THE ROLE OF C2C RELATIONSHIPS IN B2B BRAND COMMUNITY

Case: Thinking Portfolio

Master's Thesis
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Abstract

Brand communities are a phenomenon that has been studied mainly in the context of B2C companies. However, brand communities could offer large benefits also for B2B companies, especially as in B2B market long-term customer relationships are often in an important role. Relationships among the customers, the C2C relationships, are the most important relationship in a B2B brand community and the most important incentive for the brand community members to belong to the brand community.

The purpose of the study is to explore the C2C relationships in the brand community of Thinking Portfolio. Thinking Portfolio is a Finnish B2B company, the main product of which is a project portfolio management tool. Thinking Portfolio customers consist of large international corporations, small and medium-sized enterprises and public sector organizations.

The study aims to answer two research questions: (1) "What kind of C2C relationships there are in Thinking Portfolio brand community?" and (2) "What benefits Thinking Portfolio brand community members get from C2C relationships?". In addition to answering these research questions, the study aims to find ways and suggestions on how Thinking Portfolio as a company could benefit from the brand community and develop it further.

The research method used is a qualitative case study. The main data collection method is 10 semi-structured interviews of Thinking Portfolio customers. In addition to the interviews, previously written customer stories and a video recording of a presentation given by a customer at Thinking Portfolio User Day were analyzed. Also, observation was done in User Day 2018 event organized by Thinking Portfolio.

The results of the study, first of all, indicate that there is a brand community around Thinking Portfolio, however it is quite loose and it does not include all Thinking Portfolio customers. Secondly, there are two kinds of C2C relationships in Thinking Portfolio brand community: C2C relationships inside customer organizations and C2C relationships among customer organizations. These relationships differ between different organizations regarding scope, quantity and mode.

Thirdly, it was found out that C2C relationships create a lot of functional benefits, but only few experiential and symbolic benefits. Examples of the functional benefits that the brand community members receive from the C2C relationships are concrete practical tips, solutions to problems and new information and ideas.

Suggestions for Thinking Portfolio were constructed from the findings of the research. They relate to virtual brand community, Round Table discussion events, recommendations to new customers, and seeing brand community as part of other operations.

Keywords B2B brand community, C2C relationship

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Tiivistelmä

Brändiyhteisöt ovat ilmiö, jota on tutkittu lähinnä B2C-yritysten yhteydessä. Brändiyhteisöt voivat kuitenkin tarjota suuria hyötyjä myös B2B-yrityksille, varsinkin koska B2B-markkinoilla pitkäaikaiset asiakassuhteet ovat tärkeässä roolissa. Asiakkaiden väliset suhteet ovat tärkein suhde B2B brändiyhteisössä sekä tärkein kannustin brändiyhteisön jäsenille kuulua brändiyhteisöön.

Tutkimuksen tarkoituksena on tutkia asiakkaiden välisiä suhteita Thinking Portfolion brändiyhteisössä. Thinking Portfolio on suomalainen B2B-yritys, jonka päätuote on projektisalkunhallinnan työkalu. Thinking Portfolion asiakkaat ovat suuria kansainvälisiä yrityksiä, pieniä ja keskisuuria yrityksiä sekä julkisen sektorin organisaatioita.

Tutkimuksessa pyritään vastaamaan kahteen tutkimuskysymykseen: (1) "Millaisia asiakkaiden välisiä suhteita Thinking Portfolion brändiyhteisössä on?" sekä (2) "Mitä hyötyä Thinking Portfolion brändiyhteisön jäsenet saavat asiakkaiden välisistä suhteista?". Tutkimuskysymyksiin vastaamisen lisäksi tutkimuksessa pyritään löytämään keinoja ja ehdotuksia, joiden avulla Thinking Portfolio yrityksenä voisi hyötyä brändiyhteisöstä sekä kehittää sitä eteenpäin.

Käytetty tutkimusmenetelmä on kvalitatiivinen case-tutkimus. Päätiedonkeruumenetelmänä on kymmenen puolistrukturoitua Thinking Portfolion asiakkaiden haastattelua. Haastattelujen lisäksi analysoitiin aiemmin kirjoitettuja asiakastarinoita sekä videotallennetta asiakkaan pitämästä esityksestä Thinking Portfolion Käyttäjäpäivillä. Myös havainnointia tehtiin Thinking Portfolion järjestämässä Käyttäjäpäivä 2018 -tapahtumassa.

Tutkimuksen tulokset osoittavat, että Thinking Portfolion yhteydessä on brändiyhteisö, mutta se on varsin löyhä, eikä siihen kuulu kaikki Thinking Portfolion asiakkaat. Toiseksi Thinking Portfolion brändiyhteisössä on kahdenlaisia asiakkaiden välisiä suhteita: organisaatioiden sisäisiä asiakkaiden välisiä suhteita sekä organisaatioiden välisiä asiakkaiden välisiä suhteita. Nämä suhteet eroavat toisistaan eri organisaatioiden välillä laajuudessa, määrässä sekä tavoissa.

Kolmanneksi tutkimuksessa selvisi, että asiakkaiden väliset suhteet tuottavat paljon käytännöllisiä hyötyjä, mutta vain vähän kokemuksellisia tai symbolisia hyötyjä. Esimerkkejä käytännöllisistä hyödyistä, joita brändiyhteisön jäsenet saavat, ovat konkreettiset käytännön vinkit, ratkaisut ongelmiin sekä uusi tieto ja ideat.

Tutkimuksen tuloksista muodostettiin ehdotukset Thinking Portfoliolle. Ne liittyvät virtuaaliseen brändiyhteisöön, Round Table keskustelutilaisuuksiin, suositteluihin uusille asiakkaille sekä brändiyhteisön näkemiseen osana muuta toimintaa.

Avainsanat B2B brändiyhteisö, asiakkaiden väliset suhteet

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1. Introduction

1.1. Background and motivation

Relationship marketing is a topic that has interested marketing researchers as well as marketing managers for decades. The main idea behind relationship marketing is to focus on long-term customer relationships instead of individual transactions (Berry, 1995). Hence relationship marketing plays an extremely important role in business-to-business (B2B) market where compared to the business-to-customer (B2C) market, there are often fewer customers and larger volumes (Cawsey & Rowley, 2016). Having less customers makes it necessary to focus on the customer relationships in order to keep the customers happy and satisfied with the company and its products.

On the other hand, brand communities have been found to create many benefits for companies. Brand community can be defined as a specialized community consisting of customers admiring the brand and relationships in which the customers are situated (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001; McAlexander et al., 2002). Some examples of the benefits of the brand community are that brand community members act as great brand missionaries, they are less likely to switch to another brand, they are more eager to provide feedback and they constitute a strong market for brand extensions (McAlexander et al., 2002).

One of the most useful benefits of developing a strong brand community is that it could help in actualizing the concept of relationship marketing as maintaining one-on-one relationships with customers can be very time-consuming. Thus, it would be productive to have a brand community to carry out some functions for the brand and the company, such as sharing information or providing assistance (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001). In addition to helping customers connect to each other, brand community works as an additional channel for the company to communicate with the customers. This is very important as communication with customers is one of the most central aspects of relationship marketing (Andersen, 2005).

These points make us think whether brand communities could be used as a means of relationship marketing in B2B companies. At the moment the research on brand communities has mainly focused on B2C market and studies on B2B brand communities are very limited (Bruhn et al., 2014; Andersen, 2005). Also more generally, studies on B2B companies have mainly focused on buyer-seller interactions instead of interactions between the customers (Bruhn et al., 2014). Thus, there is clearly a research gap in the area of B2B brand communities.

One of the few studies on B2B brand communities by Bruhn et al. (2014) suggests that B2B companies should implement a network orientation in their branding strategy. Also, Andersen (2005) states that the relationship among the customers in a brand community is the most important incentive to belong to the community. He also notes that the role of personal relationships and social networks is an underexplored field of B2B marketing.

Customer-to-customer (C2C) interactions and relationships in brand communities have been studied to some extent, but not really in B2B context. C2C relationships are long-term interactions between different members of the brand community. According to Adjei et al. (2010), facilitating C2C interactions is the most important reason for maintaining a B2C brand community. However, as the members of B2C and B2B brand communities have many different characteristics, also C2C relationships in these brand communities may differ largely. Finally, all these findings and ideas provide an excellent opportunity to research the role of C2C relationships in a B2B brand community.

The context of the study is a B2B company called Thinking Portfolio. The reason for the choice is that even though Thinking Portfolio is quite a small company, the customer network of the company seems to have many characteristics of a brand community. For example, the customers interact a lot among themselves, both with and without the company's efforts or presence. Also, Thinking Portfolio organizes many events in which networking and socializing are key activities among other program. Thus, there are clearly a lot of C2C relationships involved.

However, the brand community of Thinking Portfolio is not yet concrete in a way that there would be an online platform for it, for example. This makes it an interesting case, as the company has not yet realized or utilized the power of the brand community and C2C relationships there are. Hence, this Thesis will mostly provide analysis and discussion of Thinking Portfolio case in particular, but also some general insights applicable to other B2B companies and their brand communities as well. A more profound introduction of the case company Thinking Portfolio will be provided later on in the methodology section.

1.2. Research objectives/questions

The first objective of this research is to address the research gap of brand communities in B2B context, and especially the role of C2C relationships in these brand communities. However, being a case study,

the second and more important objective of the research is to explore the C2C relationships in the brand community of Thinking Portfolio in particular.

The research questions that will guide the research are following:

1. What kind of C2C relationships there are in Thinking Portfolio brand community?

2. What benefits Thinking Portfolio brand community members get from C2C relationships?

In addition to answering these research questions, the study aims to find ways and suggestions on how Thinking Portfolio as a company can benefit from the brand community and develop it further.

1.3. Thesis structure

This Master's Thesis is divided into six sections. After the introduction, there is a literature review that presents the previous literature relating to brand communities. The literature review section is divided into three parts: brand community, brand community in B2B context and C2C relationships in brand communities. In the third section, the methodology is presented through discussing research method, data collection, data analysis and the case company.

In the fourth section, the findings of the research are described. This section is divided into seven parts: attributes of a brand community in Thinking Portfolio, C2C relationships inside the customer organizations, C2C relationships among different customer organizations, events organized by Thinking Portfolio, benefits of C2C relationships in the brand community, interaction between the brand community and others, and ideas for the future.

Fifth section consists of discussion; it is divided into two parts: comparing findings to the theory and managerial implications. Finally, there is a conclusion with limitations of the study and suggestions for further research.

2. Literature review

In this literature review, the previous literature relating to brand communities and especially B2B brand communities as well as C2C relationships in brand communities is presented. The most important theory and concepts in the field are introduced and discussed.

2.1. Brand community

A community as a concept is not a new one, actually it has been studied a lot already since 19th century (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). There have been many different kinds of definitions of community during the years. However, the core components of community that appear in the literature most often are (1) consciousness of kind, (2) presence of shared rituals and traditions and (3) a sense of moral responsibility (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). Despite of the type of things that are shared in a given community, the creation and negotiation of meaning is one thing that is always shared (McAlexander et al., 2002). Bender (1978, p. 145) defines community as "a network of social relations marked by mutuality and emotional bonds". This definition describes well the kind of community we are interested in.

Communities have been connected to consumption already before the introduction of brand communities. Boorstin (1974) introduced consumption communities that evolved in the place of geographically bounded collectives and connected people with similar brand use and affiliation. He says that suddenly all the Americans were connected to each other by nearly everything they ate, drove, read or used. Another concept around communal consumption that has been studied previously is a brandfest. Brandfests have been studied for example in the contexts of Harley Davidson and Jeep (McAlexander & Schouten, 1998). Brandfests include communal elements, they are clearly connected to consumption and they operate around a particular brand. However, they still have the characteristic of being limited to geographical boundaries.

Brand community is a concept that was introduced by Muniz and O'Guinn (2001). They define brand community as "a specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relations among admirers of a brand" (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001, p. 412). Brand communities share the previously discussed core components of communities: (1) consciousness of kind, (2) shared rituals and traditions and (3) moral responsibility, but what differentiates them from other communities is that in their center there is a branded good or service.

After Muniz and O'Guinn introduced the concept of a brand community, other authors started studying the phenomenon as well. McAlexander et al. (2002, p. 38) define brand community as "a fabric of relationships in which the customer is situated". Their view expands Muniz and O'Guinn's (2001) customer-customer-brand triad by taking into account the relationship the focal customer has to the branded product and the marketer, too. All in all, the four types of relationships include those (1) between the customer and the brand, (2) between the customer and the firm, (3) between the customer and the product in use and (4) among fellow customers.

Customer-brand relationship is visible for example through branded products and through relationships and attitudes towards competing brands. Customer-firm relationship refers to customers' relationship to the corporation, which usually becomes most visible and approachable through its employees. Customer-product relationship is the relationship between the customer and the brand's particular product or service. And finally, customer-customer relationship is the relationship that brand community members have among themselves (McAlexander et al., 2002).

However, it has to be noted that McAlexander et al. (2002) study the existence of these relationships in the context of brandfests that, as previously discussed, lack the characteristic of being non-geographically bound. Anyway, they found that this close proximity actually also had some positive impacts that further strengthened the brand community. Wu and Fang (2010) have made a conclusion that for all brand community characteristics to become active, face-to-face events (such as brandfests) are needed in addition to virtual interactions. This view fights against brand communities being non-geographically bound (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001) but it supports McAlexander et al.'s (2002) argument that some of the brand community elements only started existing at the brandfest when community members met face-to-face. Taking all different opinions into account, it is safe to say that brand communities can be non-geographically bound, but there are certain elements that are strengthened in face-to-face interaction.

More recently, Schau et al. (2009) have identified twelve value-creating practices that were found in majority of the brand communities that they focused on. These are welcoming, empathizing, governing, evangelizing, justifying, staking, milestoning, badging, documenting, grooming, customizing, and commoditizing. Their findings differ from those of Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) considering limited liability; whereas Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) stated that brand communities are communities of limited liability, Schau et al. (2009) found that social networking practices move past

brand boundaries. The brand community members may discuss topics not related to the brand or even remain in the community after quitting using the brand's products or services.

The current trend in the field is focusing on virtual brand communities and social media based brand communities. As discussed, an important part of the original brand community definition is that it is "non-geographically bound community" (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001, p. 412), and Internet largely facilitates this aspect. Internet expands the reach of communities and hence reduces the barriers for interaction among community members, it makes the communication more effective, and finally, it provides additional options for interaction (Andersen, 2005).

One example of a virtual brand community is Coloplast's web-enhanced brand communities (Andersen, 2005). Coloplast has two different communities, StomaNet and SpinalNet. StomaNet is a web-enhanced brand community meant exclusively for stoma care nurses. The community facilitates nurses' information retrieval, communication with other nurses and self-learning through chat facilities, libraries and archives, courses, and event calendars, for example. SpinalNet is another community that is meant for both nurses and patients as well as their families. This brand community has similar activities than StomaNet but they are organized in more general level. These brand communities are examples of very structured web-enhanced communities where the company plays an important role in maintaining the community.

2.1.1. Benefits of a brand community

Brand communities have been found to increase brand loyalty, facilitate communication exchange among customers and provide additional brand information and brand value (Andersen, 2005). Other examples are that brand community members act as great brand missionaries, they are less likely to switch to another brand, they are more eager to provide feedback and they constitute a strong market for brand extensions. (Mcalexander et al., 2002). One benefit, that is extremely important especially in B2B markets, is that brand community members provide companies with valuable product knowledge and new ideas (Andersen, 2005).

It is not enough that we know why brand communities are beneficial to the particular company. We also need to consider why brand communities are beneficial to the members of the community; why the members want to be a part of the brand community. Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) list three benefits of brand communities for the community members. Firstly, consumers in the community have a

greater voice than individuals. Secondly, consumers get information more easily and thirdly, brand community provides social, often affectual, benefits to the members. McAlexander et al. (2002) found that new members benefit from older ones by getting information and approval while older members benefit from the new members by achieving a leader status.

Bruhn et al. (2014) describe three kind of benefits that generate value for the customers in B2B brand communities: (1) functional, (2) experiential and (3) symbolic benefits. Functional benefits refer to offering and receiving support from community members in the form of information, ideas and problem solutions. Experiential benefits are mentally and emotionally affecting experiences that are obtained from interactions, whereas symbolic benefits refer to the sense of belonging to the community. At the end, these benefits are also useful for the company as Bruhn et al. (2014) found that C2C interactions in brand communities do not directly increase brand loyalty, but instead the interactions create these three kinds of benefits for the customers which in turn lead to increased brand loyalty. They say that this may be because "brand community members are not willing to give the brand something of value without gaining valuable benefit for themselves" (Bruhn et al., 2014, p. 170).

Also, through relationship marketing, the benefits of a brand community both to the company and to the community members can be connected. Brand communities facilitate finding of information and provide a forum where ideas and knowledge can be exchanged (Andersen, 2005), which benefit the customers. These actions taken by the company strengthen their relationship with customers which at the end benefits the company as well.

2.1.2. Creating and maintaining a brand community

So far we have realized that brand communities may form around any brand, both B2C and B2B brands. According to Muniz and O'Guinn (2001), brand communities are most likely to form around brands with a strong image, a long and interesting history and tough competition. The question is that should a company create a brand community and strengthen its existence in all possible ways? Is the company even able to do it by themselves? Or should the brand community emerge from customers' desires and needs? These are questions that have been discussed in the literature to some extent and that have divided authors with their different opinions.

O'Sullivan et al. (2011) argue that more often brand communities emerge without company inputs. This can be because consumers prefer unofficial platforms where their behavior is not controlled. Wu and Fang (2010) call this kind of brand communities "member-initiated communities". It means that the brand communities are established by and remain managed by the members themselves without any company interaction. This kind of brand communities may create problems for the company; one example of this is the case of Nutella. Nutella fans created different websites and online communities under the brand name, but the Ferrero group did not like it and they sued all the websites using the brand name or logo without permission (Cova & Pace, 2006). At the end everything turned out well, and the company has since created a brand community called my Nutella The Community by themselves.

Even though supporting member-initiated communities, O'Sullivan et al. (2011) found that company inputs (e.g. encouraging interaction between community members and giving a platform for interaction) may still affect company growth positively. Their suggestion is that if an already existing community contacts the company in order to cooperate in some way, the request should be evaluated extensively. The best-case scenario is that it could be a great opportunity for brand development. In case the request is against the brand strategy, an alternative offer should be made in order not to damage the relationship between the company and the community.

McAlexander et al. (2002) think that customers may individually create smaller communities without company's involvement but in order to build larger brand communities, company's role as a facilitator is needed. They say that in addition to creating the platform for interaction, companies can also take an active role in creating and advertising the shared rituals and traditions that are one of the core components of brand communities (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). Companies may create and advertise the rituals and traditions from the scratch or adopt already existing rituals from the community and start advertising them.

Similarly, Schau et al. (2009, p.41) state that "if firms give consumers the opportunity to construct brand communities and the freedom to modify their products, they will". They suggest that companies should help customers by providing materials with which they could perform value-creating activities including welcoming, badging, documenting and so forth. They argue that companies should encourage many kinds of practices in addition to customization that is the current trend. They use The Twilight Saga as an example; the company has created forums in official website (welcoming, evangelizing, justifying), they have created subcommunities such as Twilight Mothers (staking), they

organize fan-fiction contests (customization) and they provide tips on how to store signed copies (grooming).

Andersen (2005) has a somewhat opposite view. His main idea of a brand community is that the company creates the platform, which is most often a virtual platform, attracts customers to join the community and monitors the dialogues. An example of this kind of a brand community that was used for the research is Coloplast's web community site where nurses and patients can exchange information and discuss problems associated with a particular disease. Even though the brand community is very strongly maintained by the company, Andersen (2005) highlights the importance of downplaying Coloplast's presence on the site in order to be able to cooperate with professional associations as well.

To conclude, both strategies are possible and have their own advantages and disadvantages. It can be spotted that B2C brand communities are more likely to emerge without company inputs whereas the creation and maintenance of B2B brand communities require company efforts. There are many examples of successful as well as unsuccessful brand communities in the literature. Brands have decided to use different kinds of strategies in building and maintaining their brand communities, however the lessons learned are difficult to apply to other cases as there are a lot of factors that may affect the outcome.

2.2.   Brand community in B2B context

There is a common belief that branding is more important to B2C companies than it is to B2B companies (Leek & Christodoulides, 2011; Mäläskä et al., 2011). However, Michell et al. (2001) argue that also in the industrial market, the use of brand-name strategies contributes to company performance and strong brands receive many benefits such as scope for competitive advantage and enhanced reputation. Mudambi (2002) found out that in B2B context, the brand does not affect all buying decisions but it plays an important role in situations where a failure would create serious problems, greater service or support is needed, or when there are time and resource constraints. Also Cawsey and Rowley (2016) state that brand building has become an increasingly important task for companies in B2B market and especially for those B2B companies that operate in global markets; there the brand is seen as a signifier for trust.

Because of this common belief of the non-importance of B2B branding, studies on brand communities concentrate more often on B2C companies and literature on B2B brand communities is limited. It has to be remembered that the insights and findings from studies on B2C companies cannot be transferred directly to apply to B2B companies due to large differences between these two types of companies. In B2B markets there are often fewer but larger and longer-term customers and the decision makers have a high level of product and sector knowledge (Cawsey & Rowley, 2016). Also, B2B customers have more rational interests, usually buying decisions are not made by a single person, the relationships are often international, and there is a high degree of dependency and uncertainty (Bruhn et al., 2014). All these differences have to be taken into account when comparing the previous literature on B2C brand communities to B2B brand communities.

At the moment, there are only two studies that directly focus on B2B brand communities. Andersen (2005) has studied a web-enhanced brand community of Coloplast, which is a manufacturer in the Health Care sector, and how to use the brand community in relationship building. He suggests that brand community activities are seen as a lever for (1) brand community recruitment, (2) relationship involvement and (3) product/service development. Brand community recruitment and product/service development also increase relationship involvement. Finally, all these components increase brand loyalty and/or market share, which makes brand communities an important part of B2B companies' strategies.

Bruhn et al. (2014) studied the quality of customer-to-customer (C2C) interactions in B2B brand communities. They define online B2B brand community as "an accumulation of interrelated business people who come together in the virtual space of the internet and interact voluntarily, based on common, brand-related economic interests and goals" (Bruhn et al., 2014, p. 166). B2B brand communities have two main benefits for their members: expanded knowledge through exchanging information and experiences with other members and expanded business network. The latter is a benefit that is very useful and relevant in B2B context, but as it is not relevant for B2C customers, this aspect of a brand community has not been studied more profoundly.

According to Bruhn et al. (2014), B2B brand communities have three central attributes: (1) business interaction relationships, (2) a culture of mutual trust-based engagement and (3) common values. Business interaction relationships refer to the fact that was just discussed; the interactions are voluntary interactions between paid professionals and hence driven and motivated by professional objectives. A culture of mutual trust-based engagement refers to customers' relationships among

themselves; it is trustworthy and credible and it does not include commercial interests in the same way as customer-brand relationship. Common values are explicit and implicit values that guide the brand community members' behaviour in the community.

The main finding of the study by Bruhn et al. (2014) is how the quality of C2C interactions in B2B brand communities is linked to brand loyalty. Their model shows that first of all, brand trust through brand community trust affects the quality of C2C interactions in B2B brand communities. These interactions affect three benefits that brand community generates for customers (functional, experiential and symbolic benefits), and finally these benefits increase brand loyalty. Managerial implications from the study are that companies should pay attention to increasing brand trust and brand community trust as well as maintaining high-quality interactions and interaction environment in the brand community.

An interesting aspect is that both of these existing studies focusing on B2B brand communities consider their connection to relationship marketing. This finding could mean that especially for B2B companies, brand communities are closely connected to relationship marketing. Consequently, as relationship marketing is very important in B2B markets, brand communities seem to be important assets for B2B companies.

2.2.1. Main differences between B2C and B2B brand communities

The main differences between B2C and B2B markets lie in the customization of the product, the complexity of the product, the buyer-seller relationship, the knowledge of the buyers and the type of advertising/selling (Mudambi, 2002). In B2C markets, the products are more standardized and simple compared to customized and complex products in B2B markets. Moreover, there is a personal relationship between the buyer and the salesperson in B2B markets that does not exist in B2C markets. Because of this, the relationships are often stronger and last longer as well. When it comes to the customers or buyers, they are more sophisticated in B2B markets. Finally, the focus in B2C markets is on mass market advertising whereas in B2B markets personal selling is more effective (Mudambi, 2002).

These fundamental differences between B2C and B2B markets clearly lead to differences between B2C and B2B brand communities as well. In B2C brand communities the interactions between members are voluntarily private interactions that happen because of personal interests whereas in

B2B brand communities the interactions and relationships are job-related (Bruhn et al., 2014). However, trying to gain the symbolic benefit of a B2B brand community, which refers to the sense of belonging to the community, brand community members aim to receive positive feedback and attract more attention from other members. This finding means that in addition to professional satisfaction, customers receive personal satisfaction from interactions also in a B2B brand community (Bruhn et al., 2014).

Andersen (2005) states that the effect of brand communities could be even larger for B2B than B2C companies as professional users of the product or service usually have a stronger and longer-term interest in exchanging product-related information. Also, in B2B brand communities, development of products and service components of the relationship and activities contributing to them play a bigger role than in B2C brand communities (Andersen, 2005). One reason for this is the larger customization of the products in B2B markets (Mudambi, 2002).

2.3.   C2C relationships in brand communities

Adjei et al. (2010) state that the primary reason for maintaining a brand community is to facilitate C2C interactions. Going back to the first introduction of a brand community by Muniz and O'Guinn (2001), relationships among the customers were not yet clearly pointed out even though they for sure existed in the studied brand communities. A proof of their existence can be found even from the definition of a brand community: "… based on a structured set of social relations among admirers of a brand" (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001, p. 412). Also, the three elements of brand communities (consciousness of kind, rituals and traditions and moral responsibility) require interaction among the customers. McAlexander et al. (2002) made the relationship among fellow customers in a brand community a clearer concept as they included it as one of the four relationships in their brand community model.

More recently, C2C interactions and relationships in brand communities have been studied more profoundly. Adjei et al. (2010) found out that high-quality C2C communication is the base for enhancing customer-firm relationships and customer's purchase behaviour. This happens mainly through uncertainty reduction; when a brand community member has converted with other members, the uncertainty decreases and he/she is more likely to make the purchase decision (Adjei et al., 2010). The most important factors of high quality C2C communication are timeliness, relevance, frequency and duration of the information exchanged.

Wu and Fang (2010) identify three elements of C2C interactions in brand communities: quantity, scope and mode. Quantity refers to the frequency and duration of the interactions, which were both found in Adjei et al.'s (2010) model as well. Scope stands for the tendency to interact with different community members and mode means different forms of interaction such as face-to-face interaction and virtual interaction. The main finding of Wu and Fang (2010) is that C2C interaction in a brand community strengthens idea generation. This reinforces Andersen's (2005) suggestion that brand community members can provide companies with valuable new ideas for product development. Also Pongsakornrungsilp and Schroeder (2011) similarly found that C2C interactions in brand communities contribute to the value co-creation process.

Frequent social interactions among brand community members provide three kinds of support: utilitarian, intellectual and social support (Algesheimer et al., 2005). In the case of Harley-Davidson, for example, utilitarian support is motorbike maintenance tips, intellectual support is experiences of learning and social support is fellowship among other brand community members. Bruhn et al. (2014) had similar findings as they found that C2C interactions provide three kinds of benefits for the brand community members: functional, experiential and symbolic benefits. Even though the mentioned benefits are not identical, there are similarities among them. For example, Algheimer et al.'s (2005) concept of social support has the same characteristics than experiential and symbolic benefits of Bruhn et al. (2014).

In C2C interactions, consumers may take one of the two roles: provider or beneficiary (Pongsakornrungsilp & Schroeder, 2011). Usually all brand community members are beneficiaries as they gain something from belonging to the brand community, but only some are providers that contribute new resources to the brand community. Also beneficiaries contribute to the community as a whole by creating relationships with other members (Pongsakornrungsilp & Schroeder, 2011). Another means is to divide brand community members into user profiles based on the frequency of visits and interactivity. Andersen (2005) identifies four user profiles: light browsers, browsers/consumers, contributors and enthusiasts.

One challenge for the companies regarding C2C relationships in brand communities is the issue of control (Libai et al., 2010). As the interactions happen between the customers, they are not formally organized and they are beyond the control of the firm. This causes both negative and positive consequences. Companies cannot guarantee that C2C interactions will happen at all, or that the C2C

relationships will be beneficial for the company. On the other hand, customers can trust each other more as there are no provider-dependent, commercial interests (Bruhn et al., 2014).

2.3.1. C2C relationships in B2B brand communities

As only two studies were found focusing on B2B brand communities, there is clearly not a lot of previous literature on C2C relationships in B2B brand communities in particular. Also, there is only limited research on C2C relationships and interaction in B2B environment in general (Libai et al., 2010). Andersen (2005) did not discuss C2C interactions to a large extent but he noted that in McAlexander et al.'s (2002) model, among the four relationships, the relationship between the user and his/her fellow brand community members is the most important incentive to belong to the brand community. Also, for the future research he suggested that it should be studied whether professionals find both professional and private satisfaction from participating in B2B brand community. One source for finding private satisfaction from the brand community could be through C2C interactions.

Also, Bruhn et al. (2014) studied the quality of C2C interaction in B2B context. First of all, they define C2C interactions as "a collaborative exchange process between a group of two or more customers who normally use the brand around which the brand community is built in the company they work for" (Bruhn et al., 2014, p. 167). The findings of this study have already been discussed thoroughly in other parts of the literature review. The main finding relating to the C2C interactions is that the quality of the interactions leads to functional, experiential and symbolic benefits for the brand community members, and this in turn fosters brand loyalty. It is concluded that the authors' suggestion for B2B companies is to implement a network orientation in their branding strategy.

In addition to the studies of B2B brand communities, previously discussed theory on C2C relationships in B2C brand communities can be applied to B2B context as well. In most of the previous research, a concept C2C interaction is used instead of C2C relationship. However, in the context of brand communities, and especially in the context of B2B brand communities, the interactions that happen between the brand community members are often long-term relationships and hence "relationship" describes the connection better than "interaction". Hence, in this study C2C relationship is utilized as a concept describing the collaborative exchange process between the customers.

2.3.2. Business networks

One possible reason why B2B brand communities have not been studied a lot is that these groups of customers of a B2B company are not perceived as brand communities but as business networks or business relationships. Ritter et al. (2004) define a business relationship as a process in which two organizations form strong ties in order to achieve mutual benefit by lowering costs or increasing value. There are four types of organizations that the company may have a business relationship with: customers, suppliers, complementors and competitors.

However, these four types of relationships are missing the kind of relationship that we are interested in, the relationship among customers of a B2B company. Some of the customers may be competitors, especially when considering that competitors do not necessarily have to produce exactly the same products. According to Nalebuff and Brandenburger (1996), a competitor is someone whose product makes the customers value your product less than when they have your product alone. Thus, also companies in different industries can be competitors. Nevertheless, even with this definition in mind, not all organizations are competitors, and thus this kind of business relationships among customers of a B2B company have not been identified in the literature.

Considering that still some of the organizations are competitors, it is useful to quickly look into the existing theory on cooperation among competitors. First of all, the horizontal cooperative relationships are more informal and invisible and have been studied less than vertical relationships (i.e. between buyers and sellers), but they still do exist. The cooperative exchanges include business, information and social exchange (Bengtsson & Kock, 1999). Cooperation among competitors may be developed for various reasons, for example to develop product and technology standards or to enter new international markets (Ritter et al., 2004).

Coopetition is a concept that describes the simultaneous competition and cooperation of two companies (Bengtsson and Kock, 2000). Coopetition is present in B2B brand communities between customers which compete with each other. An interesting aspect is that competition seems to take place in activities that are close to customers while cooperation is possible in operations that are more distant from the customer (Bengtsson and Kock, 2000). An example from the Swedish brewery industry is that the companies compete in the distribution of products to wholesalers while at the same time cooperating in bottle returns which is an operation that is not important in the direct interaction with the customer.

2.4. Theoretical framework

The following theoretical framework was constructed based on the discussed existing literature around the topics related to the research questions that were stated in the introduction section.
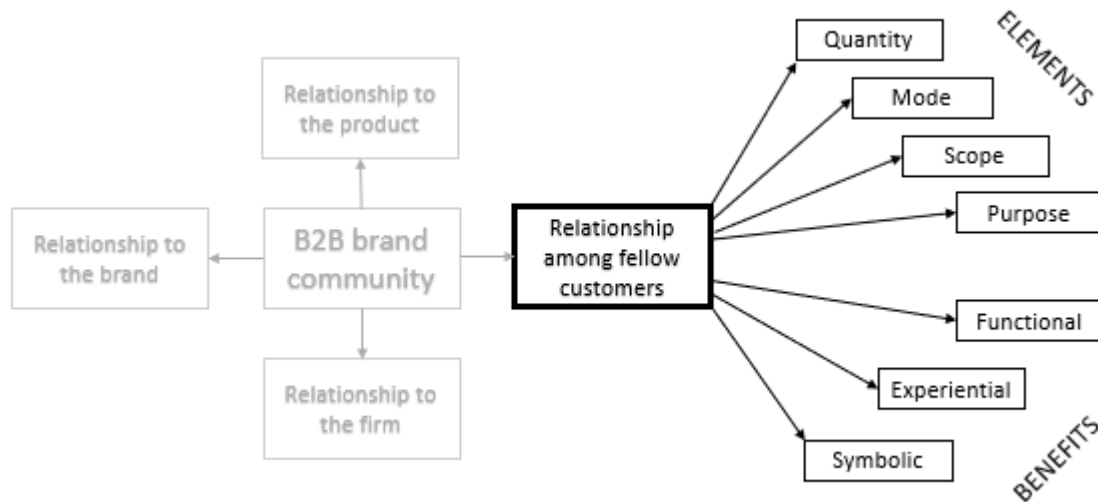

Figure 1. Theoretical framework

First of all, according to McAlexander et al. (2002), brand community consists of four relationships: the consumer's relationship to the product, to the brand, to the firm and to fellow customers. Their study focused on B2C brands, but as the research on B2B brand communities is very limited, this model will be used as a base for this research on a B2B brand community as well. In this research, the existence of the Thinking Portfolio brand community is studied by observing these four relationships.

However, as Andersen (2005) noted that out of the four relationships, the most important incentive to belong to a B2B brand community is the relationship among fellow customers or in other words the C2C relationship, that relationship will be the main focus of this research. The C2C relationships will be observed through two different aspects. To answer the first research question, "What kind of C2C relationships there are in Thinking Portfolio brand community?", four elements of the relationships are observed. To answer the second research question, "What benefits Thinking Portfolio brand community members get from C2C relationships?", three kinds of benefits of the relationships are studied.

The four elements of the C2C relationships are based on Wu and Fang's (2010) article in which they identify three elements of C2C interactions in brand communities: quantity, scope and mode. Quantity refers to the frequency and duration of interaction, scope refers to the tendency to interact with different people and mode refers to different forms of interaction (Wu & Fang, 2010). In addition to these elements, a fourth element, purpose, has been added, as the reason for the interaction plays an important role when analyzing the relationships and the brand community.

The three different kinds of benefits in B2B brand community (functional, experiential and symbolic benefits) were found by Bruhn et al. (2014). Functional benefits are related to information and problem solutions, experiential benefits are mentally and emotionally affecting experiences and symbolic benefits relate to the sense of belonging to the brand community (Bruhn et al., 2014).

The purpose of this theoretical framework is to guide the research together with the research objectives and research questions. More systematic explanation on how the theoretical framework was utilized in the research can be found in the methodology section.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research method

The research method used for this research is case study. In general, in the center of a case study there is a single particular 'case' and the research questions are related to understanding that case (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). In this research the 'case' is a B2B company Thinking Portfolio and more specifically, the phenomenon related to its brand community that consists of customers of Thinking Portfolio. Case studies can be either qualitative or quantitative (Ghauri, 2004); this research is qualitative due to the interpretative nature of the research questions.

Eriksson and Kovalainen (2008) find it useful to categorize case studies into intensive and extensive case studies; this research being an example of an intensive case study. The main goal of intensive case study is to explore and understand the studied phenomenon from the perspectives of the people involved in the case, however developing theory at the same time. In order to clarify the relationship of the case and the theory, Eriksson and Kovalainen (2008, p. 119) state that even though case study research is theoretically informed and able to develop theory, "the key interest is in the case itself, not in the pre-given theoretical propositions".

The purpose of intensive case study is not to come up with findings that can be generalized or applied to other contexts or cases. As already stated above, the main goal is to explore and understand the particular case and then to explain the unique features of the case to the audience. Thus, case study as a research method is only appropriate when the chosen case is in some way unique, critical or extreme (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). Stake (1995) agrees with this by stating that a case should be studied when it is of special interest.

In this research, the case of Thinking Portfolio fulfills these requirements. This company was chosen for the research because of its unique and special features that resemble the characteristics of a brand community, which are quite rare to find in a B2B company. Even though there is not a concrete brand community built by Thinking Portfolio in the form of a virtual brand community, for example, the customers seemed to interact a lot among themselves and enthusiastically attended different events organized by Thinking Portfolio.

One of the key features of case study research is triangulation which means that data is collected through more than one data collection method (Ghauri, 2004). It supports the idea of understanding the studied case thoroughly and holistically. Triangulation is also a way to ensure validation. In data source triangulation, it is checked "if the phenomenon or case remains the same at other times, in other spaces, or as persons interact differently" (Stake, 1995, p. 112).

3.2. Data Collection

When doing a case study, the possible data collection methods are diverse. Some possibilities are, for example, ethnography, interviewing or analysis of texts (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). Due to the importance of triangulation in case studies, a few different data collection methods were used for this research. The main data collection method was interviewing, and in addition to that, previously written customer stories of Thinking Portfolio customers as well as a video recording of a presentation given by a customer at Thinking Portfolio User Day were analyzed. Also, observation was done in User Day 2018 event organized by Thinking Portfolio.

The interviewing process started by forming the interview questions. The interview questions were formed with the help of the existing theory as well as utilizing the information received from observing in the User Day. The theoretical framework was not completely formed at that point; it was only finalized later on in the analysis phase. The interview questions were meant to provide relevant topics for discussion during the interviews in order to find the most relevant themes and topics instead of only focusing on themes that were chosen in advance.

The interviewees are employees of Thinking Portfolio's customer organizations that are responsible for Thinking Portfolio in their organization. In total 16 people were contacted by email. These people were chosen because the organizations for which they work have been using Thinking Portfolio for at least a year and these people were the contact persons in their organizations for Thinking Portfolio. Out of the 16 people, 14 people answered to the email and finally 10 interviews were organized.

The interviews were semi-structured interviews, which allowed the interviewer to guide the interview in the right direction without disturbing interviewee's flow of thoughts. The interviews took place mainly at the customers' offices around the capital region and Turku region. Also, one interview took place at Thinking Portfolio office in Helsinki and one interview was conducted via Skype. The interviews lasted for 25-46 minutes each, 34.4 minutes on average.

The interviews were conducted in Finnish which means that all the presented quotes of the interviewees have been translated into English. The interviews were recorded and then transcribed afterwards. This allowed the interviewer to focus on the conversation during the interview without having to worry about remembering or writing down important points. The details of all the interviews as well as the interview outline are presented in appendices (Appendix 1 & 2).

3.3. Data Analysis

There are two main strategies of case study analysis: one based on pre-formulated theoretical propositions and another one based on development of a case description (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). The latter strategy was used in this research. The research questions as well as the theoretical framework were formulated or at least modified strongly during the analysis phase instead of creating them already in the beginning before the data collection. This strategy is not based on formal coding procedures, however common themes, categories and patterns should be identified (Stake, 1995).

Ghauri (2004, p. 11) describes the data analysis process well by stating that "We start by trying to code and categorise text, then identify trends and establish findings. Finally, we integrate the data into an explanatory framework." This research was done mostly by following this description, however taking into account that some of the phases may have overlapped due to the descriptive nature of the case study analysis. Also, data collection and data analysis were partly done at the same time.

More precisely, the data analysis started by transcribing all the interviews from the recordings right after each interview. After that common themes, categories and patterns were identified from each interview. Some of the themes were identified beforehand from the existing theory and then spotted from the interviews, but others were only found from the interviews in the analysis phase. According to Stake (1995), the patterns may serve as a template for the analysis, or they may emerge unexpectedly while doing the analysis.

Once the most important topics and themes were identified, the theoretical framework as well as the research questions were still modified, in order to be able to focus on the most important aspects of the C2C relationships in the research. The topics and themes identified in the first interviews have also affected the outlines of the last interviews. Finally, the findings of the research were constructed

by searching for different interviewees' answers relating to these emerged topics. The findings will be presented in the next section of the Thesis.

3.4. Case Company

Thinking Portfolio is a Finnish business-to-business company that was established in 2001. The turnover in 2018 is around 2 million euros. At the moment there are 20 employees in the company. Thinking Portfolio's main product is a project portfolio management tool that it provides to companies interested in a simple and professional solution for portfolio management. Thinking Portfolio's SaaS based platform can also be used for application, service and idea management. In the future, Thinking Portfolio will also provide advisor services in the field of portfolio management.

Thinking Portfolio has around 100 customer organizations. The organizations include large international corporations, small and medium-sized enterprises and public sector organizations. The customers are mainly Finnish organizations, however some have operations abroad as well. Also, there are a few customer organizations that are entirely based in another country. In total, Thinking Portfolio products have over 100 000 end users in 50 countries.

Thinking Portfolio does not have an actual concrete brand community in the form of a web-enhanced brand community described by Andersen (2005), for example. However, the customer network of the company seems to form some kind of a brand community. The customers are largely in contact with each other even without company inputs and they are eager to give presentations about Thinking Portfolio in different events, for example. Also, Thinking Portfolio organizes events for their new and old customers many times a year and these events always attract hundreds of participants.

Thinking Portfolio has not yet realized the existence of the brand community or its potential, which makes it an interesting case. The relationships between the customers have emerged effortlessly and without a particular strategy from Thinking Portfolio's side. However, the relationships play an important role in the company's activities, as the communication between the customers leads to product development and new customers, for example. Thus, not only is Thinking Portfolio an interesting and special case to study, but it is also extremely useful for the company to better understand the phenomenon of the brand community and its different elements.

4. Findings

In this section findings of the research are presented and discussed. The section is divided into seven different larger themes, some of which are further divided into more specific topics.

4.1.   Attributes of a brand community in Thinking Portfolio

As brand community is an important concept and theme in this research, it is good to start with identifying the attributes of a brand community that can be found in the operations of Thinking Portfolio. This can be observed through four relationships that McAlexander et al. (2002) included in their brand community definition: customer-product relationship, customer-firm relationship, customer-brand relationship and the relationship among fellow customers. The three first relationships are discussed here and the relationship among fellow customers, or C2C relationship, will be discussed in other parts later in this section.

Customers' relationship to the product was the easiest to spot from the interviews. They did not have any difficulties describing the product, identifying its strengths and weaknesses or discussing their relationship to the product. Most interviewees had a strong relationship to the product, for many the relationships was also very positive and tight. For many interviewees developing the product further was very important to them.

> *"I own [name of the product] and I have very close relationship with [name of the product]. It has become quite an inseparable part of our project operations ... So developing [name of the product] goes hand in hand with developing our research, development and innovation operations."*

> *"In a cheesy way I could say there is some kind of a love-hate relationship. Love comes from that I completely believe in this kind of business intelligence tools in order to make things transparent. But the hate comes from that it requires the motivation of the management and specialists of the whole organization in order to work on a level where the benefits will be received."*

For some of the interviewees, the product is important and useful for their job but they do not have a special connection to it like the people described above. The relationship is not as strong but it is still more positive than negative.

> *"It is this kind of very crucial part of completing daily work tasks and advancing those things."*

Secondly, descriptions of customer-firm relationship were given mostly by describing the relationship to Thinking Portfolio employees. All the interviewees had a good relationship with the employees they had worked with.

> *"It is nice to work with him, they are all easy to approach."*

> *"[Name of an employee] has been very good cooperation partner. It is easy to contact ... That kind of smooth cooperation."*

Other than that, the relationship to the firm was described as positive and warm or neutral.

> *"I have a very warm and cosy relationship with Thinking Portfolio."*

> *"I hope that the company is doing fine so that our [name of the product] is doing fine."*

One interviewee had noticed a change in the relationship during the years. Before the relationship had been easier and more straightforward, but now it had become more complicated.

> *"Also the relationship with the company was at first very straightforward and I would say that even close in a way, it was kind of easy ... I imagine what happened is that it started to grow and grow, and they had to reorganize and change their procedures, which of course appears to customers maybe as not-so-straightforward anymore."*

Thirdly, the customer-brand relationship was not very visible in the interviews, which may be related to different problems with the branding in general. For example, inside many of the customer organizations, the product is branded with another name than Thinking Portfolio. As Thinking Portfolio contact persons, all the interviewees were familiar with the company and the brand, but they were explaining their experiences with this issue in their organization.

"...even though not everyone knows our project portfolio is called Thinking Portfolio."

"In our organization, we still often call Thinking Portfolio 'a PPM tool' ... Many organizations have branded the tool with a completely different name, so it dispels your brand image in a way."

Another example is from a presentation at the User Day where the speaker told that in their organization they intentionally wanted to rebrand the system with another name to make it more appealing and fun for the users, and they did this by organizing a naming competition. The system is now branded with a different name than Thinking Portfolio, which is the case in many other organizations as well.

Findings related to the fourth relationship in the model, the relationship among fellow customers, also called C2C relationships, will be presented in later parts of this section.

In addition to the four relationships, some of the interviewees also directly told their opinions about the existence of a brand community around Thinking Portfolio. They were provided with a definition of brand community by Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) and short example of brand communities from existing literature, however it has to be noted that for many this was the first time they had ever faced this concept. The opinions on this issue were quite diverse; some strongly believed there is a brand community.

"I mean there is clearly a community, a community among the users of this system ... In my opinion the brand building of Thinking Portfolio is based on this; there is a community that creates the intelligence into the operations and Thinking Portfolio brings in its own flavor. But the intelligence comes from the customer organizations, and then of course Thinking Portfolio makes sure that it is built into their products and also works as a storage, collectively collecting it all together so that it can be utilized in the future as well."

"In my opinion absolutely, absolutely there is. Clearly Thinking Portfolio is the unitive factor in the collaboration [with other companies]. "

Others thought there is a brand community to some extent. In some cases the uncertainty about the existence of the brand community may also arise because the concept of brand community was previously unknown to the interviewees and they had not thought about it before.

> *"Maybe, why not. I have never thought about it from that angle, but I guess there could be. The only thing is that it is maybe so diverse, so it is quite loose … Even though every organization has very different processes and backgrounds, Thinking Portfolio brings in the same nominators that everyone wants to and is ready to commit to. Maybe a brand community can be formed through that."*

Finally, one interviewee did not believe in the existence of a brand community around Thinking Portfolio. Even though this opinion is in a minority, it has to be taken into account; it leads to a finding that not all Thinking Portfolio customers are part of the brand community.

> *"I would say no; for example when we have gathered with other organizations, we have gathered more around the development and then Thinking Portfolio comes up in the conversation. But I don't see this working in a way that all of us organizations that are using this would consciously be a community that could share information with each other."*

To conclude, there surely is a brand community around Thinking Portfolio, however it may be loose and it does not include all Thinking Portfolio users. This statement will be further supported in the next parts that discuss the C2C relationships in the brand community.

4.2. C2C relationships inside the customer organizations

The fourth relationship in McAlexander et al.'s (2002) model, the relationship among fellow customers, will be observed through Wu and Fang's (2010) three elements of C2C interactions in brand community: scope, quantity and mode. Scope refers to the tendency to interact with different people, quantity refers to the frequency and duration of interaction and mode refers to different forms of interaction (Wu & Fang, 2010). In addition to these, the purpose of the interactions and the relationships is discussed.

4.2.1. Scope

An important aspect regarding the scope of the C2C relationships is that in Thinking Portfolio's case these C2C relationships consist of two kinds of relationships. The C2C relationships among different customer organizations is the type that comes to mind at first when getting to know Thinking Portfolio and the brand community phenomenon. However, also the C2C relationships inside each customer organization are important.

People that use Thinking Portfolio in their job may be located in different units in the organization and do very different tasks, but they communicate and build relationships because of Thinking Portfolio.

> *"On the other hand, this builds up cross-sectional view inside our organization ... It makes us communal, of course we also work hard to achieve that but anyway. These people do completely different things, they are often very far away from me in an organizational manner."*

First of all, it is important to know what kind of C2C relationships there are inside the customer organizations. All the organizations have different ways of working but the ways of communication can be divided into one of these four categories: no communication and satisfied with that, no communication but need for it, one-on-one communication, and formal groups. This is only one way of categorizing and it is possible that some organizations combine for example both one-on-one communication and formal groups.

The first category consists of organizations that do not have any formal groups or regular communication in any form around Thinking Portfolio. They contact each other by e-mail or phone calls when needed and this suits them extremely well. They either have not even thought about other ways of working or they have realized that there is no need for change.

> *"The agile development makes us to work in development bursts, which means that also with the Thinking Portfolio tool we have a development sprint when we want to do something, and then we note that it will take some time that we won't touch it. Because of this, I feel like the 'when needed' way of communicating suits us better."*

More numerous were the ones who did not have any specified ways of communication around Thinking Portfolio but who felt that there was actually need for that. Some organizations were in a phase that they had realized the need but they had not yet found the solution and were in a process of looking for one.

> *"But there clearly is a need, the more dynamic and easy the way of communication is, the better it of course serves us ... This is of course in our agenda because we want to expand it [=Thinking Portfolio] to the whole organization."*

Some organizations had realized the need and had already started to work on this by launching new communication channels or by starting to plan new different ways of working.

> *"We don't actually have a key user network, but we're building it at the moment ... The next step is that we need to create the key user network and plan the process of when we get the questions, where do we put them and who will handle them. This kind of a service desk type of functionality."*

> *"Now we've been building this Microsoft Teams, we're moving all our project work in Teams ... It will be a communication channel where I can send messages, give information, put instructions etc. Until now we've only used e-mail ... Now we're also starting to organize this IT project training."*

The third category consists of organizations that rely on one-on-one communication. Many of these organizations may also have some groups where they communicate but one-on-one communication plays more important role in the communication.

> *"Until now I've done a lot of one-on-one teaching."*

> *"For us it works so that I give a private introduction [to portfolio use], because that way we get to sink into his/her situation and needs more profoundly than just the tool ... I have experienced personally and through feedback that this personal support is the best."*

Finally, the fourth category consists of organizations that have well-organized formal groups in which they communicate about issues related to Thinking Portfolio. These groups can be formed around

Thinking Portfolio only, such as a group of Thinking Portfolio key users, or they can be groups around another topic related to portfolio management that occasionally but regularly also discuss Thinking Portfolio related issues.

> *"We have a lot of forums in which we discuss both the project model and portfolio as well as portfolio management."*

> *"Internally in the same way, people who are doing project operations meet every month and [the name of the product] can be one theme there, but we have other themes as well that we discuss and in that way we share the information. And now we separately have meetings for project managers, project owners and the steering group, so in that way we manage to inform them."*

4.2.2. Quantity and Mode

Regarding the quantity and mode of the interactions inside customer organizations, the most interesting aspect is to look at the groups that are formed around Thinking Portfolio or another topic related to portfolio management. One-on-one communication in the organizations is mostly occasional and channels used are e-mail, phone calls and face-to-face meetings. However, the C2C relationships inside the customer organizations are most visible through the groups, so it is interesting to see how often these groups interact and which channels they use for communication.

By far the most popular communication channel is face-to-face or Skype meetings. All the groups that existed in the interviewees' organizations organize meetings; of course some may use another channels in addition to meetings as well.

> *"We have a meeting, of course you can participate via Skype as well, but meetings."*

Most of the groups meet regularly, only few meet only when there is a special need. Also the frequency of the meetings varies between the organizations as well as between different groups in an organization from 2 times a year to every two weeks.

> *"We have monthly meetings for the key users."*

> *"We have quite many groups. With the key users I meet a couple times in half a year. And then I meet these development and portfolio managers also a couple times in half a year. And then project managers I meet around once in half a year."*

In addition to meetings, some organizations use different kinds of digital channels to communicate inside the groups. This kind of communication channels play an important role in transferring the interactions from compulsory regular meetings to actual relationships among the customers of Thinking Portfolio. The most often used channel is Microsoft Teams.

> *"We have thought of creating a Microsoft Teams group inside our organization where we could discuss quickly how this works and something like that."*

> *"Now we've been building this Microsoft Teams, we're moving all our project work in Teams … It will be a communication channel where I can send messages, give information, put instructions etc."*

Some organizations are planning to start using or have already started using WhatsApp groups, Yammer or some other digital discussion forums for communication.

> *"Actually now when I was meeting with project managers, there was an idea that there could be a chat where everyone could ask questions from each other."*

> *"We have this kind of a less official project network for everyone interested in project operations. And it has a Yammer page where I share current matters … I have also shared material about project operations development in general there, for example I went to Thinking Portfolio web page to see the presentation about the new features from the last User Day and posted a link in Yammer."*

One organization, a representative of which was giving a presentation at the User Day, has succeeded well in internal communication. First of all, they branded the term key user into a name that seemed less official and scary and more nice and fun. Secondly, they managed to get key users from each function involved and they are now using WhatsApp group and Microsoft Teams for fluid and quick communication.

4.2.3. Purpose

The final important aspect regarding the C2C relationships inside the customer organizations is the purpose of the communication; why these people communicate and what issues they discuss. It has to be noted that as many of these groups meet not only around Thinking Portfolio but around project management more generally, they also discuss issues not related to Thinking Portfolio. However, here the focus is in the purpose of the discussions around Thinking Portfolio.

The most common theme that appeared in the interviews was consultancy or teaching.

> *"Until now I've done a lot of one-on-one teaching ... Now we're starting to organize this kind of IT project training regularly, where I will have a section where I tell about Thinking Portfolio, reporting, and its benefits. So, when new project managers arrive in IT, we get them together and organize the training."*

> *"In addition to trainings, I give consultancy on portfolio use either for small groups or individually ... We work together with a project manager for about half an hour and then I get ideas for developing the project portfolio and he gets ideas for effective use of the portfolio."*

Other than that, the topics discussed are very practical; challenges in portfolio use, new development ideas for the portfolio, what to prioritize, and getting to know the new features and functionalities.

> *"We have monthly meetings for the key users where we go through for example issues related to information quality, or some practical issues, and all development ideas and what to prioritize."*

> *"We've discussed functionalities, or ways to develop, or how you get this visible, or how you've solved this. Frankly speaking we've asked for help or how you've done this, and then we've got someone's idea directly or we've come up with new ideas together."*

All in all, considering these four elements of the C2C relationships inside the customer organizations, the brand community phenomenon is not identified very strongly. This may be because, as mentioned before, the brand community does not include all Thinking Portfolio users. The communication around Thinking Portfolio inside an organization is partly compulsory and forced. The brand

community is more visible when observing the C2C relationships among different customer organizations as that is the context where the most active Thinking Portfolio users communicate voluntarily. These relationships will be discussed next.

4.3. C2C relationships among different customer organizations

C2C relationships among different customer organizations refer to customer organizations of Thinking Portfolio interacting, communicating and forming relationships among themselves. It has to be noted that it is the individuals who make the actions but at the same time they are representing their organization and acting according to the ways of working of the organization.

The relationships that are described here are informal relationships and the interactions happen mostly among the customers, without Thinking Portfolio's contribution or presence. In some cases Thinking Portfolio may have helped in introducing customers to each other but at the end they schedule the meetings or organize other types of discussions themselves. There are also different kinds of events organized by Thinking Portfolio where C2C relationships are formed and maintained, but these will be discussed more profoundly in another part of the findings section.

4.3.1. Scope

The relationships among the customers consist of both one-on-one relationships and groups. There are also customers who do not have a relationship with any other customer; this is again a proof that the brand community does not include all Thinking Portfolio customers or users but only the ones who are willing to be active.

One-on-one relationships are the most common way to form relationships among Thinking Portfolio customers. These relationships may have started from one of the events organized by Thinking Portfolio, from Thinking Portfolio's recommendations or from customers' own personal networks.

> *"I haven't really [been networking]. But with [name of one organization] we've been in touch more. With them we've discussed to the extent that I could send them an email without explaining to ask something ... This started when me and [name of the person] were giving presentations at the User Day at the same time ... Now we've been planning to contact a few other customers."*

The groups that exist have not been formed around Thinking Portfolio but around portfolio management in different contexts, however Thinking Portfolio plays an important role in the groups and is an often-discussed topic. One example of this kind of a group is a group consisting of public organizations. They have a group that is led by one of the organizations and the aim of the group is to develop project management and portfolio management in the organizations. As Thinking Portfolio is a tool that many of the organizations use for their portfolio management, it is naturally one of the topics in the discussions.

> *"[Name of the person] is leading this kind of a PMO network or a project talent network, whatever it is called, and there are both Thinking Portfolio users and people that are not using it."*

> *"Mainly [I've networked] with the project network that [name of the person] is leading; there are quite many bigger and smaller public organizations."*

The customers that have not interacted with any other customer organizations have to be taken into account as well. Interesting aspect is that also these people are interested in relationships with others but for different reasons they have not been able to create the relationships yet.

> *"Now I haven't [networked with other customer organizations]. It's been kind of in the making, but at the moment nothing else except the User Day."*

> *"I haven't really networked. I mean specifically with Thinking Portfolio's customer organizations. I have exchanged business cards and talked with a few organizations that we could exchange ideas and experiences."*

The one-on-one relationships and informal groups that discuss Thinking Portfolio related issues among other issues do not alone prove that there is a brand community around Thinking Portfolio. However, a community starts to exist at least when people start recognizing familiar faces in many places instead of focusing on single relationships with particular people, or when they know who to contact in different kinds of situations - to some of the interviewees this is already the case.

> *"Maybe so that I've seen people there [=at the User Day] that I've seen in other places such as Project Management Days. And then in a way it [=the community] starts*

building when we bump into each other in different places, so it doesn't happen only in one place."

"Tight network in a way that there is always a friend who to call if there is something that confuses me."

4.3.2. Quantity and Mode

Similar to C2C relationships inside the customer organizations, also the most often used channel for communication in C2C relationships among different customer organizations is face-to-face or Skype meetings. In this context Skype meetings are even more common as participants are situated in different locations.

In one-on-one relationships possible communication channels are meetings, Skype meetings, phone calls and emails. Emails are mostly used for scheduling meetings or for asking short questions about particular issues when there is no need for a meeting. Meetings are often organized at one of the participants' premises or via Skype, especially if the parties are located in different cities. The meetings are not regular but happen around a particular theme.

"We've visited [name of an organization] at one point to get to know their systems, and now some people from [name of an organization] came to our premises but most people were participating via Skype."

"Most of the productive conversation happens in the meetings; we mainly only use email to agree when to meet and with what agenda."

The previously mentioned group consisting of public organizations has a Skype meeting regularly once a month where you can ask questions. They exchange ideas and solutions for different kinds of problems. The organizer asks emerging themes from the participants beforehand, but the meeting is organized even if no themes come up.

"I always ask beforehand what themes come up, and if there are no themes that come up, it doesn't matter and we meet anyway. And every time the themes start arising when you start digging deeper with your thoughts."

The group also organizes theme seminars around chosen themes occasionally around two times a year. If there is something to ask between the monthly Skype meetings, it is possible to send an email to the group. There have been some plans to organize a digital platform for the group for sharing documents, for example.

> *"A long time ago I was about to establish this digital workspace where you can export shared documents, but I gave up on the idea because I thought it [=the workspace that had been in use in the organization] was so stiff."*

4.3.3. Purpose

The purpose of the communication in C2C relationships among customer organizations is to some extent similar to the C2C relationships inside customer organizations. Similarly between different organizations the discussion themes include teaching or consultancy in the form of benchmarking as well as discussing practical issues such as best practices and challenges. However, between different organizations, the discussions can go to broader level than inside the organization, still revolving around Thinking Portfolio.

First of all, teaching and learning from each other is an important purpose of C2C relationships also when interacting between different organizations. More often in this context it has been referred to as benchmarking.

> *"Organizations come to benchmark us and I have been to a few organizations to benchmark myself."*

Secondly, another purpose of the relationships is to discuss practical issues such as best practices, new features, experiences and challenges.

> *"We've discussed what kind of good practices everyone has."*

> *"We exchange thoughts and experiences and others … We've told how we use Thinking Portfolio and they've told how they use, and then we've got new ideas on what to put in there."*

> *"How their portfolio is built, what kind of processes there are, and mirroring it to our own of course, and then their development ideas."*

Especially discussing challenges and solutions seemed to play a big role in the relationships.

> *"If there has been a particular challenge or an area for development that everyone can identify, and then if we have had something in common, we have thought how to develop them together."*

> *"We've gone problems first. (laugh)"*

Lastly, the final purpose of the relationships is to discuss themes in a broader level than just around the practicalities. These discussions go around project culture, culture change, motivating people, communication and inspiration, and the future.

> *"Maybe all the time we try to be one step ahead, not discuss what we have done previously, but what we want to do next."*

> *"[We've talked about] the cultural change, even though it is a good system, how to get people involved ... we've discussed these kind of communicational and inspirational issues."*

4.4. Events organized by Thinking Portfolio

An additional context in which C2C relationships can be formed and maintained is different kinds of events organized by Thinking Portfolio. At the moment the events are the only way Thinking Portfolio is managing the brand community and the C2C relationships in the brand community.

The largest event of the year is the User Day which is organized every year in autumn. In the User Day, there are presentations in which customers of Thinking Portfolio talk about their experiences in using Thinking Portfolio. Between presentations, there is also time for networking. The participants are current Thinking Portfolio customers but also people that are not yet using Thinking Portfolio but are interested in it. In 2018, the User Day was organized on September 7th. There were 116 physical participants and 80 online participants at the User Day.

Also, other similar kind of events with presentations and networking are organized around particular themes occasionally. There is, for example, an event for public organizations that has been organized for two years now, and there was an event regarding the GDPR regulation in spring 2018. Round Table discussion events have been planned for some time, and they will be discussed more in the seventh part of the findings section.

In addition to events organized by Thinking Portfolio, there are some larger events that Thinking Portfolio is participating at. One example is Project Management Days which is a two-day event organized every autumn in Helsinki. There are a lot of different presentations and workshops related to project management, and Thinking Portfolio has had a stand at the fair area as well as a few sponsored presentations in the event.

All interviewees have participated in the events, at least to the User Day but some also to other events. Everyone thought that the User Days have been useful and enjoyable; all in all the general view of the User Day was very positive.

> *"I have been there once … It was very good and it is exactly what I am looking for … Quite good overall view and you get to hear others' thoughts."*

> *"I have liked it … I like to be physically there. You end up discussing with other people. I mean I think they have been useful."*

Many of the customers consider the events to be great places for networking, meeting new people and catching up with existing acquaintances.

> *"Also face-to-face meetings with colleagues are very interesting."*

> *"In connection to the User Day I may have scheduled some meeting or something else, in that way it is good that you can network there as well."*

As the customer presentations are at the heart of the events, giving a presentation at the event is something many of the customers have had a chance to do. The experience has been very nice and rewarding.

> *"In my opinion it was somehow very nice. Very very nice … It was a good experience."*

"I think it was nice, and anyway I like to perform in front of a big crowd or so … I don't know what it is, maybe as a Finn it is weird to say out loud that it is so nice to be there on stage, but somehow you get a feeling that these things that we have done are actually valuable when all these people want to listen to it."

Giving a presentation and thus being in a spot light has often lead to being contacted by other people afterwards which is considered a benefit.

"Especially after giving a presentation, there have been contacts … It is always nice to show what you have done by yourself and notice that others are interested as well."

"From there I got some meeting requests, in that way it was a social year, or the next six months after that were very fun. For example, someone came to us saying that we saw you there speaking, so we wanted to come. It was very nice."

4.5. Benefits of C2C relationships in the brand community

The customers would not spend time for forming or maintaining C2C relationships with other Thinking Portfolio customers if they would not gain any benefits out of it. This seems to be extremely important in B2B market, as the people are busy with their jobs and they do not want to spend their time in anything unnecessary. We will look at the benefits of the C2C relationships in the brand community through three kinds of benefits that can be derived from interactions in a B2B brand community identified by Bruhn et al. (2014): functional, experiential and symbolic benefits.

4.5.1. Functional benefits

Functional benefits are by far the most numerous benefits in the C2C relationships in Thinking Portfolio brand community. These consist of concrete and practical tips, solutions to problems and new information and ideas, for example.

"Concrete benefits, for example you hear that Thinking Portfolio has made a solution to someone's portfolio, so we want it, too."

"What kind of good practices others have had."

It seems to be important for the customers to see what others have done, and they consider it as very useful and beneficial. If you are only concentrating on your own system and have no idea what kind of different versions there can be, it can be more difficult to come up with new ideas and think creatively.

> *"I think you get so much out of it. You sometimes become blind when you're only doing your own thing, and then when you see what someone else is doing, you think that we should do the same."*

> *"The benefits were that you saw another version of the same product, what you can do with it. Because when you develop your own product, you easily go into a tunnel mode where you only see your own track and not the whole picture."*

Customers consider that it is easy to share information about the use of Thinking Portfolio; it may be different with some other products and tools when taking into account confidentiality issues in the organizations.

> *"In my opinion with Thinking Portfolio, you can develop the software and the ways in which you work in a higher level without going into details, what kind of secret projects we have in there."*

The functional benefits are not only restricted to developing the tool in itself, but the benefits can also be related to getting tips for developing other functions around portfolio management, for example communication inside the organization.

> *"We talked about communication, that they are using a lot of different tools for communication, and I was thinking that we could actually consider these as well. This kind of practical tips."*

One type of functional benefit that the customers get from the relationships with other customers, is that their own skills are maintained and increased.

> *"Own skills and especially understanding, so you see how other organizations are doing, is maintained through network collaboration."*

Another benefit from the interactions and relationships with other customers, is that common development targets and ideas can be identified and further communicated to Thinking Portfolio. It is useful for Thinking Portfolio to get signals from customers if there is something multiple customers are willing to develop or create.

> *"When we have had common development targets, we have been able to communicate them to Thinking Portfolio and they have been ready to take them as development targets to themselves."*

Finally, when using Thinking Portfolio, the customers get a ready-made network and a lot of possible contacts at once. This can be considered as a functional benefit as it makes forming relationships much easier.

> *"It has been in a way a ready-made network as Thinking Portfolio has quite a list of names to give, from whom you can ask questions and such. It has been much easier than starting from the scratch by yourself."*

4.5.2. Experiential benefits

Experiential benefits are not as common in the brand community, but a few were identified from the interviews. For example, gaining a good personal brand through giving a presentation will bring a lot of enjoyment.

> *"Maybe even in a selfish way, that my own personal brand is quite good, because I was giving a presentation at the User Day and after that many people have been interested in my job and our company. So that is of course a very nice benefit, it has been good publicity."*

However, experiential benefits can also be derived from the functional benefits as many achievements that create functional benefit such as finding a solution to a problem may also bring enjoyment to the person.

> *"It is always nice to hear what is happening with everyone, because you realize that it is the same issues and same problems that we all have."*

4.5.3. Symbolic benefits

Finally, the symbolic benefits seem not to be that common either. One reason for this could also be that the interviews did not go that deeply into the topic of the sense of belonging, which is an important aspect of the symbolic benefits. However, it was found out that the customers consider it easier to contact people and to ask for help when they know the people better.

> *"When you've got to know people and a little what they have done, it is very easy to ask a question if there is a problem … In a way you get the direct contacts and then it is easy to deal with the issues. That is maybe the biggest benefit."*

All in all, there are clearly a lot of functional benefits of C2C relationships in Thinking Portfolio brand community but not many experiential or symbolic benefits. This finding strengthens the statement that there is a brand community around Thinking Portfolio but it is quite loose.

4.6. Interaction between the brand community and others

The current customers of Thinking Portfolio are also interacting with people that are not using Thinking Portfolio and thus are not part of the brand community. The communication around Thinking Portfolio between these parties is mostly asking for and giving referrals and advice for Thinking Portfolio products. All interviewees have at least either had someone recommending them to start using Thinking Portfolio or have recommended Thinking Portfolio to someone else.

When initially looking for a solution or a tool for project portfolio management, many organizations were interested in what solutions other organizations have had and also to hear about their experiences. Some interviewees told that they knew that Thinking Portfolio existed, and they knew some organizations that were using it. This was enough information for them and they did not contact any of these organizations to ask further questions.

> *"Well we knew that for example [name of the organization] was using Thinking Portfolio, so we knew that it existed, but we started the selection process from the scratch."*

> *"We knew that some organizations were using it, but at that time we didn't do a lot of domestic benchmarking regarding anything."*

The fact that other organizations are using the product creates a feeling of safety, even though you would have not even heard about their experiences, how they are using the tool or what is their opinion on it.

> *"And when you know that others are using it, it has a big meaning, and when you know who the others are, what kind of organizations they are, it has a big meaning ... In the selection phase it creates a feeling of safety when you know that there are large organizations from this and this industry."*

Then there are other organizations who had actually discussed with Thinking Portfolio customers to get more insight into the decision-making process. Many organizations had even visited other organizations to get a presentation about Thinking Portfolio and how the other organization had benefitted from it.

> *"At that phase when we were choosing it, we discussed in an event with colleagues from other organizations and asked if they are using any kind of a system, and there this one came up."*

> *"We were at the User Day, then we visited at least [name of the organization] beforehand ... [They told about] how they have got people involved and just about the features of the system."*

Also hearing others' experiences and recommendations plays an important role for the organizations when choosing the tool.

> *"It was very, very good ... In our experience it was very valuable to exchange ideas, experiences and such."*

On the other hand, now that the interviewees' organizations are using Thinking Portfolio themselves, many of them have wanted to pay the benefit they got in the selection process forward by telling about Thinking Portfolio to others.

> *"Because of that [=hearing others' experiences], after we had started using it by ourselves, we've had a lot of organizations visiting us. We wanted to pay it forward."*

Many interviewees have had other organizations asking for referrals or advice or visiting them to hear about Thinking Portfolio. Many of these recommendations have actually led to purchase.

> *"At least [name of the organization] guys came to visit us once. I showed and told them what we have done and said that everything has worked well in our opinion."*

> *"[Name of the organization] has contacted us, when they were about to purchase this system we consulted them ... Then also [name of the organization] and also someone contacted us from some company, now I can't even remember who it was."*

There is this group that was described earlier in the findings section, consisting of public organizations. The members of the group that are using Thinking Portfolio have recommended it to other members of the group both directly and indirectly.

> *"Maybe in a way through this [name of the person]' group ... There we talk about things quite a lot through Thinking Portfolio, so they kind of get the communication by force, and of course they are interested as well."*

One interviewee was currently participating in a project management training and was about to give a presentation about Thinking Portfolio in a workshop where they go through different kinds of tools for project management. There are about ten people from different organizations in the training. People had already been interested in Thinking Portfolio and had asked questions, and the interviewee had told that it has worked very well for them.

> *"Next month we will go through different tools, and I will be there presenting how we're using Thinking Portfolio. I will give a demo on how it works for us ... It's kind of little marketing at the same time (laugh)."*

These findings suggest that there is a lot of interaction also between Thinking Portfolio customers and other people. These interactions are important for Thinking Portfolio as they affect the image people have about Thinking Portfolio and may also directly lead to new customers.

4.7. Ideas for the future

During the interviews, the interviewees directly told their ideas and suggestions relating to how to improve the brand community of Thinking Portfolio and its different elements in the future. These ideas are not the same as managerial implications that will be presented in the discussion section. The ideas and suggestions presented here are interviewees' own opinions and they may reflect only the view of one person, for example, and thus they cannot be directly considered as managerial implications. The ideas and suggestions are divided into two categories: some are related to virtual brand community in the form of an online forum or other virtual platform, and others are related to Round Table discussion events.

4.7.1. Virtual brand community

Even though there is a brand community to some extent around Thinking Portfolio, a common place where the brand community members or Thinking Portfolio customers could interact among themselves has not existed. In the interviews, it came up that some of the customers would be willing to have some kind of online platform related to Thinking Portfolio. The general opinion was that this would be useful and beneficial, however the opinions on which kind of platform it should be or what its purpose should be were quite diverse. The suggestions can be divided into three categories: a list of organizations, a tip bank, and finally, an interactive platform.

Some interviewees suggested that Thinking Portfolio could provide information on which organizations are using Thinking Portfolio, what kind of features they have there and who would be interested in cooperation. The list would help customers find suitable customer organizations to contact for different purposes. This is clearly not a virtual brand community, but it is the first step in how Thinking Portfolio could help the creation and maintaining of the brand community.

> *"It would be interesting, if it would be possible for Thinking Portfolio to create information on which organizations are using it … That kind of thing, so you could contact similar organizations on how you've solved this."*

> *"Some kind of benchmarking register, what an awful name (laugh). But I mean, which organizations you should especially benchmark regarding this issue … You have the*

touch for the whole clientele, so what special and new could this particular organization offer.”

Another idea, the second step, is to build a platform where Thinking Portfolio would create content and customers would have access to it. The content would mostly be information on new features and functionalities.

“Some kind of a tip bank. It is nice that new features are introduced at the User Day, but there could be some announcements introducing one at a time ... Some kind of quick tips.”

One interviewee explained that this kind of platform had existed previously, but it has not been in use for some time now. The interviewee explained that for example different widgets, portfolio views and report models were found in there.

“It was your own, intranet type of thing for your organization ... I miss something like that, where you can go and check how for example this and this could be implemented.”

The third idea is to create an interactive platform where customers can create content by themselves. It is possible that also Thinking Portfolio could create content, but the main focus would be in customers interacting with each other.

“Something like, not a chat channel, but some platform where new things could be introduced, and then you could actually ask something in there and see answers ... A bit like we have Teams now.”

“Of course there could be some kind of social media channel or something ... I could imagine if I had a case that I’m thinking, if there was an active group where I could send a question and get an answer, it could be that the conversation wouldn’t necessarily continue there but then you could send a private message and contact the other person by phone or something. That I could imagine.”

However, the interviewees already identified some problems related to this kind of platform. Firstly, the purpose and the target group of the platform should be made very clear for it to be meaningful and useful for the users. Secondly, the discussion should be active, but the problem is that for many

people the work is very hectic. If people do not have enough time, the discussion dies and visiting the platform is not interesting. Thirdly, one interviewee was doubting how productive the discussion could be if Thinking Portfolio was supervising it; maybe customers cannot share their thoughts as freely as when discussing only with other customers.

All in all, related to Thinking Portfolio's role in creating and maintaining the brand community, the customers consider it important that Thinking Portfolio is there to help in contacting other organizations because of confidentiality issues.

> *"Especially in private sector, the boundaries and trade secrets come easily on the way, so with another customer that [=Thinking Portfolio facilitating it] would make the contacting easier."*

4.7.2. Round Table discussion events

Round Table discussion events are a new concept that Thinking Portfolio has been planning to launch in the future. The idea is that 10-15 customers gather in a certain location to discuss a particular theme around Thinking Portfolio or portfolio management. There would also be a Thinking Portfolio representative hosting the event. The goal is to develop the product or practices so that both Thinking Portfolio and the customers can benefit from it. One practice session was held in 2017 around agile development and how to include that into Thinking Portfolio products.

In the interviews, before mentioning the concept of Round Table or that they have been planned, many interviewees explained that an event where you could discuss with others in a smaller group could be useful.

> *"Maybe there could be some, the presentations are really good, but maybe there could be some discussion forums or such, you could organize something where people could exchange ideas and network."*

One of the organizations had an example of a concept or an event that they had created in their organization for a similar kind of purpose.

> *"I think that this [name of the event] experiment that we have had would suit your purpose as well. There we have a challenge or an idea that we start to refine and look*

for the solution. So there could be this kind of concept for you as well, that customers would start looking for a solution together.”

Especially after explaining the idea of these Round Table discussion events, all the interviewees were interested in them.

> *“That is exactly what I was looking for, something like this.”*

> *“Yes. Yes, for sure I would be interested. I think it is very interesting to exchange ideas with other users and discuss these things together.”*

Clearly one of the benefits of the event for both Thinking Portfolio and the customers, is that the products of Thinking Portfolio are developed further. In addition, another benefit that the interviewees realized is related to networking and making it easier to contact others later on.

> *“From there you get to know people and then it is always easier to approach them.”*

The interviewees mentioned many relevant suggestions for further developing the concept of Round Table discussion events. One suggestion was that in addition to just discussing with others, there could be some kind of workshop or exercise that participants could do together.

> *“That we wouldn't only discuss, but it would be prepared a bit more. I would make it into a workshop. Discussing is always very nice, but there could be an exercise or inspiration … I would make it more functional.”*

Another suggestion that was given by many interviewees was that the event should have a clear goal or a clear statement of what its purpose is. This is related to the issue of not having enough time for everything; when people are busy, they can only attend events that have a clear goal and that will further develop something useful and beneficial for them.

> *“We do everything pretty much 'benefits first', so if you can pick the benefits from it.”*

> *“Maybe the effect of the event would be stronger if it was clearly stated that this is now for you to develop the particular functionality and this is an event for that.”*

Both of these ideas, the virtual brand community as well as the Round Table discussion events will be further discussed in the discussion section together with other managerial implications.

5. Discussion

5.1. Comparing findings to the theory

In the findings section, the existence of brand community around Thinking Portfolio was observed through McAlexander et al.'s (2002) four relationships and how these relationships were found in the interviews of Thinking Portfolio customers. However, in the first introduction of brand community by Muniz and O'Guinn (2001), the focus was on the three core components of brand communities: consciousness of kind, shared rituals and traditions, and moral responsibility. Hence, it is also important to observe how these components are visible in Thinking Portfolio brand community.

In Thinking Portfolio's case, consciousness of kind is realized to some extent. It is somehow related to symbolic benefits that were found to exist. On the other hand, shared rituals and traditions are not in any way present in Thinking Portfolio brand community, or at least they were not identified in the research. Finally, moral responsibility plays an important role in the brand community. The customers are always willing to help others and to share their knowledge and ideas to their fellow brand community members. These observations further strengthen the finding that there is a brand community around Thinking Portfolio, however it is quite loose due to the lack of shared rituals and traditions, for example.

As discussed in the literature review, another important aspect of brand communities is the differences in definitions considering whether brand communities should be non-geographically bound or not. According to Muniz and O'Guinn's (2001) definition, it is very important that brand communities are non-geographically bound. However, McAlexander et al. (2002) and Wu and Fang (2010) argue that face-to-face interactions strengthen the brand community and are necessary for its existence. This research supports their view as face-to-face meetings were found to be the most often used channel in maintaining C2C relationships, and also the different kinds of events were seen as an important part of the brand community.

Another topic that divides the researchers' opinions is the issue of limited liability. According to Muniz and O'Guinn (2001), brand communities are communities of limited liability while Schau et al. (2009) state that brand community members may discuss topics not related to the brand or they may remain in the community after stopping using the brand's products. The findings of this research support Muniz and O'Guinn's view; Thinking Portfolio customers discuss only Thinking Portfolio

or portfolio management related issues with each other. However, it seems like this could be common with B2B brand communities in general as being in the brand community and interacting with other brand community members is part of the members' job and thus most likely they will not spend extra time on something that is not necessary or relevant.

The benefits of brand community that generate value for the customers were observed through Bruhn et al.'s (2014) model in the findings section. The findings of this research support Bruhn et al.'s (2014) finding that in a B2B brand community, the functional benefit is the most important benefit that the members can gain from belonging to the brand community. The customers of Thinking Portfolio identified a lot of functional benefits that they have received from the brand community. Experiential and symbolic benefits were identified as well, but functional benefits were by far the most numerous.

Also the three benefits listed by Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) were identified in Thinking Portfolio brand community. The benefit of having greater voice as a community than as individuals was spotted when interviewees explained that together they can find development ideas for the products and then communicate them to Thinking Portfolio. Getting information more easily is clearly fulfilled by Thinking Portfolio brand community, and finally, the brand community also provides social benefits for the members. This is visible through the interviewees' descriptions of giving a presentation and being contacted afterwards by other customers, for example.

Idea generation, product development and value co-creation are topics that researchers have connected to brand communities (Wu & Fang, 2010; Andersen, 2005; Schroeder, 2011). These play an important role in Thinking Portfolio brand community as well. Customers are eager to develop their own operations and systems and thus they are interested to do that through developing Thinking Portfolio products and tools. Through virtual brand community or Round Table discussion events, for example, Thinking Portfolio could utilize this potential further.

Coopetition is a concept that Bengtsson and Kock (2000) explained to mean the simultaneous competition and cooperation of companies. They found out that cooperation seems to take place in activities and operations that are distant from the customer. This finding is supported by the research, as for many Thinking Portfolio customers, project management and project portfolio management are not at the heart of their customer processes. Thus, it is possible to cooperate regarding these issues with companies that are considered as competitors.

5.2. Managerial implications

Especially as the study is a case study focusing on the case of Thinking Portfolio, it is useful to point out some managerial implications drawn from the research. First of all, the importance of the existence of a brand community also in B2B market has to be highlighted. Secondly, the C2C relationships inside the brand community play an extremely important role in B2B brand communities, as they are the most important incentive to belong to the brand community (Andersen, 2005). These findings relate to other B2B companies as well, however other than that this section and the managerial implications presented here are only applicable to the case of Thinking Portfolio.

Even though brand community can be important for every B2B company, for Thinking Portfolio it is extremely important. Some examples of what the brand community of Thinking Portfolio does is that it contains all the networks built around Thinking Portfolio and portfolio management that customers consider useful, it contributes to the co-creation process of the products, and it assists the sales functions of Thinking Portfolio by giving recommendations and advise for new potential customers. There are four main managerial implications that Thinking Portfolio should take into account in order to gain the most benefit from the brand community.

The first managerial implication relates to the virtual brand community or an online forum. As it was found out already in the literature review, contrary to B2C brand communities, the emergence of B2B brand communities usually requires company efforts (Andersen, 2005). Thus, Thinking Portfolio should take an active role in creating and maintaining an actual virtual brand community. This virtual brand community should be a platform where both Thinking Portfolio and the customers could share content and have a dialogue. Further research should be done on what would be the most suitable platform for this and what exactly the purpose of the brand community would be.

The second managerial implication is related to the Round Table discussion events. As the customers seem to be very interested in these events, they should be implemented. This idea is supported by the literature presented in the literature review as well. Andersen (2005) suggests that brand communities provide valuable new ideas for product development and Wu and Fang (2010) found out that especially C2C interactions in brand communities strengthen idea generation. The customers' suggestion should be taken into account and the events should have a goal that is clearly stated in order to maximize the benefit for the customers.

Even though the focus of the research is on C2C relationships of current Thinking Portfolio customers, the third managerial implication relates to new potential customers of Thinking Portfolio. As it was found out that all the interviewees have at least either chosen Thinking Portfolio because of a recommendation or recommended Thinking Portfolio themselves to another organization, it is very clear that the recommendations are an important way for Thinking Portfolio to get new customers. Because of this, Thinking Portfolio should pay attention to this activity by considering how to ensure its continuity or even increase it.

Finally, the brand community should not be seen as a separate unit, but it should be integrated into Thinking Portfolio's operations and activities. For example, the benefits that the interviewees have received from C2C interactions and relationships should be considered when planning events, communication and other activities. When planning an event, it should be considered whether it offers some of these benefits for the customers or not. Also, brand community should be made visible, not only in the form of a virtual brand community, but also through communication and marketing. That way everyone, and not only the customers that are part of it, would know about the brand community.

6. Conclusion

6.1.   Research summary

The purpose of this Thesis was to study the C2C relationships in a brand community in a B2B context, as it is an area that has not been studied widely in the existing literature. Being a case study of a company called Thinking Portfolio, the research aimed to answer what kind of C2C relationships there are in the Thinking Portfolio brand community as well as how the members of the brand community benefit from these C2C relationships. The data was collected mainly through 10 semi-structured interviews of Thinking Portfolio customers. Next the findings of the study are summarized.

First of all, it was found out that there is a brand community around Thinking Portfolio. However, the brand community may be quite loose and it does not include all Thinking Portfolio customers. Secondly, to answer the first research question, it was found out that there are two kinds of C2C relationships in Thinking Portfolio brand community: C2C relationships inside customer organizations and C2C relationships among customer organizations. In general, both of these relationships differ largely between different organizations regarding scope, quantity and mode of the interactions, and thus it is challenging to draw any conclusions and generalizations.

However, little more specifically, considering the C2C relationships inside customer organizations, the organizations are in different phases on how organized and systematic the relationships are. Face-to-face meetings are the most common channel for interaction and the most popular purposes for the communication are teaching and practical issues. When it comes to the C2C relationships among customer organizations, one-on-one relationships are the most common but there are also a few groups. Skype and face-to-face meetings are the most common communication channels and the most popular purposes for the communication are benchmarking and practical issues.

Thirdly, to answer the second research question, it was found out that C2C relationships create a lot of functional benefits, but only few experiential and symbolic benefits, which seems to be common for B2B companies (Bruhn et al., 2014). Examples of the functional benefits that the brand community members receive from the C2C relationships are concrete practical tips, solutions to problems and new information and ideas.

Fourthly, events organized by Thinking Portfolio are considered good and a great way to network. Fifthly, for the future, the customers showed interest for a virtual brand community as well as Round Table discussion events. Finally, Thinking Portfolio customers' interaction with new potential customers is an important way to get new customers.

These findings were compared to the existing literature and based on that, managerial implications were presented. Managerial implications relate to virtual brand community, Round Table discussion events, recommendations to new customers, and seeing brand community as part of other operations. The goal of this study was not to find an all-inclusive explanation of a B2B brand community or a throughout brand community strategy for Thinking Portfolio. The purpose was to explore the C2C relationships in Thinking Portfolio brand community and the benefits these relationships offer to brand community members, and this purpose was fulfilled.

6.2. Limitations and suggestions for further research

Commonly with all qualitative research, and especially with case studies, the results cannot necessarily be directly applied to other cases. Especially with brand communities, there are many characteristics of the company as well as the customer organizations, that are very special and make the brand community one of a kind. Thus, the findings of this case study should be applied to other cases only with consideration.

Another issue to consider is the limited amount of interviews. As mentioned before, there are around 100 customer organizations of Thinking Portfolio and representatives of only 10 of them were interviewed. Also, different people inside the organizations may have different opinions and views. Hence, conducting more interviews could strengthen the findings of the research or give more insights and new ideas.

As B2B brand communities is a topic that has been studied only a little, it is in general a topic that should be researched further in different contexts. Regarding the C2C relationships, themes that emerged in this research and that would deserve further investigation are word-of-mouth and value co-creation. Word-of-mouth does not necessarily happen inside the brand community, but it is something brand community members can do to recruit others to join the brand community. Value co-creation seems to be extremely important benefit of a brand community for a B2B company.

However, these topics were not covered by this research and thus they should be studied further in the future.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 – List of interviews

Name	Organization	Date of the interview	Location of the interview	Duration of the interview
Marke Kaukonen	Espoon kaupunki (City of Espoo)	2.10.2018	Espoo	31 minutes
Johanna Krappe	Turun ammattikorkeakoulu Oy (Turku University of Applied Sciences)	2.10.2018	Helsinki	30 minutes
Päivi Thuneberg	Tamro Oyj	9.10.2018	Vantaa	33 minutes
Jani Kupila	Bayer Oy	15.10.2018	Turku	46 minutes
Sari Hannila	Turun kaupunki (City of Turku)	15.10.2018	Turku	30 minutes
Merja Lamponen	Raisio Oyj	15.10.2018	Raisio	25 minutes
Taru Coles	Kemira Oyj	16.10.2018	Helsinki	28 minutes
Tiina Rinne	Suomen Kuntaliitto ry (Association of Finnish Local and Regional Authorities)	16.10.2018	Helsinki	46 minutes
Susanna Hietanen	HSY Helsingin seudun ympäristöpalvelut - kuntayhtymä (Helsinki Region Environmental Services Authority)	17.10.2018	Skype	34 minutes
Tero Laitinen	Finnair Oyj	19.10.2018	Helsinki	41 minutes

Interview outline (in Finnish)

Suhde Thinking Portfolioon
1. Mikä on tittelisi ja työnkuvasi?
2. Miten käytät Thinking Portfoliota työssäsi?
3. Kuinka kauan olet ollut tekemisissä Thinking Portfolion kanssa?
4. Miksi yrityksessäsi päädyttiin Thinking Portfolioon?
   a. Mitä tiesitte Thinking Portfoliosta etukäteen?
   b. Suositteliko joku sitä teille?
5. Miten kuvailisit suhdettasi Thinking Portfolioon?
   a. Tuote/työkalu
   b. Yritys/brändi/työntekijät

Suhde muihin käyttäjiin yrityksen sisällä
6. Kuinka monta henkilöä teillä käyttää Thinking Portfoliota?
7. Oletko muihin Thinking Portfolion käyttäjiin yhteydessä?
   a. Miten kommunikoitte? Missä kanavissa, kuinka usein, mitä sisältöä?
8. Toivoisitko Thinking Portfolion osallistuvan kommunikointiinne?

Suhde muihin asiakkaisiin
9. Oletko verkostoitunut muiden asiakkaiden kanssa Thinking Portfolion ympärillä?
   a. Kenen kaikkien? Onko jotain ryhmiä?
   b. Mistä asioista/teemoista olette jutelleet?
   c. Missä kanavissa?
   d. Oletteko keskustelleet muistakin asioista kuin Thinking Portfolioon liittyvistä asioista?
   e. Mitä hyötyjä olet saanut tästä?
   f. Oletko suositellut Thinking Portfoliota uusille käyttäjille?
10. Oletko käynyt Thinking Portfolion järjestämissä tapahtumissa (esimerkiksi Käyttäjäpäivä, Uudistuva Julkishallinto)?
    a. Mitä mieltä olet niistä?
    b. Oletko tapahtumissa verkostoitunut muiden kanssa?
    c. Oletko palannut uusiin kontakteihin tapahtuman jälkeen?
    d. Koetko hyödylliseksi tavata ihmisiä kasvotusten?
11. Oletko kuullut round table -toiminnasta? Oletko tästä kiinnostunut?
    a. Mistä aiheista/teemoista olisit kiinnostunut?
12. Haluaisitko lisää verkostoitumismahdollisuuksia?
    a. Toivoisitko Thinking Portfolion helpottavan verkostoitumista entisestään? Miten?
    b. Olisitko kiinnostunut WhatsApp-ryhmästä/Slack-kanavasta tms.?
13. Kuulutko muihin verkostoihin työsi osalta?
    a. Miten nämä toimivat?

Brändiyhteisö
14. Brändiyhteisö = jäsenten välisiin suhteisiin perustuva maantieteellisesti rajoittumaton yhteisö, joka rakentuu jonkin tietyn brändin ympärille
    a. Voidaanko Thinking Portfolion yhteydessä mielestäsi puhua brändiyhteisöstä?
    b. Koetko kuuluvasi muihin brändiyhteisöihin?

Relationship to Thinking Portfolio
1. What is your title and your job description?
2. How do you use Thinking Portfolio in your work?
3. How long have you been dealing with Thinking Portfolio?
4. Why did your organization end up in Thinking Portfolio?
    a. What did you know about Thinking Portfolio beforehand?
    b. Did anyone recommend it to you?
5. How would you describe your relationship to Thinking Portfolio?
    a. The product/tool
    b. The company/brand/employees

Relationship to other users within the organization
6. How many people use Thinking Portfolio in your organization?
7. Are you in touch with other Thinking Portfolio users?
    a. How do you communicate? In which channels, how often, what content?
8. Would you like Thinking Portfolio to participate in your communication?

Relationship to other customers
9. Have you networked with other customers around Thinking Portfolio?
    a. With whom? Are there any groups?
    b. Which issues/themes have you discussed?
    c. In which channels?
    d. Have you discussed other issues than Thinking Portfolio related issues?
    e. What benefits have you received from this?
    f. Have you recommended Thinking Portfolio for new users?
10. Have you been to events organized by Thinking Portfolio (such as the User Day, Uudistuva Julkishallinto)?
    a. What do you think of them?
    b. Have you been networking with others at the events?
    c. Have you returned to new contacts after the event?
    d. Do you consider it useful meeting people face-to-face?
11. Have you heard about round table? Are you interested in this?
    a. Which topics/themes would you be interested in?
12. Would you like to have more networking opportunities?
    a. Would you like Thinking Portfolio to facilitate networking even further? How?
    b. Would you be interested in WhatsApp/Slack channel?
13. Are you a part of other networks related to your work?
    a. How do these work?

Brand community
14. Brand community = a non-geographically bound community that is based on a structured set of social relations among the members and builds around a particular brand
    a. Can we talk about brand community related to Thinking Portfolio?
    b. Do you feel that you belong to other brand communities?