', 27.07.2008)

In the previous message, member is trying to find out does anyone else buy same food as she. The member provides also her evaluation of the product and why she continues to buy that product.

Virtual community members can also wonder why others think certain way as the following member. She doesn't understand how everyone else's cats like specific brand as her cats don't like to eat it.

How do everyone else's cats seem to like Hills Adult except my cats?! 😬 First goes the Royal Canin food and after that maybe half forcibly they eat the Hills... (Member 39, 'Pet store dry foods', 29.02.2008)

Having decided on a specific product, consumers often experience cognitive incongruence related to information about the alternative offers they have rejected. They try to reduce this dissonance by getting information in virtual communities. By asking about their purchases member can read others answer and get confirmation whether he/she has made the right buying decision.

Often it is quite hard to differentiate which comment belongs to determination of social position and which one to dissonance reduction. For example the following comment could belong to determination of social position but by asking advice from ingredient experts, the member seems to be more motivated by dissonance reduction rather than finding out do others think alike.

Doesn't anyone have experience about those ANF dry foods? Here we like it very much. It would be nice if some nutrient expert could interpret to me this product's quality. ...[] (Member 27, 'Pet store dry foods', 22.11.2009)

Member engage in advice seeking because they feel much better when they read that they are not the only one who has a certain problem with a brand or a product. The next member has had problems with the cat food brand she has bought and is now asking for advice if others have noticed the same problems and think she should change the brand to another.

In general we have eaten Royal Canin's dry food Fit and Beauty & Care. Now I bought Iams lamb dry food on trial and they have tasted well. However, the food smells awful compared to RC dry food. Other disadvantage is that they contain wheat. Our cats aren't allergic to wheat. Does anyone else have experiences from Iams or should I change back to familiar RC food. (Member 55, 'Pet store dry foods', 13.04.2007)

Cognitive incongruence may also be caused by conflicting information from other sources. Many virtual community members discussed about their frustration and confusion with the different recommendations coming from various sources. It seems that members are confused about whom to trust when there is so much conflicting opinions as the following member discusses.

We also eat Royal Canin, Fit 32 is currently in use. Still it feels like we aren't feeding the best food and everywhere seem to be debates with different arguments about which is the best dry food brand for cats. Thus, we aren't yet changing to raw feeding, so I'm just looking for the best possible dry food brand. I would like to have food, which has as high meat percentage as possible, no unnecessary additions (and as the questions is: what are unnecessary?) and quite low ash percentage. ...[] (Member 56, 'Pet store dry foods', 21.11.2007)

There are various different sources of information to cat owners which causes confusion when the information differs considerably depending on the source. Basic sources of information to cat owners are friends, pet store sellers, vets and of course virtual community members. Vets as other doctors are normally considered to be reliable and therefore it causes confusion when virtual community members advice and discuss opposite things than vets as you can see from the following message.

So what to do now, when the vet explicitly told me at my kittens' first vaccination visit that food should be dry food oriented so long as the dry food is high quality??? The doctor in question breeds cats himself.

So according to this, wet food shouldn't be favoured so much, especially so that the main emphasis is on wet food. We have now based on his instructions decreased amount of wet food when the amount of dry food has increased (Royal Canin kitten dry food).

What would be the right direction... It is difficult when you are trying to do everything right for these new family members but the instructions are so different depending on the source. (Member 57, 'When cat doesn't want to eat wet food', 08.10.2009)

However, it seems that consumers trust more the other virtual community members because they ask them about these inconsistencies with the different recommendations. As they notice differences between the recommendations, they do not blindly believe for example vets but rather ask advice from the other members. In next discussion, there confusion between vet's instructions and the recommendations the members got from the pet store seller. Pet store sellers are also considered to be knowledgeable about cats and cat foods because of their work and therefore this next member is confused how these recommendations differ so much.

Hey, I'm again very confused because I bought Nutra Gold dry food for kittens recommended by the pet store seller in Musti and Mirri. Yesterday, when I was scheduling appointment for booster vaccination and getting a microchip and otherwise discussing with the vet (or the clinic's vet nurse) and he said that Nutra Gold isn't good for kittens and is has to be Royal Canin. Soon I don't ask from anybody anything because it feels like despite how much you are trying to learn the right things and act accordingly, there is always setbacks. This same thing was with the vaccination rules and time of castration; I got totally new "recommendations" to them both. How can you know, that you are doing the right things? (Member 35, 'Pet store dry foods', 20.05.2008)

Royal Canin isn't the only quality food brand, there are other high quality brands and it is a matter of taste, what you want to feed to your cat. I wonder if your vet is selling Royal Canin foods, because he so strongly swears by the brand 😊 ...[] (Member 9, 'Pet store dry foods', 22.05.2008)

As the other member has replied, it seems after reading the discussions that vet's aren't to be trusted blindly. Vets as well as pet store sellers have always agenda because they are doing business and want to sell their products. Thus, it seems that the members really trust each others' opinions more than other sources and this way by asking advice in the virtual community they can obtain information which they seem to trust.

Community membership

This advice seeking dimension contains items from belonging to a virtual community as well as learning what products are new in the marketplace from the Hennig-Thurau and Walsh's (2003) model.

Belonging to a virtual community means that consumers are turning to the Internet and these virtual communities to interact with others who share their passions. They provide eWOM by asking for information because they like being part of such a community and asking questions as well as providing information are both part of normal behaviour in virtual community. They enjoy participating in the experiences of other community members and especially by commenting and asking questions themselves and not only "lurking" others. This is how this motivation dimensions differs in this study from the original Hennig-Thurau and Walsh's (2003) classification.

Belonging to a virtual community dimensions is quite similar with the social benefits motivation but it contains only advice seeking behaviour. In this study these were separated because of the two different models but after the analysis recommendation would be to combine these two under social benefits motivation so that the motivation would entail both eWOM providing behaviours – giving information and asking for information. Many issues discussed in this part of the analysis apply to the social benefits as well. But in this section community membership motivations are analyzed from the information search perspective.

Typical advice seeking behaviour related to community membership motivation is that the questions are closely related to other members' previous comments in the community and the established relationships between members after getting to know each other. It is obvious that many members follow other members' life very closely through their comments in the community and are becoming friends. This can be seen for example by asking questions directly from someone and mentioning their cat's names as in the following message. This way members show that their message is directed to a specific person and by using names of other members' cats they show that they know each other. This is quite similar with calling a person by his / her first name, so when members have get acquainted with each other, they can discuss about each others' cats by their names. By referring to the other member's cat by name, the other member shows that they are friends and are part of the same community.

We have now completely changed to regular eating times. Or as regular as they possibly can be for a shift worker. Food is on offer mainly three times a day and sometimes also dry food as a light evening snack. Because we are trying to lose some weight from Hamsu, this is the best way because you can monitor feeding times and amounts of food when everyone eats at the same time. Harma is still on light food diet and of course he would empty others' cups as well as if we wouldn't watch. However, Harma still gets to eat meat and heart. (Member 33, 'Feeding times for overweight cats', 15.06.2010)

What kind of light diet does Harma have? We are trying with Sylvi RC's obesity management dry food.

Here we are trying to balance feedings with one "I live for eating" cat and two "I eat to live" cats. It seems to be quite tricky, but I will not give up 😊 (Member 15, 'Feeding times for overweight cats', 16.06.2010)

Community membership motivation can be most often seen as humorous and off-topic discussion about their cats and taking care of them. In the following discussion one member shows his interest in the other members and having fun with them. This community has good spirit and the members like joke with each other and discuss about things not just related to information sharing of cats. They want to get to know each other as well as their cats. For example asking about other members' cats and do they have similar odd eating habits is one way of participating to the community and getting to know other members.

[...] Do anyone else's cats have the habit of carrying food from their cups to e.g. a mat to eat from?? And the best base for food seems to be those kinds of mattresses that cannot be washed just with river water. 😞 ...[] (Member 58, 'What food do you feed to your cat?', 23.07.2008)

No, at our house kidneys, hearts and other meats are usually carried to bed. And I think it is unnecessary to say that usually we have unmade beds on weekdays. So, perhaps the blood stains in our sheets are just increasing our street credibility 😊 (Member 34, 'What food do you feed to your cat?', 23.07.2008)

[...] At our house, Kauko usually digs the piece of meat with his paws from the tray to the floor, usually on a mat, and then eats it. The mat in the eating place is thus looking very nice 😊 Armas and Hessu eat directly from the tray and rarely pick up pieces to somewhere else. Except Armas does it sometimes, when he has taken the piece of meat to his mouth and sees better piece on the tray. Then the "worse" piece is dropped to the floor 😞 (Member 9, 'What food do you feed to your cat?', 23.07.2008)

In addition, learning what products are new in the market is also belonging to this motivations dimension. Consumers are also motivated to seek information from virtual communities in order to find out new products in the marketplace. Virtual community members are interested in what is new and get new information. There weren't any direct questions about what is new in the cat food market and what kind of new products there is. Questions were more about have others heard about a new brand etc. Thus, members often have heard about new brand but want to get more information about it from other members as in the following question.

Does anyone have experience with Royan Canin's new Sterilised-food? I came across with it in M&M store but I haven't bought it at least yet. It is meant only for sterilised cats, it has 12 % of fat when compared to 10 % of fat in Light. I was wondering would it help with Eetu's weight management? Or is there still too little fat which makes the fur turn bad (normal fat percentage is at RC little bit over 15 %)? Otherwise the content list seems to pretty much the same as in other RC foods. There isn't any information yet on the manufacturer's website about the Sterilised-food. (Member 25, 'Pet store dry foods', 26.04.2007)

Sometimes other members tell about products which are unfamiliar with other members and then the other members often ask more details about the product as in the next discussion.

I bought now Brit's hairball relief dry food for test. The cats like it and I hope that that Kikku doesn't vomit hairballs so much anymore. Last time I had Nutra Nuggets but they were eaten by force so therefore I will not buy them anymore. (Member 6, 'Pet store dry foods', 12.03.2007)

^Could I see Brit's ingredient list 😊 I haven't never seen the food in question being sold anywhere, so I'm curious to see the ingredient list 😊 (Member 3, 'Pet store dry foods', 12.03.2007)

Yes, it was the first time for me also when I found that food from Musti and Mirri. ...[] (Member 6, 'Pet store dry foods', 12.03.2007)

As it can be seen from the below discussion between two members, curiosity and novelty-seeking explain why consumers need to learn what products are new in the marketplace.

Learning how a product is to be consumed

This advice seeking dimension contains consumer motivation to learn how a product is to be consumed from the Hennig-Thurau and Walsh's (2003) model. This motivation takes place after the purchase and consumer is trying to find advice and solutions to his/her problems with the product.

The questions relating to the right use of the product can vary quite a bit depending on the previous knowledge of the member. Some of the members haven't owned a cat before or looked into taking care of a cat and that's shows from their questions. For example how to serve dry food to cats – as it is or soaked in water – is quite obvious to most of the community members and overall to cat owners but as you can see from the next two questions, that isn't the case for everyone.

I'm just want to know do people give dry food as dry or soaked in water? We have dry food bar open all the time but they seem to taste also soaked in water. So basically give it instead of wet food. ...[] (Member 8, 'Dry cat food with water', 14.01.2010)

However, some of the members seem to be little bit more knowledgeable about cats and feeding cats which can be seen as more challenging questions about the right use of cat foods.

So, I move now my question from obtaining a cat topic to feeding.

I wouldn't want to feed my cat with only meat because of student budget. In other words, I need to put some market dry food in the mix anyway. Because it is a kitten, you surely need to give some calcium (Aptus Calphosum D)?

In that case, does a cat need wet food daily or is it enough e.g. to give one bag every other day or once a day? I think that is said in the wet food instructions something that kittens two bags in a day (one half at a time), so in other words three or four meals a day?

What other vitamins are good to add myself and what kind of amounts, so that I won't give too much or too little? (Member 59, 'General questions about feeding a cat', 08.08.2009)

This member needed much more detailed information about how much food to feed to her cat as well as other important things to consider as for example giving vitamins and calcium. This shows that the members has already the basic knowledge about cat foods but wants to know more and more specific things about feeding your cat. Normally members know how to use cat food products and therefore there isn't so much questions relating to learning how the product is to be consumed rather than obtaining buying-related information about cat food brands.

7 DISCUSSIONS

This chapter contains discussion about the empirical findings and the refined theoretical framework. First the empirical findings presented in the analysis chapters are discussed and summarized. Then some suggestions are given concerning the theoretical framework and related theories in order that it would better suit the virtual pet community context.

7.1. Discussion of the empirical findings

Concern for other consumers or rather concern for other consumers and their pets is the most powerful of these motivations. eWOM communication in the virtual community occurs because consumers want to help other consumers and especially their pets with by helping members with their buying decisions or save them from negative experiences. The concern towards cats and their wellbeing by advising other cat owners is evident in most of the messages, perhaps in different ways but still very strongly. Members show concern for others and their pets by answering questions, sharing information on their own initiative, telling about positive and negative experiences as well as warning others about bad products. By discussing about some of the topics over and over again members show their willingness to help the new cat owners and new community members and normally don't mind repeating the instructions and their opinions when needed. Concern for others and their pets is clearest seen the way members emphasize cat owner's responsibility of their cats.

In the helping the company motivation consumers can help the company by telling their positive experiences with the company to other members. This is the most common way in the community to help a company. Some of the members even give feedback to the companies in order that the companies can become better and produce better and higher quality foods. However, the line between helping the company and just telling positive experiences about a company's products' is quite difficult to define. Here common sense was used with what seems to be just a positive comment about a product or a brand and where there is really emphasized the positive qualities of the brand and how good the company is.

Social benefits are also very important part of the community and what motivates members to provide eWOM. Although finding and providing information about cats and feeding cats is the dominant reason for discussions, members also want more and especially form relationships with others. This can be seen in a way community members act toward each

other, everyone is usually very nice and polite to each other. Belonging to a virtual community leads to relationships being built inside and outside the community. By communicating in the community and following how other members and their cats are doing, members are getting to know each other. Members also form relationships outside of the community and meet face-to-face. Belonging to a community means that members or at least most of them share emotional bond to each other which can be seen comfort and encourage other when something bad has happened as well as being happy and celebrating when something good has happened. Community members also want so socialize and especially want to have fun with each other. This can be seen from the amount of humorous often really off-topic discussions between members. Sharing funny stories about yourself and especially about your cat seems to be one way to get to know each other and enhance the positive atmosphere of the community.

The extraversion/self-enhancement motivation was combined of expressing positive feelings and self-enhancement motives. Expressing positive feelings related most commonly in the virtual community to member finding a really good cat food brand or having a good consumption experience by getting for example the food in a lower price than normally. Consumption experiences were often successful and led to providing positive eWOM because member was positively surprised about the product or the buying process often because of lower expectations. The self-enhancement motivation related to consumers sharing their positive experiences in order to enhance their image among others by projecting themselves as intelligent shoppers or as consumption experts. This kind of self-enhancement could be seen in the community by members telling others what they should and should not do, providing lots of information and long and detailed lists about feeding cats and foods, using complex words and terms as well as referring to their background as for example working in a pet store. In addition to showing their expertise and cleverness as a consumer, community members also make them feel good about themselves by showing their dedication to cats.

Venting negative feelings motivation results from dissatisfying consumption experiences and providing eWOM acts as a way for consumer to ease the frustration and anxiety related to the event. Virtual community members think very passionately about their cats and taking care of the cats and can be very angry and provide very heated articulations for example when they have bought products that are harmful to cats. Messages can be quite heated which can be seen from the expressions and language used in the community. Using swear words seems to be one way to show and vent negative feelings. Community members are especially frustrated

with the cat food companies that produce low-quality foods and that cat food producers don't even reveal all of their cat food ingredients and percentages which are the most important thing when deciding what products to buy. Also other community members using these low-quality brand causes anger and venting feelings. As discussed before, the wellbeing of a cat comes before any other things as for example money.

Exertion of power over companies motivation means that negative consumer comments can influence the way a company and its image are perceived and therefore this can be used by consumers as an instrument of power. This is often done by venting negative feelings about a company so therefore this motivation closely related to venting negative feelings motivation. Community members' power over companies can be seen in cases where criticism is articulated by many members simultaneously. More members articulating about a company have power together than one member. Exertion of power can exceed over the community by member encouraging and provoking other members to give negative feedback directly to the company. Even one member can have quite much power over a company when he/she can rally others giving negative feedback also.

Advice seeking motivation in this study was divided into the following motive dimensions: obtaining buying-related information, social orientation through information, community membership and learning how a product is to be consumed.

Obtaining buying-related information contains reducing risk and search time before purchase. Consumers can reduce risk relating by finding information and opinions about products from the other community members. Members also want reduce the time needed to purchase a product by reading comments in the community because they get information faster than elsewhere and save time during shopping. Advice seeking can consist of asking quite broad questions about products but more often questions can be very specific and detailed in nature because most of the members seem to have good base knowledge about feeding cats and cat foods. Often members have to provide quite much information themselves by providing background information of their situation in order to get good and helpful advices. Community members also reduce their search time by asking information in the community. Also by providing more information in their questions about their situation and for example cat food ingredients they try to reduce search time because other members don't have to find information about the product themselves in order to answer.

Social orientation through information consists of determination of social position and dissonance reduction motivations. By reading product related information in the community, member want to evaluate the product and the social prestige associated to it. Members want to see if they are the only ones thinking of a product in a certain way. They also like compare their own evaluations with that of others. After buying a product community members can experience cognitive incongruence related to other products and they try to reduce this dissonance by getting information from the community. By asking about others' purchases member get confirmation whether he/she has made the right buying decision. Conflicting information from others sources like friends, pet store sellers, vets and of course other virtual community members often cause cognitive incongruence. Many virtual community members are frustrated and confused with the different recommendations coming from various sources and don't know who to trust. However, it seems that the members really trust each others' opinions more than other sources and this way by asking advice in the virtual community they can obtain information which they seem to trust.

Belonging to a community advice seeking motivation contains belonging to a virtual community and learning what products are new in the marketplace motivations. Members are turning to the community to interact and share their passions with others by asking for information because they like being part of such a community and asking questions as well as providing information are both part of normal behaviour in virtual community. Often members' questions are closely related to other members' previous comments in the community and the established relationships between members after getting to know each other. Members for example ask questions directly from some other member. Learning what products are new in the market means that members are also motivated to seek information from the community in order to find out new cat food products. Although there weren't any direct questions about what is new in the cat food market and what kind of new products there is, members' asked from others have the heard about a new brand and have any experiences of it. Curiosity and novelty-seeking as well has trying to find good new products explain why consumers need to learn what products are new in the marketplace.

Learning how to use a product motivation takes place after a purchase and member trying to find information about how to use the product or solve his/her problems with it. The questions relating to the right use of the product can vary quite a bit depending on the previous knowledge of the member. On the one hand some members haven't owned a cat before and don't know much about it and on the other hand some of the members seem to be little bit

more knowledgeable about cats and feeding cats which can be seen as more challenging questions about the right use of cat foods. However, normally members know how to use cat food products and therefore there isn't so much questions relating to learning how the product is to be consumed rather than obtaining buying-related information about cat food brands.

7.2 Refined theoretical framework

Based on the analysis of the research data, the theoretical framework and the theories related to it need to be more specified to suit the virtual pet community context. Overall the framework however applied well to the empirical part of the research and studying the chosen virtual pet community. It was successful in describing community members' motivations to provide eWOM and brought out many important aspects concerning these motivations as well as the virtual pet community and its members.

The biggest change concerning the theoretical framework is in the concern for other consumers motivation. In the virtual pet community context consumers aren't so concerned with the other consumers rather than the pets they own. They are concerned that the other consumers take the best care of their pets and feed their pets the best food available. Therefore it was suggested in the analysis section that the motivation should be changed in the virtual pet community context to concern for other consumers and their pets. In more general perspective when taking into consideration other kinds of virtual communities than virtual pet communities, this motivation could be further renamed concerning all the significant others in consumers lives, all their loved ones, from family members and relatives to pets.

In the helping the company motivation, some specifications were made concerning the definition of a company. In the case of virtual pet community also the different cat food brands were included because it can be quite difficult to consumers to differentiate brands from the companies. Brands are remembered better than the companies producing them and often companies have many different and competing brands and consumers don't often comprehend that these brands belong to the same company.

Social benefits motivation is developed to contain part of the community membership dimension from the advice seeking motivation. These both motivations relate to consumers' same motivation to turn to the Internet and virtual communities to interact with others that share same passions as they and form relationships with them. Belonging to a virtual

community dimensions is quite similar with the social benefits motivation but it contains only advice seeking behaviour. Recommendation based on the analysis is that these both would be combined under social benefits motivation so that the motivation would entail both eWOM providing behaviours – giving information and asking for information. Asking questions as well as providing information are both part of normal behaviour in virtual community and therefore both are motivated by the social benefits motivation.

Relating to the extraversion and self-enhancement motivation some specifications were also made in the analysis. In the self-enhancement motivation consumers share their positive experiences in order to enhance their image among others by projecting themselves as intelligent shoppers or as consumption experts. However, in this research also other comments that not necessarily relate to only consumption experiences were analyzed because consumers can discuss about cat foods without having bought them. In addition, although Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004) related this motivation category to positive experiences, often the self-enhancement relates to telling what products are good and what are not and therefore also the negative experiences relating to self-enhancement were taken into consideration.

Venting negative feelings also needed some specification in the virtual pet community context. In this research venting negative feelings about products and brands overall is included and therefore messages aren't restricted to only consumption experiences. Consumers can and do discuss negatively about cat foods without buying them. Consumer doesn't necessarily have to have experience of the product in order to evaluate and comment on it. Also the exertion of power over companies and venting negative feelings motivations were closely related to each other because venting negative feelings often entails negative comments about a brand or a product which can be also seen as exertion of power. However, these motivations are good to be kept as different motivation categories because venting negative feeling can include so much more than negative comments about brands and companies.

As discussed here, community membership dimension in the advice seeking motivation should be combined to the social benefits motivation. However, community membership also included learning what products are new in the marketplace and based on the research this should remain in the advice seeking category. In the refined theoretical framework learning what products are new in the marketplace is therefore going to be one dimension in the advice seeking motivation.

Based on these observations from the empirical part of the research, other motivations seem to apply to the virtual pet community context as they are. Below is the refined theoretical framework of consumer motivations for eWOM in virtual pet community (Figure 3) which takes into consideration the changes mentioned in this section.

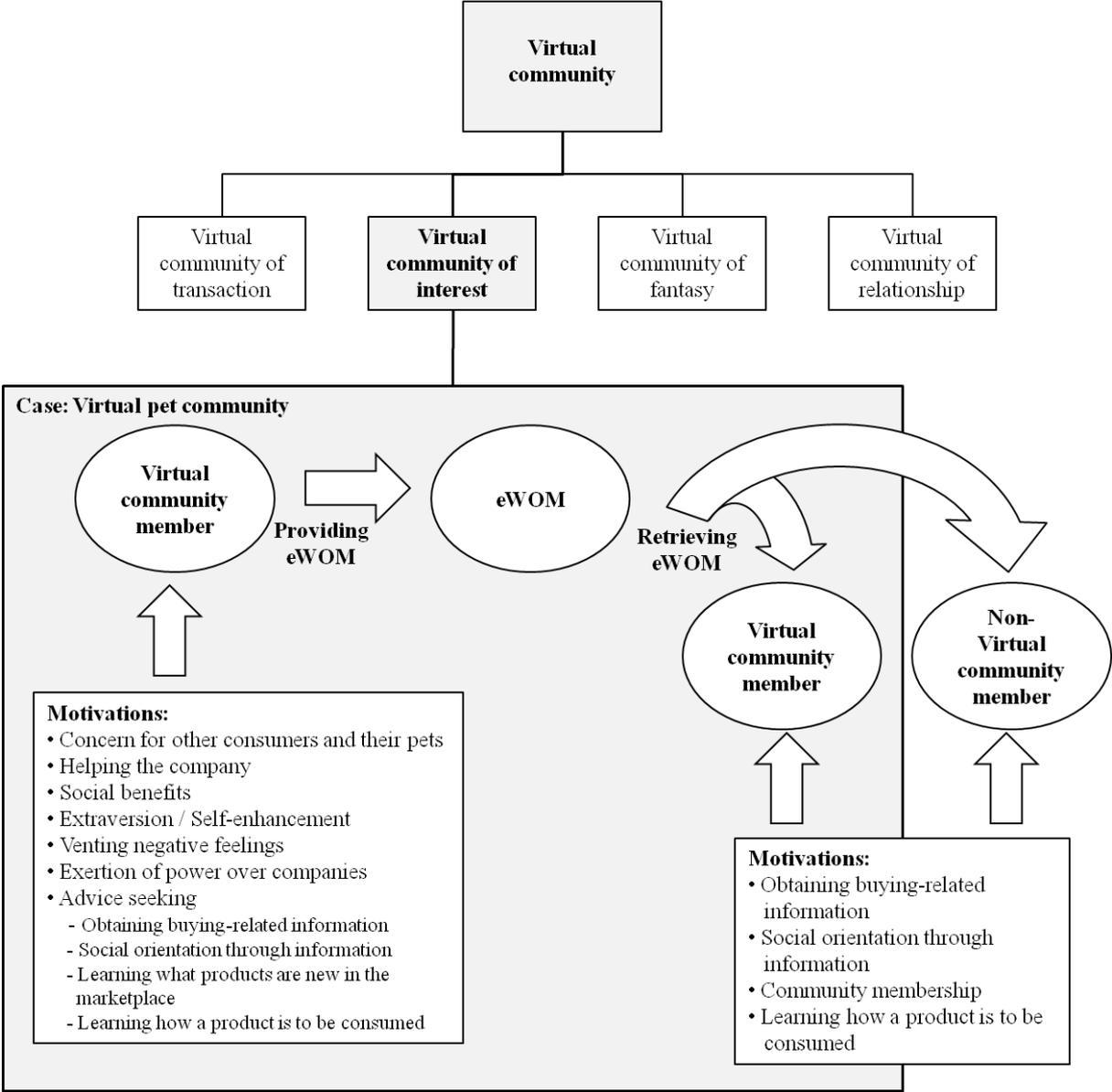


Figure 3. Refined theoretical framework of consumer motivations for eWOM in virtual pet communities

8 CONCLUSIONS

This last chapter provides conclusions of the research. First theoretical implications are presented. Second section presents managerial implications based on the findings. Last section takes a critical view on the process and discusses the limitations of the study and also offers suggestions for further research.

8.1 Theoretical implications

This study has contributed to the research of consumer behaviour by studying consumer motivations especially for providing eWOM in virtual pet communities. This was achieved by conducting first a literature review about the relevant theories and researches related to virtual communities, eWOM communication and especially motivations affecting eWOM behaviour. Based on this, theoretical framework was conducted where the relevant theories were taken into consideration and applied in a model for consumer motivations for eWOM in virtual pet communities.

Second part of this study related to the empirical testing of the theoretical model by netnographic research about a virtual pet community. The findings of the empirical study suggest that motivations for providing eWOM presented in the theoretical framework are applicable to virtual pet communities. The netnographic research provided important information about consumers' motivations as well as other information about the virtual community, its members and their buying behaviour.

However, some small changes were made to the theoretical framework after the analysis and in the end it contained the following motivations for providing eWOM: concern for other consumers and their pets, helping the company, social benefits, extraversion/self-enhancement, venting negative feelings, exertion of power over companies and advice seeking which was further divided to obtaining buying-related information, social orientation through information, learning what products are new in the marketplace and learning how a product is to be consumed. All these motivate consumers to provide eWOM, some of them seemingly more than others. For example concern for other consumers and their pets, advice seeking and social benefits were the most common motivations based on the analysis. Especially the wellbeing of pets motivates most consumers to provide eWOM

What is evident from the research is that although consumers have different motivations to engage in eWOM, they find virtual pet communities to important source of finding and providing information about products as well as enjoying socializing with the other community members and forming relationships. Especially the importance of the virtual community as a source of buying-related information is vital because most of the discussions analyzed here concentrated on cat food products. Therefore virtual communities and the eWOM communications in them are important factors affecting consumers' lives and their buying behaviour and this research helps to understand the underlying reasons and motivations behind the eWOM communication in virtual pet communities.

8.2 Managerial implications

In addition to providing information on consumer motivations for eWOM and especially providing eWOM in virtual pet communities, this study aims to add knowledge on the opportunities of the virtual pet communities for companies and especially pet food companies. This research can enhance companies' possibilities for better understanding consumers and their decision making in the pet food markets.

Some might assume that the identification consumer motivations for eWOM in virtual communities wouldn't be so beneficial to companies. However, this research provides a lot of useful information about consumer's buying behaviour related to cat foods and especially what consumers think about cat foods. By researching these motivations, it was found out what characteristics consumers appreciate in cat foods and especially about what factors affect consumer decision making. Consumers also discuss about different brands and both the positive and the negative experiences with the brands from which cat food companies could benefit. By reading criticism about own brands, companies could use this information to develop their products and that way increase their sales by providing what the consumers want.

It would be good if the cat food companies would recognize their responsibility of providing quality food for consumers' cats and not to provide low-quality foods. Many cat food companies produce food at lower cost by replacing nutritious ingredients like meat that costs more with other ingredients that aren't necessary in cat's diet and can even be harmful to cats. Consumers are very passionate about their pets and want to take best care of them by feeding them with high-quality foods. As technology has advanced and these kind of virtual

communities have emerged, consumers have now the access to continuously growing amount of information about taking care of their pets and buying them best foods. As the consumers have more information they are more knowledgeable about the low-quality foods some of the cat food companies provide and therefore it would be beneficial to both the consumers as well as the companies if the cat foods would be higher quality. It seems from the study that most of the consumers are ready to invest more money in their pet food to get more quality. By providing higher quality foods, pet food companies would better answer to customer needs and this way could benefit more from increased sales. As many companies have started to taken into consideration environmental aspects in producing products, why wouldn't pet food companies take into consideration health of pets by providing quality foods.

By researching motivations to provide eWOM it was evident that virtual pet community members are actively sharing positive and negative experiences of products and services. This information should not be unused and therefore monitoring the relevant virtual communities would be important from companies' perspective. From the researched motivations especially the helping the company as well as the exertion of power motivations can provide valuable information to companies about how they are doing in the eyes of their consumers.

8.3 Limitations and suggestions for further research

There are some limitations associated with this study. As discussed in the research methodology, netnographic research has its limitations. The interpretation depends considerably on researcher's own skills and background and therefore there is no one truth or right result. Netnographic studies only provide the researcher's interpretations of the phenomenon under study and others could interpret used data differently. However, as a form of cultural research netnography is not trying to provide generalizable results but to understand and describe how consumers behave and construct their lives in the specific situation as in this case in a virtual pet community.

Other limitation is that the study is conducted by researching only one virtual pet community around cats. Other virtual pet communities – around cats and especially other pets – should be studied in order to confirm that these same motivations are found also in other communities and also see if these motivations are manifested in the same way as the community in this study. It would also be beneficial to test the theoretical framework in other virtual

communities of interest to see how it applies to different virtual communities. This would be one way to test how applicable the model would be to other virtual communities.

Other suggestion for further research is that these same motivations used in this research could be studied from the virtual community members' point of view by conducting for example consumer survey or interviews about their motivations in virtual pet communities. This way it would be possible to find out especially about the retrieving motivations which could not be studied by only reading eWOM communications. This way could be found out if the same topics arise from members' own answers as in this research.

The providing and retrieving motivations for eWOM can be viewed as necessary but not sufficient conditions for understanding the eWOM motivations. Especially the motivations which lead to adoption of the eWOM provided and retrieved in the virtual community should be further examined and included in the theoretical framework provided in this study. This way we could fully understand the interactions and causalities related to eWOM behaviour. Especially from companies' point of view, it would be important to understand what factors affect to the adoption of eWOM communication and lead to purchases.

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