

Brands & UGC, simple as 1,2,3?

What factors influence the creation of brand related user-generated content (UGC) and how can users best be invited to get active?

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“The best way to predict the future is to create it”

Peter F. Drucker

Abstract

The advent of the web 2.0 has offered brands new opportunities to strategize the enhancement of the brand reputation. In recent years, brands have started to engage users through online platforms and invite them to create content for reputational benefits. The interest in user-generated content for reputational benefits has both in society and academic realm increased and as many aspects about these user practices are still unknown, this research was interested in the process of creation and its implications.

By conducting 11 semi structured in-depth interviews, this study has taken a user perspective and brings to light the factors that influence the creation of brand related user-generated content. Moreover, it illuminates the challenges and frictions users come across in the process of creating content in relation to brands. With this information this study advises brands on what best practices to incorporate in the communication strategy. The research shows that factors influencing participation are mostly related to practices of identity construction such as affiliation with the lifestyle the brand stands for, or taking an influencer role in respect to brands. The challenges have to do with a lack of freedom in creation, a lack of perceived exclusivity in collaborations and a lack of identification with brands. Several paradoxes were found as users want to use brands for their online identity construction, but at the same time do not want to be constrained by rules the brand set for them. Moreover, very explicit attempts to invite for content creation and interaction are treated with scepticism, as users find it clear that brands are doing this inviting and interacting for marketing and branding purposes.

Consequently this study advocates that brands focus on inducing the perceived sense of exclusivity, honesty, freedom, and creativity to ensure content creation and positive experiences for users to enhance the brand reputation.

Keywords: brand identification, brand reputation, branding, identity construction, user-generated content

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1. Introduction

The development of the web 2.0 from both a technical as well as a social perspective has enabled two-way communication between individuals and among individuals and organizations. Not only can individuals communicate with each other via email, social media and online call services like Skype, the communication between companies and consumers has drastically changed as well (Krishnamurthy & Kucuk, 2007).

More information than ever is available at consumers' fingertips about companies and their products and people are becoming more vocal in expressing their ideas on what to think, like or buy (Krishnamurthy & Kucuk, 2007). Consumers can easily reach out online to big multinationals, complain about product experiences, and advise their peers and non-peers on what to buy through electronic word of mouth (Keller, 2007). Many say the power balance between consumers and companies has shifted as the user-generated content shared by users online has the potential to reach large audiences and affect corporations' reputation, making the web a potentially harmful medium for these corporations (Dickinson, Kerr, Mortimer, & Waller, 2012; Kucuk, 2008)

Even though the risks are high, opportunities arise as well. As consumers are making more and more use of the web, bigger marketing budgets are being spent here (Gartner, 2014). Companies are trying to jump on the bandwagon of the user-generated content that is created on the web and ask themselves how these web 2.0 practices of content production, participation with existing content, and the community building around this production can be leveraged from (Bughin, 2007). Especially as Millennials, or generation Y, is a consumer group very aware and critical of advertising, new ways of brand advocacy are explored to target this audience (Keller, 2007; Smith, 2011). Therefore it is relevant to study what motivates users to create content in relation to brands, what challenges they encounter in their practices, and how these can be prevented by brands in their dealing with user-generated content. This information can subsequently be used by brands to create effective campaigns and evoke fulfilling practices for users that ultimately enhance the brand reputation (Arnould, Muniz, & Schau, 2009).

Some brands understand quite well the possibilities of user-generated content and actively invite users to engage by posting photos, writing blogs or contributing in

discussions online. It seems as though people are more than willing to create this content for branding purposes, which can also be referred to as user-generated branding or consumer generated content (Arnhold & Burmann, 2008; Muniz & Schau, 2011). Interesting questions arise, like why would people want to contribute content for a brand, and how does a community around this content arise?

Furthermore, does it differ what kind of brand is inviting users to participate? Are lifestyle and fashion brands more fitting for these kinds of practices than other companies or does this not matter? Scholars have paid extensive attention to what the personal motivations for brand related participation and content production are, but have mostly left out if more general factors such as the type of brand or the type of invitation influences participation in creation (Hess, Rohrmeier, & Stockl, 2008; Shao, 2009). How these users that actively participate and create content ideally want to be approached by brands to perform these practices is interesting to study, as in this manner a user perspective is taken while looking at best practices for brands. Insights on this could be of great use as user-generated content projects and campaigns could be designed in such a way to successfully attract contributors.

Moreover, it is relevant to study how these practices influence the perceived reputation of the brand in the eyes of these participating users. It is studied that Millennials are drawn towards online word of mouth communication for product and brand recommendations (Keller, 2007). However, how the actual process of content production influences the perceived reputation of the brand has not been studied yet. In order to create a thorough understanding of the user practices in regards to content creation in relation to brands, the formulated research questions for this thesis are as follows:

RQ1: What are the factors that influence people's participation in brand related user-generated content?

RQ2: what are challenges users encounter in the process of creating brand related user-generated content?

RQ3: How can companies successfully invite users to create content for reputational benefits?

A very important part of brand related user-generated content is the environment in which it is created. It is specifically in online brand communities, such as forums and blogs where co-creation and collaboration amongst users takes place and value is created due to the interpersonal communication (Arnould, Muniz, & Schau, 2009). So far the emphasis of study has been on either personal accounts on the experiences within one such a community, or case studies of one community (Koenig, McAlexander, & Schouten, 2002). Therefore, focussing on participation across different brand communities and derive patterns from this seems a relevant scope to further build upon this literature.

It is a relatively new development that companies are giving away control for users to tell their stories about the brand, and actively stimulate this. At the same time, brands try to appropriate this content and lead the way content is produced (Van Dijck, 2013). Therefore it might be hard to speak of 'giving up control' completely. This paradox or tension between practices needs to be kept in mind while studying these developments, as decisions made regarding brand related user-generated content would always be driven by arguments from both sides of the spectrum. Studying this tension will teach us about the changing relationships between companies and consumers and will hopefully illuminate the frictions within this relationship.

From a scientific point of view studying this topic could teach us about the future of marketing and branding and the changing interrelations within this field of communication. From a business perspective, the insights gained in this research can help brands to successfully design campaigns using user-generated content and long term PR strategies. By keeping to a user perspective, information can be gathered on both the reasons behind behaviour, the frictions within the relationship between users and brands as well as the appropriate and most successful ways to invite users to contribute.

2. Literature review

In this literature review the multiple dimensions of the study will be put within an academic framework. First of all, the focus will be on what user-generated content is, and how it relates to branding purposes. Secondly, the strategic benefits for companies to engage customers by inviting them to create user-generated content will be elaborated on. Lastly, the factors influencing participation and creation of user-generated content will be discussed, ranging from personal motivations to more social reasons.

2.1. User-Generated Content

User-generated content is a term that caught on with the rise of the web 2.0 as described by O'reilly (2007). The Organization of Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) created a thorough definition of user created content, which can be regarded as the same concept: "i) content made publicly available over the Internet, ii) which reflects a "certain amount of creative effort", and iii) which is "created outside of professional routines and practices" (OECD, 2006, p. 4).

O'reilly and Batelle (2009) emphasize that the value of the web is facilitating co-creation by communities of users. Web 2.0 is all about harnessing these bundles of information that all together can be called collective intelligence. Examples of typical web 2.0 companies thriving on user-generated content are Youtube, Facebook, the Dutch "Marktplaats" and Blogger. On these aforementioned platforms, people can post photos and videos, publish their diaries, chat with other users online and create communities around certain topics. This content influences traditional media as it gives room to different and new standpoints than those expressed by for example television and newspapers (Leung, 2009).

Over the years many different names for contributors on the web have been coined. The term 'produser' emphasizes the different roles a person can take on online, both using and producing content or information (Bruns, 2008). Leadbeater and Miller (2004) have emphasized the blurring between professionalism and amateurism in user-generated content on the web with the term 'pro-am', opposing the idea that user-generated content is always created outside of professional practices (OECD, 2006). However in this study it will be researched whether motivations for creating content are also strictly amateurish or can span professional goals and motivations.

The aforementioned scholars, and with them many others, sketch a very positive image of the powers gained by users in creating meaning, content and agency online, as these users actively demand and use their right to participate in society and culture (Bruns, 2007; Jenkins, 2006; Miller & Leadbeater, 2004). There are also less optimistic or at least more nuanced views on the empowerment through content creation. Van Dijck (2009) acknowledges that indeed big possibilities have risen for consumers to speak up and express their content and discontent with other entities. However, the image of the ever producing and vocal user should be nuanced according to her. Most important for this paper are both the aspects of appropriation and the widespread optimistic ideas about participation (Van Dijck, 2009).

Firstly, even though active users create content on the web, the big corporations that invite and facilitate users to create this content mostly leverage from these activities (Van Dijck, 2009). The idea that by creating content one gains more power in the relation to corporations and other entities from this perspective does not hold much ground, and can be related to the tension described in the introduction.

Secondly, not all web users are active participators and producers on the web, as over 80 per cent of users are only passive recipients of content (Van Dijck, 2009). Moreover, the 1 per cent rule goes even further by suggesting that for every person that posts or produces something on the web, 9 people will engage with it, and 90 others will only 'lurk' (Arthur, 2006). However, some say this rate is now out-dated and more people are actively participating nowadays (Goodier, 2012). Additionally, small groups of people could turn out to be the principal values within a community, and over time engage others to participate as well (McConnel, 2006).

The preceding discussion is relevant for this study as it places in perspective the online activities of users and shows that not everybody is actively participating all the time. However, many are nowadays consuming user-generated content online and engage with existing user-generated content. By interviewing users that are active producers on the web the relevancy for this study is ensured, as these users shape the content available online and thereby serve as pioneers and tastemakers for the rest of us.

2.2 User-generated content in relation to brands; consumer-generated content and user-generated branding

User-generated content can be created and used for all sorts of purposes. Content that is shared through a platform like Facebook for example is often created in the practice of maintaining social ties and constructing the online identity (Boyd & Donath, 2004; Grasmuck, Martin, & Zhao, 2008). Brands however, are trying to jump on the bandwagon as well by strategically adapting to user-generated content and even actively inviting users to create such content (Arnhold & Burmann, 2008).

The web 2.0 has caused three effects: a shift in locus of activity from the desktop to the web, a shift in locus of value production from the firm to the consumer, and a shift in the locus of power away from the firm to the consumer (Berthon, Pitt, Plangger, & Shapiro, 2012). These developments put much emphasis on the creative consumers as the dynamos of the current new media industry, and their activities are being considered very valuable from a marketers' perspective (Berthon et al., 2012). Consumers can be involved online in discussions on forums, brand related conversations on Twitter, and the production of brand related videos (Berthon, Campbell, Parent, & Pitt, 2011). These activities can possibly result in positive electronic word of mouth (Chowdury, Jansen, Sobel, & Zhang, 2009).

This brand related user-generated content is sometimes called consumer generated content to explicitly state the users role as a consumer (Muniz & Schau, 2011). Others like to call it "user-generated branding", which emphasizes more the appropriation of the created content by companies (Arnhold & Burmann, 2008). User-generated branding can be defined as "The strategic and operative management of brand related user-generated content (UGC) to achieve brand goals" (Arnhold & Burmann, 2008, p. 66). For this study, the emphasis will be on the 'user' as this is the primary role a person takes on online. Moreover, brand related user-generated content or user-generated content in relation to brands will be used to refer to the activities studied here, as content is not always necessarily made by users for branding purposes or appropriated as such by brands itself.

Arnhold and Burmann (2008) differentiate between two types of brand related user-generated content, namely non-sponsored and sponsored user-generated content. Non-sponsored user-generated content means content that is created without the interference of the brand, so consisting of people spontaneously writing reviews on products, exclaiming their love for a certain brand in a blog post or post a photo on Instagram while wearing certain brand clothes. Sponsored user-generated content means the brand has actively invited its consumer fan base to create brand related

content (Arnhold, 2010). Levis for example asks its fans to post photos wearing levis clothes on social media, using the hash tag #liveinlevis, and HEMA, the Dutch warehouse has built a blogging platform on which passionate users can write posts on how they use HEMA products in their daily life.

It should be noted that this differentiation between sponsored and non-sponsored user-generated content relates back to the aforementioned tension or paradox on controlling versus letting go of the brand story. By actively encouraging users to create content of some sort, the brand seems to be giving away control. However, the brand is strategically pushing users towards a specific direction of content creation and is thereby trying to lead the way, which can be considered trying to keep control (Van Dijck, 2009; Miller, 2015). This will be more elaborated on in the next part on the strategic benefits of user-generated content and is relevant for this study as it shows the underlying factors that determine how users are invited and motivated to generate content. For this study the interest lies mainly with sponsored user-generated content, as I will look at how companies can improve the way they actively and successfully invite users to create content to finally enhance the reputation of the brand. However, the position of users towards non-sponsored user-generated content will be studied as well, as it could be that users feel most appealed to create content for brands when they are not explicitly invited to do so.

2.3. Strategic benefits for brands to engage users via user-generated content

So far it has been studied what user-generated content is and how it relates to brands. A question that has not been asked yet is why companies are engaging and inviting customers to create brand related content.

First of all, to address this question it will be beneficial to clarify the term branding, as this is one of those terms that seems to be very clear at first sight, but of which the meaning is ambiguous and not univocal (Balmer, 2001). Keller and Lehmann (2006) describe branding as having emerged as a priority practice of management that has to do with the growing realization that a brand and its reputation are one of the most valuable intangible assets a firm has. Branding can be described to be a pan-company activity that not only entails communication and marketing, but also overall strategy and direction (Chernatony & Schultz, 2002). Bickerton and Knox (2003) refer to the role of branding and brand management as “to create differentiation and preference for a product or service in the mind of the consumer” (p. 3). The difference between

product branding and corporate branding according to them is that corporate branding covers the whole organization and not just a specific product (Bickerton & Knox, 2003).

When specifically looking at the influence of the web 2.0 on practices of branding, it becomes clear that relations and roles have changed. Due to the possibilities of the web and the empowerment of users brand managers are now merely brand hosts instead of brand guardians, as consumers are producing their own brand related content online (Christodoulides, 2009). More extremely, in the web era command and control branding like in the pre Internet era do not fit anymore (Christodoulides, 2009). Christodoulides (2009) emphasizes that a brand managers' function nowadays is to facilitate communication between customers and between brands and customers, being a facilitator of user-generated content so to speak (Arnhold & Burmann, 2008). This relates again to the paradox between keeping control and admitting customers to tell their stories. Deriving from these different theories and definitions of branding, branding can be understood to be the marketing of a complete brand in order to create differentiation and a competitive advantage for the brand as a whole. One way to do this is by incorporating user-generated content in the brand strategy (Greve, 2014).

This competitive advantage and differentiation is very closely related to the brand reputation. The corporate reputation consists of two components: the brand image and the brand identity (Fombrun & van Riel, 1997). The brand reputation can be regarded a collective representation of how the outside world perceives a company or brand and how the employees and managers perceive the company (Fombrun & van Riel, 1997). For this study, the focus is on the 'outsider' perspective of the company, thus the company image, as a customers' perspective is taken. However, even though the explanation given by Fombrun and van Riel (1997) has been widely adopted, corporate reputation is still an ambiguous concept and is often used interchangeably with identity and image (Wartick, 2002). Therefore, for this study I will refer to reputation as the outside image of a brand that can be measured from a user perspective. Studying the development and different clusters of definitions of corporate reputation it becomes clear that corporate reputation in the end is used as 'reputation capital', which can be regarded an economic asset (Barnett, Jermier, & Lafferty, 2004). Moreover, studies have shown that a favourable reputation gives companies a competitive advantage (Balmer, 2001).

It is interesting to see how this field of corporate communication and reputation has changed due to emerging technologies. Companies' reputations are becoming

increasingly vulnerable while control over the reputation is decreasing rapidly (Argenti & Barnes, 2009). At the same time, the promises of interactivity can be regarded an opportunity for current day businesses. If companies actively engage their customers online and create communities, this can create significant competitive advantages (Argenti & Barnes, 2009). The increasing transparency in current day business models by engaging customers strongly relates to this (Avery & Fournier, 2010). Due to new media, it is easier to engage customers in the value creation of a brand, and this engagement positively influences the customer loyalty (Greve, 2014). Inviting for user-generated content can be regarded such a form of engagement.

As several scholars argue, one way to enhance brand reputation is to engage users to create content (Argenti & Barnes, 2009; Greve, 2014). First of all, communities are built around user-generated content to enable communication between users. Moreover, users can easily communicate with brands through these platforms as well. These platforms are virtual communities, which are groups of people with a common interest that interact regularly in an organized way over the Internet (Arinze, Geven, & Ridings, 2002). For this study, I am not only regarding brand owned pages as possible communities where brand related user-generated content is created. Communities can also form around hash tags on Twitter or Instagram, and around certain topics on Youtube.

In web communities devoted to user-generated content, identity-, meaning-, and status related concerns exist for participants, making the experience real and valuable (Arnould, Muniz, & Schau, 2009) Moreover, studies show that value is extracted from communal and not individual practices of multiple kinds, meaning consumer collectives are the sites of vast amounts of created value (Arnould et al., 2009). These communal aspects are beneficial as key practices for brands, as they increase the on going use and purchase of products. People participating actively in brand communities may experience a higher sense of loyalty towards the brand (Koh & Kim, 2004). Additionally, these communities can help to identify and formulate future goals and points of improvement for the corporation, as consumers are speaking their mind about the brand (Kozinets, 2002). Finally, brand communities can influence the behaviour of consumers (Casalo, Flavian, & Guinaliu, 2007). Both the people participating in the community and the brand itself can inform and influence other users about product experiences.

The idea that users influence each other in communities relates to the concept of electronic word of mouth communication (Chowdury et al., 2009). Millennials, or generation Y, is the generation that grew up with the Internet and is born between 1982 and 1994 (Jayson, 2010; Zemke, 2001). This generation is highly influenced by word of mouth recommendations (Keller, 2007). Millennials use the web and social media extensively, and it empowers them to be more creative and active in the construction of their perception of product and brands (Smith, 2011). Furthermore, Millennials do not like intrusive advertising such as pop ups but do like to engage in personalized and word of mouth communication. They often listen to peers to determine what products to buy or what brands to like, and find electronic word of mouth communication to be more reliable than traditional advertising (Keller, 2007). Millennials are drawn to competitive pricing, gifts, coupons, personalization and interactive webpages (Smith, 2011). Interesting and relevant here is the emphasis on both the idea of personalisation and interactivity, which can be related to the aforementioned word of mouth communication and more generally to user-generated content.

Millennials spend a lot more time with user-generated content than other generations, they remember user-generated content better than other types of content, and rate this type of content to be 20 per cent more influential in purchase decisions than any other type of media (Knoblauch, 2014). The process seems to work both ways, as Millennials are motivated to creatively generate content and at the same time are highly influenced by word of mouth content created by peers. The fact that these youngsters are spending a lot of time with user-generated content is clear, but questions on why this is the case, what challenges they encounter while doing so and how these practices change their perception of brands is something that has not been studied much yet and is very relevant as user-generated content is so important for this age group. The interviewees of this study can all be regarded Millennials, so the aforementioned questions are relevant to keep in mind while analysing the results.

2.4. Factors influencing participation

For this subpart, the term 'factors' is chosen to take a more general approach than just personal motivations, as the willingness to participate can also be influenced by the existing relationship with the brand or more general cultural conventions in society or the specific industry one is present in.

First of all, to create a framework with which to analyse what motivations for certain behaviour are, the uses and gratifications approach is used. This is a user-centric perspective that asks 'why do people use specific media and what do they use them for'? The theory of uses and gratifications assumes that people are not passive, but have power over their own media consumption and are able to formulate the motivations they have themselves (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1976). Katz et al. (1976) developed 35 needs that motivate people when they use media. These 35 needs are again categorized in five groups: cognitive needs, affective needs, personal integrative needs, social integrative needs, and tension release needs. These 35 needs can again be categorized in four comprehensible groups: information, personal identity, integration, and social interaction (McQuail, 1983). Shao (2009) has studied the underlying motivations, wants, and needs for user-generated content with these last mentioned categories introduced by McQuail (1983). She focussed on different types of dealing with user generating content: consuming, participating, and producing. As this study is focused on the production of user-generated content, the consumption part is not discussed here.

Participating in user-generated content consists of user-to-content interactions and user-to-user interactions, which take place when users like or rate existing content or have interpersonal interaction (Shao, 2009). Participation serves as indirect and direct fulfilment of the need for social interaction (Shao, 2009). This aspect of participation is important to this study, as people's participation contributes to the formation and maintenance of online communities, which arise when interpersonal communication is carried out with sufficient human feeling (Rheingold, 1993).

Shao (2009) assumes humans to be self-interested, and thus her article focuses on self-expression and self-actualization to be the motivations for the creation of content, which to this study is the most important practice to research. Self-expression and self-actualization can together be referred to as identity construction. Self-expression relates to the expression of identity and individuality. Through activities such as blogging, video making and photography, people can show their real or true self to others. Especially for those constrained in real life by the options they have this online self-expression can help in the identity construction (Shao, 2009). An example of this could be teenagers that are not allowed to do or wear certain things but can actively construct their identity online. Also, self-expression can be seen as the so said management of how others perceive them. As one can actively leave out certain

information and present other information, impression management is practiced (Trammell & Keshelashvili, 2005).

Additionally, self-actualization can be described as the working on or developing of the identity (Trepte, 2005). By contributing to online platforms with user-generated content, people get the feeling they are making a difference and mean something to the world (Shao, 2009). For a lot of teens, a main motivation to post content on social network sites like MySpace is to get discovered and become famous, which can be regarded as a more extreme form of the need for self-actualization (Bughin, 2007). It is interesting to see whether this impression management and self-actualization is practiced in the same way with brand related user-generated content, and what challenges users encounter in these practices.

The relationship between motivations and user-generated content can also be researched quantitatively (Bright, Daugherty, & Eastin, 2008). In doing this, a positive significant relation for user-generated content and ego defensive and social functions was found (Bright et al., 2008). The ego defensive function relates to minimizing self-doubt and feeling a sense of community, while the social function can be explained as a way of connecting with others and feeling important (Bright et al., 2008).

These studies done by Shao (2009) and Bright et al. (2008) are very helpful as they categorize different motivations for the creation and interaction with user-generated content. However, there is no attention for brand related user-generated content. Berthon et al. (2011) point out three basic motivations for the creation of user-generated advertising, which can be related to brand related user-generated content but is not exactly the same. User-generated advertising, as the name suggests, refers to generating fake or self-made ads, and is not the creation of content that relates to brands in general. However, the motivations can be of use in comparing them to the motivations for user-generated content in relation to brands. Berthon et al. (2011) state there are three motivations: intrinsic enjoyment, self-promotion, and perception change. Intrinsic enjoyment can be described as creating for the sake of creating and gaining playful joy from the process of it (Berthon et al., 2011). Self-promotion as a motivation comes down to trying to attract attention for a portfolio for admissions or from a potential employer. Lastly, perception changes can be explained as the wish to alter a message for a specific target audience. In this case an ad, or the branding aspect, is only used as a means to get a message through (Berthon et al., 2011).

By using economic theory as well, six different motivations for the creation and consumption of consumer-generated content were found through an online questionnaire (Hess et al., 2008). Not only economic incentives were found to be the present motivations. Furthermore personal documentation, enjoyment, passing time, information dissemination, and contacts were identified, very similar to the self-expression and self-actualization motivations found by Shao (Hess et al., 2008; Shao, 2009).

The former categorizations and frameworks on uses and gratifications, and more specifically the motivations for user-generated content can help in offering grips in addressing these questions. However, some of these questions relate to levels of determining factors for participation that might not only deal with very personal motivations, but more general factors that influence participation. The evolutionary form of the term the willingness to pay; willingness to participate could offer insights on more general factors influencing participation (Bal, Parent, & Plangger, 2011). There are six distinct interrelated components that together determine and sustain user engagement, of which the first two are the company and the content it pushes (Bal et al., 2011). The company pushes content, which can be a brand owned page, a social media page or a specific post on an aforementioned medium, and serves as a catalyst for engagement and participation (Bal et al., 2011). The content is then pushed over a metaphorical wall of 'control' after which the company cedes control of the content and the brand. Finally, the community and the consumers take the pushed content and alter it by practices of viewing, forwarding, commenting, creating, moderating, and arbitrating, which brings us to the last component of the conversation (Bal et al., 2011). In this model, the emphasis does not only lie with personal motivations on the side of the community and the consumer, but also with the brand and the content it pushes, as this can also determine whether people are willing to participate (Ball et al., 2011).

Related to the aforementioned concept of willingness to participate, is the idea that motivations can be differentiated into a personal motivations segment within the context of uses and gratifications theory, and an organizational commitments segment (Lampe, Ozkaya, Velasquez, & Wash, 2010). Theories in the organizational commitments segment suggest that the more affinity a user feels with a certain organization, the more this user is likely to participate in activities that relate to the organization (Lampe et al., 2010). This affinity can be reached through different phenomena. For example, the already existing satisfaction with the online community before participating is very

important in deciding whether to participate. This already existing satisfaction strongly relates to the sense of belonging users have with the community and the brand in general (Lampe et al., 2010). Normative commitment refers to internalized pressure to behave in a certain way within online communities to meet the organizations' interests and goals, which can again positively influence the participation within a brand community (Lampe et al., 2010).

These last two discussed theories that have been tested in actual brand communities are very relevant for this study. They point out that not only personal motivations are important in deciding whether to participate within content creation, but also organizational commitments, which can be regarded as more social relational motivations, play a crucial role (Bal et al., 2011; Lampe et al., 2010). However, they are either very conceptual or focussed on a very small number of brand communities and do not take into account that behaviour might differ between communities. Also, on social media there might be less of a perceived sense of an explicit brand community, which could influence the findings as well.

When combining all these different insights on motivations for the creation of user-generated content, some of which are specifically focussed on brand related user-generated content, it becomes clear that none of the academics have addressed whether the motivations change due to what kind of brand invites users to create content, as certain brands might be addressing a specific motivation such as self-expression. Furthermore, are there specific brands that are not suitable for employing strategies related to user-generated content? Also, how do the types of invitations or campaigns that brands use to get people active influence the participation? Moreover, when users have decided to create content in relation to brands, what challenges are they encountering in the process of creation? And how can brands prevent these challenges from occurring? This research addresses this gap in the literature and adds to the academic realm on this topic by interviewing people that in different ways contribute and create brand related user-generated content on both social media and brand owned platforms. In this review it has been assessed that the existing relationships with the brand and within the community play a role in the motivations to participate, but how this actually differs across types of brands and types of invitations is still unknown. Also, once users have made the choice to create content, the process of creation itself is understudied. What factors influence the success and fulfilment of creation and what are things that can be improved in the process? Seeing a gap in literature exists in this

respect, the research questions study factors influencing participation, challenges in the process of creation, and the formulating of best practices for brands to employ user-generated content to enhance the brand reputation.

3. Methodology

This chapter provides a detailed description of the measures that have been used to answer the research questions. It states the method that has been used, as well as detailed information on the sample and the sampling technique. Moreover, the operationalization and the analysis of data are discussed.

For this study, qualitative measures are used to answer the research questions. To make the research manageable the choice has been made to break it up in three parts than can separately be addressed by conducting in depth interviews. Below the research questions are stated.

RQ1: What are the factors that influence people's participation in brand related user-generated content?

RQ2: what are challenges users encounter in the process of creating brand related user-generated content?

RQ3: How can companies successfully invite users to create content for reputational benefits?

3.1 Choice of method

As all three research questions are asking about the 'how' and 'why' behind practices and phenomena, qualitative methods seem to be in place. The interest lies very much with *what* motivates and influences users, *how* the process of creating content goes about, and *how* users like to be invited by brands. In depth conversations in the form of interviews seem to be the most fitted method to answer the research questions (Patton, 2005).

Doing in depth interviews has been chosen as a method because the emphasis in this study is on meaning rather than measurement, making it an interpretative study. The strength of interviews according to Patton (2005) is that it can make explicit the source of specific behaviour and motivations for this behaviour, which is exactly what will be studied here. Moreover, doing in depth interviews gives room to the multiple realities that are experienced by the participants (Suter, 2012). In the interviews participants can explain how they perceive and interpret their own behaviour, their feelings, and their knowledge, which can uncover the underlying meaning behind

practices (Mason, 2002). By going in depth with each participant, and interview them about their content creation in relation to brands, and how these practices influence their thoughts on brands, the factors influencing behaviour are revealed and are critically reflected on. The style of interviewing has been semi structured. Although questions were formulated on forehand, there was room for participants to explore the aspects in their user-generated content practices that they found to be important. In this way, the conversation unfolded in a natural manner, making the atmosphere relaxed and open for participants to say what they want (Longhurst, 2003). All the interviews have been conducted face to face in real life, to make sure that non-verbal communication could be analysed as well.

3.2 Unit of Analysis

The in depth interviews are conducted with Millennials, people born between 1982 and 1994, who have ever participated in the creation of user-generated content in relation to brands. One participant was a couple of years older, but regards herself as having 'online DNA', which fits the criteria of a millennial well. I have specifically chosen for Millennials as many scholars argue they are the most critical generation that is very wary of advertising (Smith, 2011). Therefore, it is specifically interesting and relevant to see what the motivations are for Millennials to participate in brand related user-generated content, what challenges they face, and how they can best be invited to create user-generated content in relation to brands. As they are the most critical audience to target, knowing what attracts them is very valuable information.

3.3 Sampling

The sample consists of 11 interviewees, of which 8 were female and 3 were male. The study relied on homogenous sampling, which focuses on finding participants with specific communal grounds (Patton, 2005).

First of all, participants have been recruited through online platforms where user-generated content is created for brands. One participant was recruited through the HEMA blog. Additionally, as explained in the literature review communities can also arise around content or hash tags. Four participants were recruited using specific brand initiated hash tags such as #liveinlevis, #hema, and #nike and commenting on photos and requesting email contact. The retail, fashion and the sports and athletic industry are

covered to have diversity in the fields of interests of participants. To ensure clarity, an example of a message that was posted in the comment section on Instagram to recruit participants is shown below:

“ Hi Cool photo, I’m Frida Boeke, and I’m currently writing my master thesis on user-generated content in relation to brands. This development to me is a very interesting one and I’m very excited to talk to people that can tell me more about this. Looking at your profile, you might be an expert on the subject. Would you be willing to sit down with me and discuss these practices? You will be helping me a lot with doing my research and you’re helping science in general to understand the rapid changes on the web in relation to user-generated content! Hope to hear from you and kind regards, Frida”

Furthermore, one participant was recruited through a mutual acquaintance. Three participants were recruited through my own network and social media use, as they create user-generated content in relation to brands often. Two people were recruited through a snowball effect, as they were friends or acquaintances of one respondent from my own network and of one respondent who was recruited through Instagram. Via Instagram and the HEMA blog, a lot more possible interviewees were approached but they either did not reply or backed out later in the process. In the end, there were 15 possible participants but due to time constraints the interviews with possible participants that lived more than two hours of traveling away were cancelled. However, seeing that the 11 interviews resulted in 170 pages of interview transcripts and several patterns were found in the results, it can be stated that a point of saturation was reached.

Even though I did not have any incentives to offer possible participants, people were willing to participate in this research. Seeing that they are passionate about their online activities, they were happy to talk about this topic. Moreover, people from my own network probably had social incentives for contributing, as they did me a favour.

All interviews were conducted with Dutch people in Dutch, and later translated to English. Below a table is added to give information on participants in one clear overview. Note that some names are altered as participants wanted to stay anonymous. 9 interviews lasted for about 50 minutes, with two interviews taking more than an hour and one interview about 40 minutes. All interviews were held over a period of time of 30 days and all participants signed consent forms that stated they agreed with being

audiotaped and the retrieved data being used for academic research purposes. All interviews were held face-to-face in casual settings, such as the library or my home.

Name	Age	Occupation	User-generated content interest	Primary reason for posting brand related content
Alicia	26	Personal trainer and health coach	Health, fitness, and Lifestyle blogger and Instagrammer	Professional purposes and brand identification
Ating	24	Health sciences bachelors student	Fashion and Denim Instagrammer	Brand identification
Britt	19	'gap year' between high school and university, and fashion blogger	Fashion blogger and Instagrammer	Influencer role, brand identification, and rewards from collaborations
Cindy	21	Arts and design student	Sustainability blogger on HEMA platform	Brand identification and influencer role
Florian	23	Fashion student AMFI	Fashion and lifestyle Instagrammer	Brand identification, possible rewards, and professional purposes
Iman	24	Freelance art director	Lifestyle and fashion Instagrammer	Brand identification, professional purposes, and possible rewards
Mayari	24	Fitness instructor	Sneakers Denim and Fashion	Brand identification, professional purposes
Sophie	28	Brand manager Influencer Marketing Agency	Fashion and Lifestyle Instagrammer	Brand identification and professional purposes
Teun	29	Freelance event manager, copy writer, and coach	Lifestyle Instagrammer	Professional purposes and brand identification
Vera	34	Food blogger/stay at home mom	Food blogger and Instagrammer	Influencer role
Yasemin	24	Newly graduated	Beauty Instagrammer	Brand identification

Table 3.1 Participants information

3.4 Operationalization

To study which are factors that influence participation, what challenges users come across and the way brands should ideally invite users to create content a funnel strategy has been used. Again, the interviews were done semi structured, meaning there was a

structure but there was room for participants to deviate (Longhurst, 2003). To break the ice a little at the beginning, participants were asked to talk about who they are, what they do and what their hobbies are. After that the general online activities of interviewees were discussed, relating to what online media they use often. Then they were asked about their content creation, and content creation in relation to brands. After asking about their activities, the reasons why they participate in this behaviour in relation to brands were discussed. Then more explicitly I talked with the interviewees about the personal, the interpersonal, and cultural reasons for which they create content in relation to brands. To add a layer of reflectivity that could help in seeing if participants are aware of the wider implications of their practices, I asked them about what they think is the use of inviting for brand related user-generated content. After that the ways in which participants like to get invited to create content were discussed, together with the rewards they would like to get for their creation. In this, a lot of real life examples came up in which participants talked about what they like and what they do not like. In doing this, challenges and frictions came to light that were discussed too. Lastly, the influence of brand related user-generated content on the reputation of brands was discussed. The strategy was to ask participants for as many real life examples of experiences with the creation of brand related content to gain a broad understanding from which challenges as well as best practices could be abstracted. The interview guide that was used during the interviews can be found in the appendix.

To keep the interview open and not prime the participants I did not come up with possible answers or factors at first, but asked open questions. Rook et al. (2007) suggest the nondirective interviewing approach to avoid framing the topic too much for participants in the beginning. Later in the discussion of a topic, I did frame the behaviour and answers more by giving participants specific options that have resulted from previous research that the interviewee can then further elaborate on, suggesting a more directive approach (Rook et al., 2007). The handles used in the offering of influencing factors were those of the uses and gratifications theory as mentioned by different scholars such as Shao (2009), Hess et al. (2008), and Berthon et al. (2011) and also the approaches that pay attention to organizational commitments (Bal et al., 2011; Lampe et al., 2010). To measure the second research question on what challenges users come across in the process of creating brand related user-generated content a very practical approach with no direct theoretical framework was chosen, mainly because there is a gap in literature on this specific topic. For the third research question participants were

asked to sketch a campaign or collaboration they would participate in, for which they used examples of existing campaigns and collaborations and used their experiences to come up with new ideas. This aspect of the interview ended up being a sort of brainstorm, in which my role was to stimulate participants to come up with ideas. As participants in general came up with many examples, it was not necessary to take a more directive approach in this respect (Rook et al., 2007).

3.5 Data analysis

To analyse the data a content analysis was conducted. More specifically, an inductive theme analysis as described by Owen (1984) was used to interpret the data gathered from the interviews. An inductive method is chosen, as the emphasis was on finding patterns in the behaviour and statements of the participants.

Owen (1984) states three criteria for a theme or pattern to be present within a sample: recurrence, repetition, and forcefulness. Recurrence refers to the recurrence of a specific meaning, but expressed in different wordings in different parts of a report. This could be when more participants state the same motivations for behaviour in different words (Owen, 1984). Secondly, repetition is described as the recurrence of sentences, phrases, and keywords. This criterion can be seen as an extension of criterion one as it is about explicit repetition of words, instead of the recurrence of meaning that criterion one is about (Owen, 1984). The last criterion, forcefulness, refers to the form in which participants communicate. This could be vocal inflection, volume, dramatic pauses, and non-verbal communication (Owen, 1984). Using these three criteria, the transcripts of the interviews were researched for patterns in the behaviour and viewpoints of participants.

In order to identify themes using the three criteria of Owen, all interviews were first read multiple times to gain a general and thorough understanding of the data. Then, blocks of data that held a single theme within interviews were marked, for example blocks that dealt with a certain experience or with the explanation of a motivation. These blocks of data were then linked to each other by grouping them together on the basis of their overarching theme (Boyatzis, 1998). Finally, the criteria mentioned above were used to analyse the blocks of data, and see if there was recurrence, repetition or forcefulness. The patterns that occurred in the analysis make up the results section. Furthermore, these patterns have been compared to existing literature on both

motivations for creating user-generated content in relation to brands and brand reputation that have been discussed in the literature review. In this manner, the findings are put within a theoretical framework.

4. Results

In this chapter the findings resulting from the conducted in depth interviews are discussed. In total eleven persons were interviewed extensively about their online practices in regards to brand related user-generated content. The three research questions will be used to structure this section and to provide a clear overview of the material. Firstly, the factors influencing participant's content creation in relation to brands will be discussed. Secondly, the challenges users come across in the process of creating user-generated content in relation to brands will be elaborated on. Finally, the ways in which companies can successfully invite users to create content for reputational benefits will be discussed. The findings suggest that people use brands for self-expression and self-actualization, and very much value to be acknowledged for their content creation practices by brands.

4.1 RQ1: What are the factors that influence people's participation in brand related user-generated content?

In the semi structured in-depth interviews, interviewees were asked about their personal, social or interpersonal, and societal or cultural reasons for which they create user-generated content in relation to brands. However, the latter, the societal or cultural reasons or the macro level so to speak, did not give any worthy results. Therefore, it has been chosen to work with intrinsic factors, referring to personal and self-beneficial motivations, and extrinsic factors, motivations that have to do with helping friends and brands. Intrinsic and extrinsic factors did show to partly overlap and flow over, so they will be discussed together in order to show their interconnectedness. The factors consisted of acknowledgement from the brand, getting featured on the brand account and using the brand account as a springboard, affiliation with the lifestyle the brand stands for, informing others on good products, getting products for free, networking, portfolio building and 'gunnen'. The factors are discussed below.

4.1.1 Acknowledgement from the brand

10 out of the 11 participants referenced the need for acknowledgement from the brand for which they create content to be important for them. This sentiment was mentioned in different yet overlapping ways. The acknowledgement can exist in the form of a follow from the brand account or a comment or a 'like' given by the brand account on the created content, and always consists of some form of interaction with the brand. Cindy seeks the interaction in the form of constructive feedback she would like to get from

HEMA on her blog articles, while Iman likes to receive likes for the content she produces for a brand like H&M.

The interaction motivates users to create content and gives them the idea of being of value to the brand. When talking about the interaction she had with H&M in the form of receiving a like, Iman puts it this way: “That you’re actually very small and that something big sees you exist as well, some recognition in a way” (p.83 Iman). ‘Something big’ refers to a big brand that rewards the user for his creation by giving him or her feedback in any form. While interviewing Ating on the content he produces for Red Wing, one of his favourite shoe brands, he was asked:

“And do you get a response from red wing?”

Yeah sometimes I get a like from red wing from their official account. And sometimes I don’t

And how do you feel about this? That comparison? Either getting that or not?

Well actually (starts laughing) I hope they do it, it’s recognition.

Recognition of you as a fan?

Yeah as a fan, and that I get recognition for thinking their company or product is really cool. That they see this, I think that’s cool” (p. 20 Ating).

Yasemin talks about how she feels a sense of recognition and specialness when the brand account likes her content: “these brands get 1000 tags, and that they see my picture, that I stand out yeah (...) It’s recognition that I am using the products well” (p. 159 Yasemin).

The emphasis is mainly on getting acknowledgement from an entity that is much larger than how the user perceives himself. Florian says: “I see it as a compliment. I like their creations. And then why would they comment to a girl like me and compliment me?” (p. 77 Florian). The creation of content seems to be a way of getting closer to a brand and get a form of interaction that results in acknowledgement that was not possible before the advent of the web 2.0. It becomes clear that the interaction with the

brand is more important than the so-called community around it. Even though some participants recall to “look at hash tags” to see what others have come up with, they mainly value the interaction with the brand (p. 26 Ating).

4.1.2 To get featured on the brand account and use the brand as a springboard to get likes, comments and follows

This motivation very much relates to the first factor on getting acknowledgement and recognition from brands, but goes further because participants say they like the reward that comes with it in the form of likes, comments, and new followers. As opposed to the latter factor, the community aspect is present here. However, the motivation of getting more followers is not as explicitly stated, but does get mentioned as a more indirect motivation. When asked, most interviewees say they very much like to get more followers, but do not see this as a main goal in the creation of brand related content. Florian talks about being featured on the Levis Facebook after using the liveinlevis hash tag on Instagram:

“I see it as a compliment that they like my style and think it’s cool enough to put it on their social media account. Not even to get more followers, that’s also fun, but it’s cooler that the creative team behind Levis wants me to be on their account” (p. 73 Florian).

The acknowledgement here goes further than only liking or commenting, as the brand is actually sharing the content on its own channels, giving the user an even higher sense of recognition. Sophie explains the reason the sense of recognition is higher:

“They repost, and they have a huge reach on their channels, so that’s like an honour when you’re reposted.

And why is it an honour?

Because a lot of people will see it. And there will be a link to your channel, that’s how it works with Instagram.

And then you get more followers?

Yes” (p. 117 Sophie).

When Mayari was asked whether he participates in the competitions of big channels because of the followers it could yield him if he would get featured, he answers: “Yes that’s what I think about, but not only that” (p. 108 Mayari). When he was asked whether it serves as a drive, he answers: “Ehm...yes it is in a way, but I don’t give a fuck on the other hand” (p. 108 Mayari). The answer is not entirely clear, and it could be that this motivation is more implicitly present, without the interviewee realizing.

Moreover, it should also be taken into account that interviewees could be giving socially desirable answers, as they could feel it would not be acceptable to state gaining followers to be a motivation for creating content in relation to brands. Britt brought up the concept of ‘featuring’ and when she was asked why people want to get featured, she said: “I think to belong to something” (p. 35 Britt). When asked whether Britt feels that way herself she states: “No, these are really things that I see with others” (p. 36 Britt). It could of course be that she does see this with others and does not feel like this herself. However, social desirability or shame could also have influenced her position towards this matter, as it could feel uncool or ‘not done’ to state that one wants to belong to a group, or is focused on becoming famous and getting more followers. However, getting featured for interviewees gives them a great sense of appreciation and acknowledgement, and the followers that are gained by being so are very happily received, but do not seem to be a motivation in itself to create brand related user-generated content.

4.1.3 Affiliation with the lifestyle the brand stands for

A factor that is recalled by all participants is the idea that the brand that is tagged needs to ‘fit with who the user is’. When going more in depth on this, it became clear that participants like to tag and incorporate brands in their content that they think fit with their own lifestyle or personality and they want to affiliate themselves with. While talking about why she produces content in relation to Nike, Alicia says:

“For me it’s very important that it fits with who I am as a person. In principle that’s still very general because I do lifestyle and not just ‘fitness fitness fitness’. But I have a certain style. I think Nike fits with me” (p. 4 Alicia).

Later on, when she was asked whether she would blog for Nike, she said yes and explained why:

"Because I think Nike is a very nice brand, I have a lot of experience with it, and a lot of fun from their products, and their products fit very well with what I like to do. And it's also fashionable. it looks very nice. And uhm that fits with me so I can show why I really like this" (p. 10 Alicia).

Both Mayari and Sophie touched upon the idea of being able to mix and match more brands that they identify themselves with to create a unique combination of brands. Sophie says about this:

"All brands have something you like, you can literally shop with everything you see and find. Maybe I like that one sweater of Adidas but also the trench coat of Burberry and I want to wear that together and I want to be associated with both of them in a way. That's the power of what's happening now, this diversity that consumers can decide themselves what's cool" (p. 116 Sophie).

Mayari talks about how he tags several brands in a photo of himself on Instagram, all brands he is wearing at that moment: "And I thought because it's three brands with which I feel they are forming who I am, what I feel comfortable in. then I think, I want to show people that" (p. 102 Mayari). When he was asked whether he tags to show people who he is, he said: "Yeah yeah, like that. I'm not putting myself in a box, but I'm creating boxes myself" (p. 103 Mayari). When asked about whether she affiliates with the lifestyle of the brands she tags, Britt confirmed and also touched upon the risks of incorporating brands in this respect:

"Yeah I think this is the case with brands in general. What you wear, the brands you wear do say a lot about your image so that's why you need to be wary when collaborating with brands. Maybe you will be associated with something you don't want" (p. 34 Britt).

In general, the creation of content in relation to brands serves as a tool to show who the user is, very much related to practices of self-expression that have been identified in the

creation of user-generated content with no specific brand focus (Shao, 2009). Moreover, it shows that the affinity a user feels with a brand influences the likelihood of participation and creation (Lampe et al., 2010).

4.1.4 “Gunneln”

Gunneln is a word that does not easily translate to English. It means something like “having the wish that somebody else gets or is something” or “approving of something for someone else without jealousy” (“Gunneln”, 2014). In the case of this research, ‘gunnen’ was mostly used when referring to wanting a brand to get publicity, reach, or attention, so strongly related to goodwill. This motivation to share user-generated content in relation to brands was recalled by all eleven participants, but can be broken up in two types of ‘gunnen’. The first one can be regarded the ‘gunnen’ of a brand that users perceive to have the same values as they have. Secondly is the ‘gunnen’ of a brand that is owned by friends or acquaintances. The ‘gunnen’ factor seems very extrinsic in nature but also shows to partly overlap with the factor of affiliation with the lifestyle the brand stands for. The user is not only appropriating aspects of the brand image for his or her own self-expression, but finds the shared values so important that the brand needs to be helped in achieving its goals.

Cindy states she wants HEMA to have success, and wants to contribute to this by blogging because she feels they stand for the same values as she does: “Yes, I want the HEMA to be successful, that’s important too I think. The HEMA ‘gunnen’. I wouldn’t do it for the Primark to give a stupid example” (p. 52 Cindy). After stating she “does not agree with what the Primark stands for”, she explains she buys her bananas and chocolate fair trade and believes “that with the HEMA you know that in any case they value this as well, their stuff is not made in china and not necessarily exploited people, because they value that too” (p. 52 Cindy). Therefore she thinks “ok people buy it at the HEMA instead of at a chain that is doing this” (p. 52 Cindy). In general she thinks: “it’s good that people buy more at the HEMA” (p. 52 Cindy). In this case it is very clear that Cindy identifies a lot with the values she perceives HEMA stands for, and wants to help them in achieving their goals.

In other words, Mayari talks about “shouting” brands, meaning explicitly naming brands on his Instagram to “support them” (p. 102 Mayari). Teun talks about small Scandinavian brands that he wanted to “help a little” because he thought they were cool

and he did not see them much in the Netherlands. He tagged them in photos and tried to “plug these brands with friends” (p. 123 Teun). In this case, it could be argued that this behaviour of Teun can also be categorized under the influencer role motivation, as he wants to inform others on good products. However, because he wants to inform others to mainly “help this brand a little” it has been chosen to still categorize it under this factor of ‘gunnen’. In general, some examples might be categorized under more than one factor, or motivations might overlap somewhat with other motivations. However, it can be regarded natural that motivations overlap and that some examples might incorporate several factors that influence participation.

Secondly the helping of friends or acquaintances that own brands was something recalled by 4 out of 11 participants. For example, Sophie explains about friends of her who started a clothing brand, which she tagged:

“Yeah I do this to help them and I like to help them. And these 2 photos there were comments asking me hey where can you buy it? And then I commented where you can get it. And then you actually experience that it works” (p. 114 Sophie).

Florian does the same for her parents who have a clothing store and Alicia talks about the ‘gunfactor’ she has with Jogha, a sports clothing brand owned by girls she collaborates with (p. 3 Alicia; p. 71 Florian). In these cases the motivation has to do with interpersonal relations or social reasons. It is hard to consider them strictly extrinsic motivations, as they can also be driven by the wish to be loved or accepted by friends, which can be regarded more personal factors influencing creation. However, the words participants use, are all related to ‘helping others’ so in the first place this motivation is regarded extrinsic, but definitely holds intrinsic aspects.

4.1.5 To inform others on products and brands

9 out of 11 participants said they regard themselves as online influencers in terms of what is new, good, or ‘cool’. The three respondents that are also bloggers all explained their content creation behaviour as being part of a drive to inspire others. Moreover, they perceive themselves to have a certain influencer role and incorporate brands to show others what products and brands they use as experts in their field of interest. Vera explains: “These are the comments I always get, that I’m very critical that when I say

something about something it is probably true. From there I started [blogging red.] and now it's getting bigger" (p. 143 Vera). Vera took an existing passion for food online and reviews and recommends products and brands. For Britt however, this grew: "And gradually I started getting more and more questions like: "where is this from, where is that from this and that". Um.. that's why I tag brands"(p. 33 Britt). This was the same for Yasemin: "I started with one photo and I got some questions, cool lipstick, what colour is it? And then I thought oh that's quite funny. 'Your make up is good', because of that I was motivated to keep going" (p. 159 Yasemin). Cindy however, decided to participate in the HEMA blog and use this platform to inspire others for a sustainable lifestyle:

"But then I only share pieces about things that I think people should think about more, so being responsible. And every now and then something fun. I don't want to teach people a lesson but when people want to follow my lead, then let it be a good lead" (p. 60 Cindy).

Cindy forced herself into an influencer role by using the brand platform to advocate for HEMA's sustainable product. Her behaviour can be described as a form of self-actualization in how she tries to mean something to the world by creating content (Shao, 2009). It needs to be mentioned that informing others on what products to use and trying to inspire others can also be regarded an extrinsic motivation as it is not strictly personal but also about 'helping others'. However, the choice has been made to categorize this theme under the intrinsic factors, as the wording participants use are mainly about the 'self'.

4.1.6 To get things for free

A factor that influences 8 out of 11 participants, is the motivation to get products for free in return for creating brand related user-generated content. However, a distinction can be made between two types of this motivation. First of all, some users have actual agreements with brands or PR companies representing brands to post brand related content in return for goods, so called 'collaborations'. When they speak about material incentives, they are quick to note that collaborations are not merely driven by the wish to get products for free. A sense of identification and affinity with the brand and product serves as a qualifier for this factor. Britt explains how it works: "I get emails regularly from brands that they want to collaborate and at the moment I don't get money for it

usually. I'm too small for that I think, but then I get something sent, a parcel" (p. 30 Britt). It is mostly short-term collaborations with brands and Britt finds it hard to remember the collaborations she has done, because they are all "small things" (p. 31 Britt). When talking about the criteria for doing a collaboration, she says: "I don't do collaborations for the purpose of receiving gifts, because if you don't even like it, what's the point" (p. 31 Britt). The collaborations are rather short, and the rules are clear; in return for posting about products Britt gets these products for free. This works similarly for Florian, when asked about why she does the so-called collaborations, she says: "I like to get those products for free. And also because I think it's a compliment when they want to send something to me and they want me to wear their clothes, it's a compliment" (p. 72 Florian).

Secondly, 3 out of 11 participants recalled they do not have a collaboration with a brand but post content regardless in the hope they get free products after catching the attention of the brand by posting about it. Iman explains: "I really like to get clothes, so that's what I expect in return. But that's not the reason why I do it. In the first instance I just share it because I like it. But umm it's a nice extra when you get something back" (p. 90 Iman). Again, it is interesting to note that getting products for free is not the prime motivation to create the brand related content, but it does seem to play a reasonable role. However, the affinity with the brand serves as a qualifier. After asking Yasemin whether getting free products plays a role she answered: "Yeah I would like it, I would think it's super if one of my favourite brands would say: here is a badge of our new products" (p. 165 Yasemin).

The difference between the two motivations, either posting about a brand the user has a collaboration with, or posting about a brand with the hope of getting something back can be regarded the same distinction as sponsored user-generated content and non sponsored user-generated content, and could have implications for how this content is perceived by the user and by others (Arnhold, 2010). For example, Cindy states she likes brands more that do not actively ask for content to be created, even though she does this exact thing for HEMA (p. 61 Cindy). This matter will be elaborated on in the results of the next research question and in the discussion chapter.

4.1.7 Professional factors

The professional factors consist of a networking aspect and a portfolio building aspect, which will be both explained below.

Networking

Networking was recalled to be a motivation for creating brand related user-generated content by 8 of 11 participants. Even though most of them are creating brand related user-generated content from a personal passion, they do keep in mind the possibility of going commercial with their content. Yasemin explains how the hash tagging of brands could help her professionally:

“I keep it as a back up, when I start a blog then I already have these contacts. That’s pretty smart. A lot of people forget that, it’s always smarter to put the brands in the photo because you never know.” (p. 168 Yasemin).

For Mayari, the networking does not happen so much with brands, but by using brand related hash tags that provide him contacts in the sneaker scene he is active in. Before going to sneaker fairs where he sells shoes, he uses specific hash tags to inform others, to “enlarge his network” and gain attention for his selling activities (p. 99 Mayari).

For some participants, the personal and professional parts of life are overlapping, for example for Teun as a freelancer:

“In my case this overlaps a lot, because a lot of my professional life has come from my social life. Or is very strongly intertwined. Because the brands I work for are also friends or people I know, so it’s kind of hard to distinguish, but in general I would say that when I integrate brands in my social media activity this has a commercial background. So when I work with barber on a location, then I tag barber because it will generate traffic to barber” (p. 126 Teun).

This is not strictly about networking per se, but does show that the purposes of using social media and incorporating brands has a commercial side to it, specifically for Teun as a freelancer who gets most of his work from his network. The same goes for Iman who has built lasting “Instagram relationships” with brand accounts and the people

behind it (p. 86 Iman). Alicia explains she participated in a campaign for Albert Heijn consisting of an of line event and content creation. As the main reason for participating she states to “expand her network for which days like these are very suitable” to meet “other bloggers and people” (p. 4 Alicia).

Creating content in relation to brands thus evokes some sort of interaction with the brand that could be beneficial for professional networking purposes. However, incorporating brands can also bring users in touch with other users, specifically when they are active in the same community such as the blogging or sneakers community.

Portfolio Building

Incorporating brands into user-generated content can also give the user a means of showing what he is talking about, inducing a sense of expertise. Participants explained that having this content visible for possible employers, both brands and non-brands could help them professionally. Mayari sees his content creation as both professional and personal. When asked whether he establishes his professionalism by tagging brands, he answered:

“Yes. When I wear something, it doesn’t matter what it is, I know where it comes from. And it isn’t... yeah ok, maybe my boxers, or sometimes a simple sweater. But umm.. I don’t just buy random things. I do know” (p. 104 Mayari).

By incorporating brands Mayari shows his distinct style and his knowledge of the fashion and sneaker scene. For Florian, this works similarly. When asked whether she incorporates brands for professional reasons, she responds:

“Yeah I do think so, because I think the more I use my Instagram creatively, and no selfies and use my creativity and also engage brands then when I send in my resume to brands, I do write down my social media because it shows my portfolio, who I am and what I do” (p. 73,74 Florian).

For Iman the working of her Instagram as a portfolio was not something she instigated, but happened to her along the way:

“But umm at some point I started realizing that people that are working for Ladress or Scotch and Soda, things that I got work from, that these people have been following me for quite a while. And Uhm were already looking at what I’m doing. So I am way more conscious about this and therefore I’m thinking more about what I’m sharing because I realize I can get work from this” (p. 86 Iman).

Whether actively initiated by the user or not, it does become clear that the creation of brand related content could mean something for the user in a professional way. It could help them in showing their creativity in a job application, or give them the means to present themselves as an expert in the field they are active in, still very much related to the idea of self-expression through user-generated content (Shao, 2009).

To conclude, the first research question has been answered by illuminating the different factors that proved to be important for participants. The affiliation with the lifestyle the brand stands for and getting acknowledgement from the brand either in the form of interaction or a feature on the brand account are very important for participants. The factor of ‘gunnen’ turned out to be a more extrinsic influencing factor but very related to the idea of affiliating with the lifestyle a brand stands for. Moreover, participants feel the need to inform others on products and very much like to get products for free. However, the latter is only an influencing factor when the qualifier of affinity with the brand is present. Also, participants recalled having professional reasons for the incorporation of brands in their content, as it helps them with networking and showing potential employers their level of expertise in a certain matter and communicating what they stand for creatively.

4.2 RQ2: what are challenges users encounter in the process of creating brand related user-generated content?

Although participants were enthusiastic and motivated about creating content in relation to brands, they also highlighted several pragmatic challenges in accomplishing the desired collaboration or handling with user-generated content in relation to brands. These challenges have to do with experiencing a lack of freedom when collaborating with brands and having issues with authenticity. Moreover, participants experience problems with brands that collaborate too much and give gifts to too many users, as this

decreases the exclusivity of a brand and the collaboration. Finally, some participants perceive the honesty of the brand to decrease when making use of user-generated content. The challenges are listed below and completed with examples.

4.2.1 Personal freedom and authenticity

Lack of freedom when collaborating with a brand

4 out of 11 respondents touch upon the challenge of having issues with the lack of freedom in the collaborations with brands. They experience rules that brands set for them that they do not like and feel restricted by. These rules can consist of mandatory hash tags, certain photo filters or specific formats for blog posts.

Teun experienced an unpleasant collaboration due to the lack of freedom in using certain hash tags. He collaborated with clothing brand Bjorn Borg and was obligated to use a hash tag consisting of the words 'be active be attractive'. He thought this was very "fake and made" and although he liked Bjorn Borg, he thought: "My friends and even my followers that do not know me, would know I would never use this hash tag normally and it's out of character" (p. 129 Teun). Yasemin states she "hates the scripted things you have to say in collaborations with big brands", even though she herself has never collaborated with big brands (p. 165 Yasemin). Vera says she "loves the HEMA" but hates their blog because she feels like it's "disguised advertising" due to all the strict rules she heard people need to obey (p. 153 Vera). Users on one hand want to collaborate with brands and want to get the recognition already touched upon in the former research question. However, they do not like it when brands set abundant rules for them in these collaborations. This tension will be further elaborated on in the discussion.

Collaborating with brands that do not 'fit with the person' and getting products sent over that users do not like

4 out of 11 respondents state they have issues with either doing collaborations with brands that do not fit their person well, or with assessing whether a possible collaboration would fit them. Iman collaborated with clothing brand River Island and was drawn to the 'shopping money' she got in return. However, she "did not think about having to share pictures" at that time and later realized "the brand didn't really fit her too closely" and she "regretted saying yes afterwards" (p. 81 Iman). Vera gets products

sent to her very often by PR companies, and has now come up with a weekly 'foodmail' post. She features all the products she gets, but does not give her opinion on all of them to prevent posting negative content about a product like 'margarine' for example (p. 136 Vera). It needs to be noted that most participants do not like to post negative content, and rather choose to keep quiet than post something with a negative message or attitude. Florian and Britt both get many requests for collaborations as well. They are very wary of what they say yes to, because they do not "want to spread a message they do not support" (p. 35 Britt; p. 71 Florian). Florian summarizes this challenge by saying: "people are following me because of my style and for who I am, and not because I'm an advertising agency" (p. 71 Florian).

Being wary of UGC campaigns because users do not want to follow the crowd and come of more special

4 out of 11 participants recalled that competing or participating in a campaign gives them the idea that they are not 'doing their own thing' but following the crowd, implying that authenticity is an important aspect for users. Iman says about this: "I really want it to seem like, or that it really is, that I post things that I like, and when by accident a brand is involved or I'm wearing a certain brand, then I tag them" (p. 84 Iman). Vera states she would not compete in a challenge or campaign unless she is personally asked by the brand because "she's really doing her own thing" and not "following the crowds" (p. 148 Vera).

4.2.2 Perceived Exclusivity and honesty

Brands collaborating with too many bloggers or give away products to too many people

Britt talks about how she got a watch from the brand Daniel Wellington and a bikini from the brand Triangl, but later saw that these brands were sending gifts to a lot of people and "not even with real bloggers, but with everybody" (p. 36 Britt). She does not like this because then the products lose exclusivity. She even says she "wouldn't do anything with them anymore if they would approach her" (p. 36 Britt). It is interesting to note that this could have to do with Britt's perceived position as an influencer, which could possibly diminish due to the lack of exclusivity of the products she recommends. Cindy talks about how she thinks HEMA should have made a more "sharp selection in

the amount of bloggers” because she thinks there are way to many (p. 62 Cindy). Lastly, Iman comments on a Teva sandals campaign, in which many bloggers were all suddenly posting about Teva sandals. According to Iman “It came of very unnatural and unauthentic”, and even “funny” (p. 86 Iman). It seems as though respondents want to be the chosen ones that can collaborate with brands, and feel like their own image is on the line when too many bloggers or users are receiving gifts.

Participants perceive the honesty of the brand to be less when inviting for user-generated content.

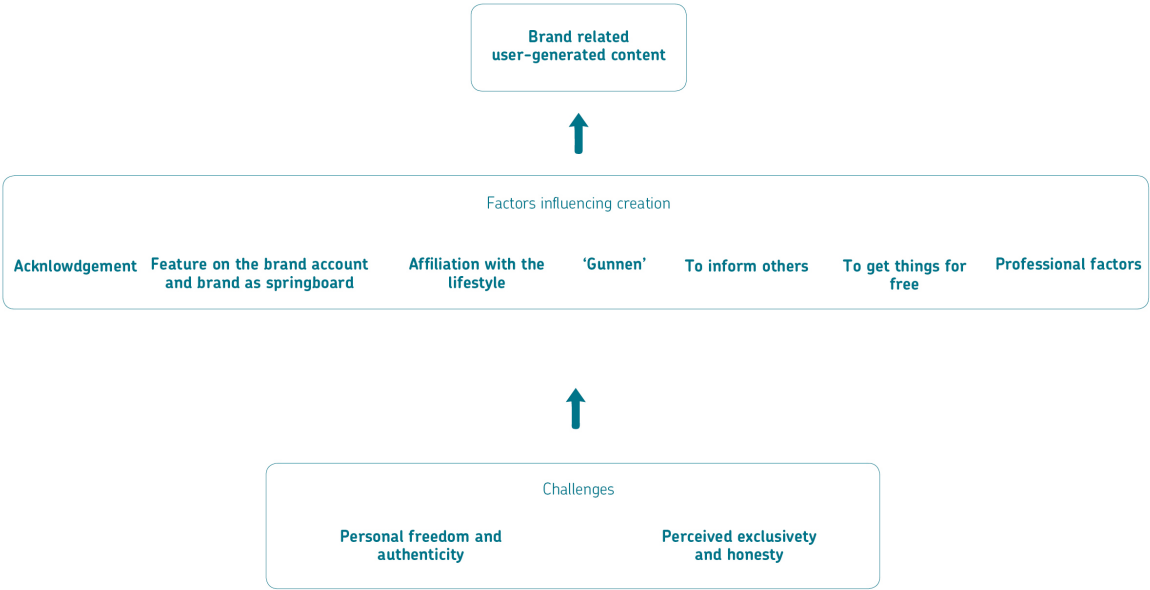
Interestingly enough, Cindy who writes for the HEMA blog and has explained she has been doing this because of the “honesty of real people telling their story”, also says she thinks that brands that do not actively invite for the creation of user-generated content come of “more honest” (p. 61 Cindy). She says: “I do think that when brands don’t ask it, that it’s more honest that it’s more easy. How do I say it. When it just happens from free will it will be more true and honest” (p. 61 Cindy). When confronted with the paradox in her own thinking, she agrees and says she often thinks “is this what I want?” (p. 61 Cindy). Iman talks about rather not competing in competitions unless she has a strong relationship with the brand, because she finds it too set up, not spontaneous, and too commercial (p. 83 Iman). The difference in perception of sponsored and non-sponsored user-generated content thus very much relates to issues of honesty and transparency.

Participants perceive the exclusivity of the brand to be less when making use of too much user-generated content

Ating, Mayari and Florian all like being invited by brands to create content. However, they also state that brands that do not make any use of user-generated content or invite for its creation, come of more exclusive. Ating states he can understand that brands do not make use of user generated content or social media, when “their products are not for the masses” (p. 27 Ating). Mayari states it can be a “brand’s strength” to not be active on social media or pay attention to user-generated content as it is “undercover” and then it stays “his thing”, relating very much to his role as a trendsetter (p. 106 Mayari). Florian talks about “a legitimate level of arrogance big and well-respected brands can afford themselves in regards to user-generated content” (p. 77 Florian). They do not need to respond or ‘like’ all the content that users create (p. 77 Florian). Cindy agrees with this when talking about the responding rate on user-generated content of HEMA, which she thinks is too high (p. 64 Cindy). Again, this viewpoint seems to clash with the

enthusiasm users recall to have in regards to creating content in relation to brands and user-generated content campaigns and getting acknowledgement in the form of interaction with the brand. This will be further discussed in the discussion chapter.

To conclude, challenges users come across in the process of creating user-generated content for brands relate to personal freedom, authenticity, exclusivity, and honesty. Firstly, a lack of creative freedom due to too many rules set by brands and PR companies in the creation of user-generated content proved to be an important struggle for users. They also have challenges with assessing whether a brand is the right fit for them and making sure they do not follow the crowds and stay authentic in their collaborations. Moreover, users experience troubles with brands that collaborate and interact with too many bloggers and users, and even perceive brands that make too much use of user-generated content to be less honest than other brands. To ensure clarity, a visualization of the factors influencing creation and the challenges is shown below.



Visual 4.1 Factors and challenges

4.3 RQ3: How can companies successfully invite users to create content for reputational benefits?

Next to naming the challenges they come across, participants were also interviewed on what they do like and prefer in the collaboration with brands or in brand initiated campaigns. The best practices of brands in regards to user-generated content respondents have experienced are discussed in this section. Additionally, the wishes and expectations of respondents in what they would want campaigns and collaborations to look like are elaborated on. The structure for answering this research question is set up according to the different aspects that showed to be important for interviewees, namely: campaigns, collaborations, the content, and rewards.

4.3.1 Campaigns

This section refers to the way participants like to be invited by brands to create content in a campaign setting, so not having one on one communication with a brand. The participants elaborated on how they personally could get mobilized as content creators to get active, and thus what a successful user-generated content campaign would look like for them.

For the type of campaign that users think to be successful or desire, the majority talks about communicating a certain hash tag via social media with which people can give their own interpretation of how they combine or use a certain product or brand. It needs to be noted that no participant talked about a brand owned platform to be of importance in a campaign. Ating values the contributions of others as well, and states he gets inspiration from seeing how other people are combining their “red wing shoes in the summer” for example (p. 26 Ating). Teun likes this way of inviting people to create content because it is “free and there are no real restrictions, if you like the brand and wear it, then tag them” (p. 129 Teun). For Yasemin it is about showing “what you can make of it” in regards to make up products (p. 166 Yasemin). It needs to be noted that this way of inviting users to create content is mainly suitable for lifestyle, fashion, and food related brands, but not as fitting for “services companies” due to the “lacking visual character of services” as Sophie rightly states (p. 113 Sophie).

Vera provided a valuable suggestion by stating that a campaign needs to have a story. As an example she uses the “Albert Heijn spring campaign” in which users are asked to come up with their own juice flavour, which could eventually end up in the

actual stores of Albert Heijn. Not only did Albert Heijn get a lot of suggestions for possible products and “engaged with their target audience”, they also created a “path in their campaign” (p. 152 Vera). With this she means the storyline; first the contest is communicated, later the contributions are highlighted, then a winner is picked and content is created of the process of the juice flavour going to the stores. As Vera puts it: “Then people want to try the flavour and people are curious, ‘oh funny who won?’ ‘Oh that’s a nice combination.’ I think that has a beneficial effect, it’s supportive” (p. 152 Vera).

The pre existing relationship is very important for participants, as they would not participate in a campaign of a brand they do not know about. Teun suggests:

“The brand should start with the people that are already following the brand or already think it’s interesting and those people you can make active. You will have a big chance they will do it because they already think you’re interesting” (p. 130 Teun).

To conclude, a hash tag communicated by the brand works for respondents to get motivated to create content because it suggests freedom of the content users can create. Moreover, a storyline in the campaign is beneficial for both the brand and the user, as it increases the attention span. Furthermore, campaigns should start with getting the real fans to create content and hope the campaign will spread out from there.

4.3.2 Collaborations

Most respondents that have collaborated with brands in the past prefer to be approached one on one by brands via email or Instagram direct message. For Vera, this does not mean she does not want to participate in larger campaigns, but she would like to be notified personally because again: “she does her own thing” (p. 148 Vera). This focus on doing your own thing and not following the crowd is similar for Britt, Florian, Alicia, and Iman. For these more established content creators that have reasonable amounts of followers, the presumed authenticity plays a role. They want to be personally approached and like to call the deals that are made with brands ‘collaborations’, implying they are mutually beneficial for both parties.

Another important aspect for the collaborations is the preferred exclusivity. Users like to have collaborations with brands that other users do not have. Cindy talks

about this when stating that HEMA should be more selective in the amount of bloggers they have on the platform, and Britt touches upon this idea when talking about the gifts she got that a lot of other users got as well (p. 62 Cindy; p. 36 Britt).

To conclude, in collaborations users want to be handled with 'special care'. They value one on one communication and exclusivity of deals.

4.3.3 Content

When talking about the type of content users want to create in relation to brands, almost all participants recalled the same words, freedom and creativity. The emphasis on giving your own interpretation of the product or the use of a product or brand and "creating your own thing" or "version" was something everybody liked (p. 130 Teun). Sophie explains: "For me it has to be a creative assignment in which is asked for your creativity, that you have to do something in a way that you think fits" (p. 117 Sophie). Brands can explicitly ask for your interpretation of how you prepare your oats in the morning like the brand Quaker did successfully according to Vera (p. 142). In fashion, the mixing and matching of for example your jeans like the Levis campaign is recalled as a success. Cindy appreciates the fact she can write about everything on the HEMA blog, as long as it is related to HEMA products in some way (p. 47 Cindy).

However, the product or brand does not even explicitly need to be visible in the content. Sophie talks about a campaign ASOS did, one of the biggest UK web shops, in the advent to Christmas:

"They had a new Instagram channel, with an advent calendar. Every day there was a really cool price to win, those were things from the ASOS web shop. And every day you could make your UGC for them. So for example a really cool coat and then you had to show why you wanted to win the coat, or what that coat did for you or why you needed a coat. You could go crazy" (p. 115 Sophie).

To conclude, the most important aspects in respect to the content is the need for it to be free to let the user be creative himself. This again creates tension, as brands ideally want to keep control over the content that is posted in relation to the brand (Bal et al., 2011; Van Dijck, 2009)

4.3.4 Rewards

As has been assessed in the answering of the first research question, users value to get acknowledgement from brands in the form of comments, likes or a feature on the brand account and to get things for free. These motivations or factors influencing participation can be regarded as incentives and preferred rewards and thus this subsection partly conceptually overlaps with the first research question. However, by relating the reputational benefits for companies to invite for user-generated content to the findings on preferred rewards, it is assessed how companies can best create an online environment or deal with user-generated content to increase the sense of rewarding for participants.

Firstly, users highly value and appreciate when brands interact with user-generated content creators. As “token of appreciation” users expect to get a ‘like’ or a ‘comment’ in return from the brand account for which they are producing content (p. 20 Ating; p. 83 Iman; p. 113 Sophie;). This promise of interactivity has proved to be very beneficial to brand strategies, as it engages users in the value creation of the brand and positively influences brand loyalty (Greve, 2014). In general, users like to feel of value to the brand and the brand can evoke this feeling not only by liking and commenting, but also by engaging content creators in the development of new products. Vera explained she valued the Albert Heijn spring campaign due to its engagement and storytelling aspect (p. 152 Vera). This relates very much to the aspect of product feedback that serves as a strategic benefit for brands to invite for user-generated content (Kozinets, 2002). Not only can brands use the reward of interaction and engagement in the development of new products, they could also for example use it to create new advertisements, which could be developed from user-generated content. Participants mention being featured on the brand account is an ‘honour’ so having your user-generated content to be used as real advertisement logically will be perceived as an honour too.

The communal aspect of content creation has been assessed to be valuable for brands to enhance the brand reputation (Arnould et al., 2009). Not many users explicitly stated the aspects of inter user communication and a sense of community to be important in their practices of creation, so this could be a point of improvement. Mayari and Ating, who operate in denim and sneaker subcultures, did recall this sense of community, but it had a large cross over with existing offline relations and thus not only relates to online user-generated content. Users did however talk about getting likes and

follows from others and looking at what others contribute, implying a communal aspect. Cindy as a reward from HEMA gets exclusive emails that introduce new products, which are sent to all the bloggers participating in the HEMA blog. She finds this a great reward as it makes her feel like she is part of the insiders group of the brand, relating to both interactivity and a sense of belonging (p. 49 Cindy). This shows that to have this sense of community or belonging to a group one does not necessarily need to interact with other users or members of this perceived group. A sense of community can apparently also arise when brands create rewards such as providing exclusive information or offering other perks. Creating rewards that have to do with ensuring a type of exclusivity thus induce a sense of community, showed to be appealing to users and are also of reputational benefit to the company (Arnould et al., 2009).

Also, having a cross over with offline events was something two users stated to be a very fun and valuable reward. Cindy talks about getting invited for the specially organized 'press days' of HEMA for the bloggers, on which you get information about new products and get a goodie bag to take home, also related to the indirect motivation to get free products (p. 48 Cindy). Yasemin talks about wanting to get invited to the headquarters of make up brands to help develop new products, also related to the first aspect mentioned on interactivity and engagement (p. 168 Yasemin).

Moreover, three of the established users state that maybe later, once they have become bigger influencers online, they would want to have money in return for sharing content. Right now they feel they are not in the position to ask for this (p. 69 Florian; p. 91 Iman).

To conclude, in respect to campaigns users like to be challenged to come up with their own interpretation of a certain product or brand with the use of a hash tag on social media. A storyline in the campaign is beneficial and brands should focus on getting the loyal fans to get active, and spread the campaign from there. In collaborations participants want to be handled with 'special care' and value one on one communication and exclusivity of deals. The most important aspect of the content participants recalled is the freedom to let them be creative. In respect to rewards, users like to have meaningful interactions with brands and getting a sense of exclusivity and belonging to an inner circle of chosen content creators. Lastly, next to monetary rewards a cross over with offline events was recalled to be a valuable reward for the creation of content.

5. Discussion

The purpose of the research was to bring to light the factors that influence the creation of user-generated content in relation to brands, and also find the challenges that users experience in this process of creation. Moreover, studying how brands can design collaborations and campaigns to meet the wishes of users as much as possible to enhance the brand reputation has been researched. Firstly, the implications of the findings will be discussed and related to existing literature. A main theme was abstracted from the results of the first research question and three paradoxes were formulated after analysing the results of all research questions together.

This study contributes to the understanding of user-generated content in relation to brands in new ways, as it is the first research, to my knowledge, that emphasizes the implied struggles that are at work in the relation between users and brands in the process of creating content. These struggles of identity and freedom are more generally related to struggles between consumers and organizations on the web that have emerged due to the functionalities of the web that have enabled participation and engagement (Dickinson et al., 2012; Kucuk, 2008). As these struggles are important to take into account in formulating and improving ways of handling brand related user-generated content, this study also contributes by concretely advising brands on how to deal with these frictions.

5.1 Implications of findings

5.1.1 Identity construction

When critically reflecting on the findings, a few things came to light. First of all, the factors that were abstracted from the results to answer the first research question seem to have one underlying implication. When taking these factors influencing participation in brand related user-generated content into account, it seems as though they all have a common outcome, namely: the practice of identity construction. The identity or the self relates to the “I” and the “me” as introduced by Mead, relating to both the “on-going unique individuality and the internalised attitudes of significant others” (Jenkins, 2014. P. 43). Taking that notion a little bit further, identity is a relational construct, as it can only exist in interaction with others (Albert & Whetten, 1985). Identity construction can be seen as the process in which people “make sense of the ‘self’ by selectively organizing their experience into a coherent sense of the self” (Papacharissi, 2010. p. 233). New

media and ways of communication have liberated interaction from its physical requirements and given new ways of constructing the identity through virtual tools (Cerulo, 1997). Social media is one of these ways to construct the identity by actively interacting with others and creating content (Grasmuck et al., 2008; Shao, 2009).

However, it was not yet researched that brand related user-generated content is also used to construct the identity online. Self-expression directly relates to issues of identity and individuality as it is about feeling the need to present the 'true' or 'real' self to others, for example by actively leaving out and including certain information in user-generated content (Shao, 2009). In this study it was found that the incorporation of brands in content is actively done to create an image of the self that users think resembles them in real life. Moreover, users recalled affiliating with the lifestyles of the brands they incorporate in their content, which can be regarded brand identification (Golob, Podnar, & Tuskej, 2013). This could be in the form of agreeing with the perceived values these brands stand for, or more generally in terms of the image of the brand being for example sporty or sophisticated. When this brand identification went even further, the factor of 'gunnen' arose, as users feel the need to openly support the brand in achieving its goals. An interesting aspect furthermore is users are 'mixing and matching' more brands in their content, meaning their identity construction happens according to combining several brands that all stand for different parts of their identity.

It has been established that users actively construct their professional identity online, yet the incorporation of brands for this purpose was not known (Van Dijck, 2013). In this study, building an online portfolio and networking with the use of brands contributes to the professional self. This act of incorporating brands for the sake of a professional identity and portfolio relates to the idea of self-promotion as a motivation for user-generated advertising (Berthon et al., 2011). This self-promotion by incorporating brands for networking and portfolio purposes emphasizes the self-portrayal of the user as being an influencer and having expert knowledge in a certain area.

Secondly, self-actualization is seen to be part of identity construction (Fitts, 1972). It refers to feeling importance in the world and feeling one makes a difference. This part of identity construction relates very much to the factor 'informing others on good products and brands', as this implies the role of the influencer that wants to inspire to do or buy certain things. The value that is extracted from this practice by the user can be regarded self-actualization, as it gives the user a sense of importance online, and

more generally in the world (Johnson, 1972; Shao, 2009). This could have to do with the fact that word of mouth communication, and thus user-generated content is trusted more than other types of media by Millennials, and the creation of it could give users a sense of credibility in relation to peers (Knoblauch, 2014). Wanting to take on this role in relation to a brand however, relates to the perceived overlapping values and identity of the brand and the user, referred to as brand identification, which increases the reputation and loyalty of a brand (Han, Kim, & Park, 2001). The brand identity is the corporate image and reputation, as seen from an outsiders' or external stakeholders' perspective (Hatch & Schultz, 1997). Therefore, the congruence between the personal identity and the perceived brand identity, referred to as brand-self similarity, increases the chance of creation of content for these brands, and creates reputational benefits for the brand in the form of trust and feeling (Ratneshwar, Sen & Stokburger-Sauer, 2012; Reputation institute, 2015).

Brands add value for consumers on two different levels; by signalling the quality of the product of the brand, and by creating meaningful associations that add value beyond the product attributes (Chernev, Gal, & Hamilton, 2011). The second level has everything to do with consumers using brands to express their identities, and this study shows that in content creation related to brands this works the same way. It might not seem like a surprise that the same motivations are found for offline identity construction and online identity construction with the use of user-generated content, taking into account scholars arguing that there is no such divide between on and off line behaviour anymore (Rogers, 2009). However, the fact that content creators so actively make use of brands in their online practices to show who they are, what they like and how they want to be perceived was not yet established and gives rise to opportunities for new research on online identity construction. For instance, this finding implicitly advocates for the creation of campaigns and brand strategies that communicate more explicitly a specific identity or lifestyle. Brands with stronger identities invite for stronger identification and thus for creation of content, which will at last create reputational benefits for brands (Argenti & Barnes, 2009; Chernev et al., 2011; Greve, 2014). However, users found their creative freedom in the production of content in relation to brands to be very important. Consequently, a brand identity that is too distinct in the communication of its identity might leave too little room for the users' interpretation and expression of the self. This tension will be further elaborated on in the paradoxes discussed below. Moreover, scholars argue brands that are actively advocating a certain lifestyle and identity, have

the risk of saturation, as users can only do the aforementioned ‘mixing and matching’ of different brands with a limited amount of brands (Chernev et al., 2011). Consumers’ need for self-expression with the help of brands can thus be satiated, but no studies have been done to research whether this is the case with user-generated content and online self-expression as well, and what the exact criteria of satiation with brands are.

5.1.2 Paradoxes of user-generated content in relation to brands

Three themes were identified in the findings that can be regarded paradoxes, all related to the overarching theme of identity construction discussed above and the struggle for control between consumers and companies (Dickinson et al., 2012; Kucuk, 2008). Participants often stated two opposing opinions that clashed in regards to their identity and showed there to be underlying tensions and struggles.

Personal identity vs. brand identity

The first and probably the most important paradox that was abstracted from the results relates to struggles of control and identity. As mentioned in the subsection above, identity construction in the form of self-expression and self-actualization showed to be an important overarching theme in the factors influencing the creation of brand related user-generated content. Users recalled a very important criteria for creating content in relation to brands to be that the brand ‘fits with the user’, which refers to overlapping values and can be regarded brand identification (Golob et al., 2010). When the brand identity is perceived positive and the user perceives it to resemble his identity, this consequently creates reputational benefits.

However, results also showed that users feel most uncomfortable with getting too many restrictions from brands in collaborations or campaigns, concerning rules on what photo filters or hash tags to use. Moreover, they all recall freedom and creativity to be the most important aspects of a successful campaign or collaboration they would participate in. In their practices of constructing the identity, they do not like to be restricted by brands. On the other hand, users do actually feel the need to create content in relation to brands as these brands for them have the ability to articulate a desired identity (Ratneshwar et al., 2012). To do so, users have to inevitably follow the rules brands set for them, which creates tensions. As they voluntarily tag and hash tag brands and even blog on brand owned platforms, there seems to be a constant struggle or negotiation for control going on between the personal identity and the brand identity,

even though users recall a motivation for creation to be affiliation with the lifestyle the brand stands for, meaning brand-self similarity (Ratneshwar et al., 2012). A brand identity that is too distinct in the communication of its identity might reduce the room for negotiation with the user identity, while brands that do not communicate a distinct identity might risk not attracting for the creation of user-generated content. Even if content is user-generated it does not mean that users have full control over what they can produce, as they have to keep to certain rules and restrictions. This was already the case for user-generated content not related to brands as discussed by Van Dijck (2009), but goes even further with user-generated content that is created for brands due to obligatory hash tags or formats that need to be used. From the brands perspective it is understandable to want to keep the threatening risks of user-generated content as low as possible and send out clear rules for participation to ensure control over the brand story (Dickinson et al., 2012; Kucuk, 2008). However, by tightening the grip on user-generated content the potential is not fully harnessed and could even backlash, as this study shows strict rules have a negative effect on the brand reputation.

The attraction brands have on users is so big apparently, that users are willing to give up certain freedoms in return for online identity construction with the help of brands and it could be argued that if users value their personal identity and the construction of it so much, they should not incorporate brands in their content at all. However, this seems to be a non-existent viewpoint in the eyes of users, and they more perceive it as an inevitable constant negotiation between them and brands in order to articulate the desired identity (Ratneshwar et al., 2012). More than anything else, this specific struggle and negotiation over control over the story that is being told in user-generated content seems to be a symptom of a wider development; due to the possibilities of the web for engagement and participation, relationships between organizations and stakeholder groups are changing (Berthon, Pitt, Watson, & Zinkhan, 2002; Kucuk & Krishnamurthy, 2007).

Honesty vs. invited user-generated content

Users touched upon issues of commerciality and honesty in regards to sponsored user-generated content as introduced by Arnhold (2010). They recalled that brands that actively invite users to create content, come off less honest. Moreover, they feel it has a very commercial feeling when brands do this and it even seems fake. On the other hand, these same users recall liking it when brands ask for the creation of content in

campaigns and they think that it contributes to the brand telling an honest story. This seems to be very contradictory and it can be related to the aforementioned tensions of controlling versus letting go of the brand story. By actively encouraging users to create content, or so-called sponsored user-generated content brands seem to be giving away control to users (Arnhold, 2010). However, by doing so they are pushing users towards a specific direction of content creation so they are actually not giving away control but keeping it (Van Dijck, 2009).

The influencing factor on 'gunnen' shows that users are aware of what positive outcome it could have on a brand reputation to create user-generated content, and they use this knowledge to help friends and brands, which they perceive have the same values as they have. However, as they are so aware of this, they find brands that invite too much for user-generated content too explicitly asking for "disguised advertising" as Vera calls it (p. 153 Vera). This induces the sense of dishonesty.

This again seems to be a symptom of the struggle over control between consumers and brands in which consumers and users are demanding transparency and honesty, while brands are trying to control and oversee the brand story that is being told online (Berthon et al., 2002; Kucuk & Krishnamurthy, 2007; Van Dijck, 2013). It has been argued that branding professionals should merely be the facilitators of communication regarding the brand (Christodoulides, 2009). This view though does not take into account the risks that this may cause, as negative stories can be spread easily as well (Dickinson et al., 2012). However, users also stated they would not post negative stories, but rather just keep quiet in regards to bad experiences, which forms another argument to indeed let go of control of the brand story. It seems to boil down to a sense of balance and nuance in inviting for user-generated content. By actively inviting for creation on a brand owned platform, a level of perceived dishonesty is probably more likely to occur, as the appropriation of content and ideas for marketing purposes by the brand on such a platform is more explicit. In the case of inviting users to use a certain hash tag on social media, this is less obvious. This is supported by the fact that Cindy, the only participant who creates content on a brand owned platform, discussed the most forceful of all participants this idea of perceived dishonesty on the HEMA platform.

Exclusivity vs. too much use of user-generated content

Users stated that they very much like to be invited by brands to create content, to get featured on the brand account and receive comments and likes from the brand.

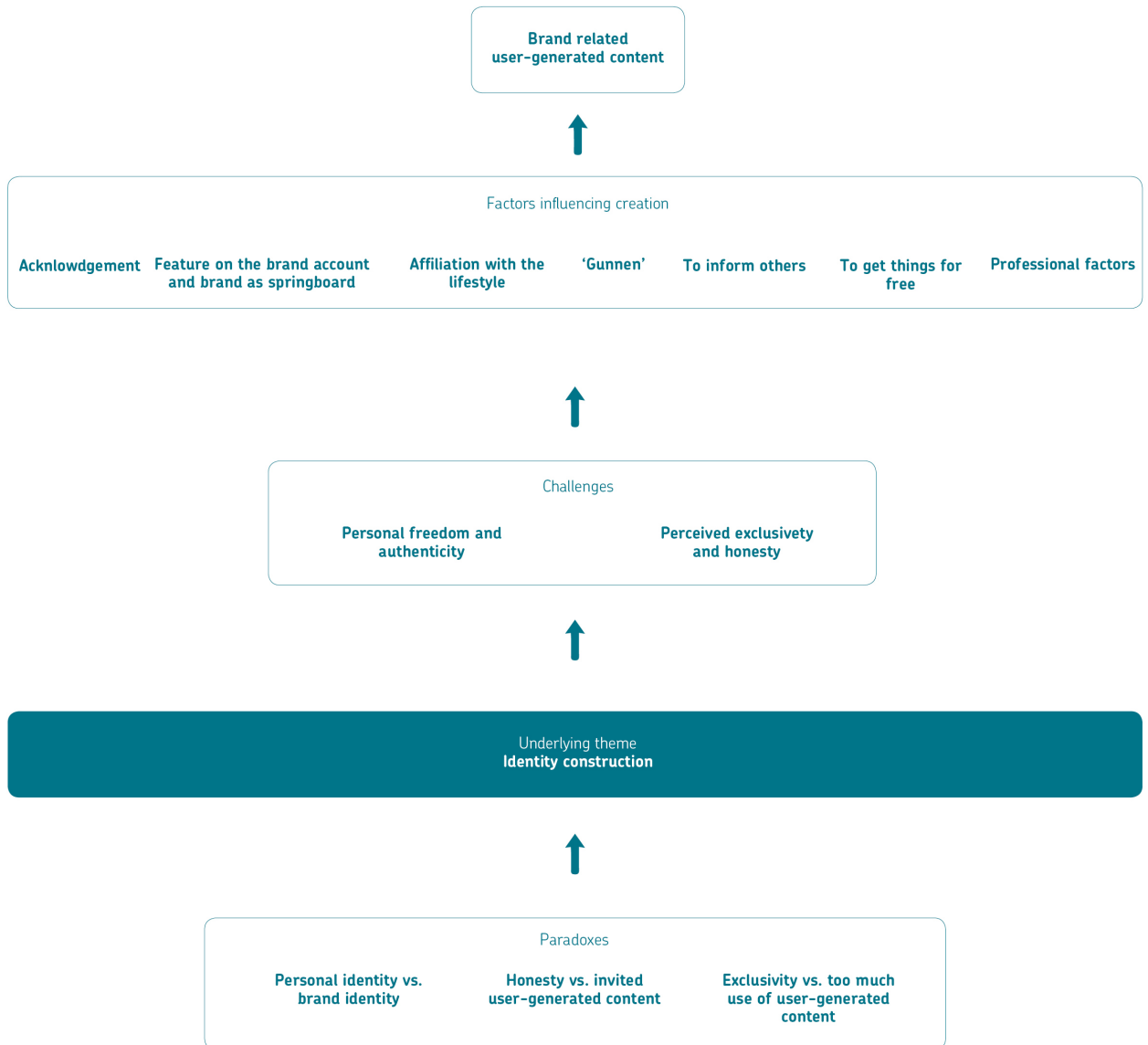
Furthermore, users recall to love to receive gifts from brands and have so called collaborations. However, they also stated that brands that do not pay much attention to user-generated content come of more exclusive and that high-end brands can actually permit themselves this level of 'arrogance'. Some users advised that brands should be more selective with featuring and commenting on users and should not just collaborate with everybody. On the other hand, these same users like it when they themselves have interaction with brands and receive gifts. Users like to feel special, and brands collaborating with, or commenting on too many users do not contribute to this feeling.

This paradox is remarkable, as user-generated content inherently seems to be about accessibility and openness to all users, and not about exclusivity. However, users seem to disagree and do value a perceived sense of specialness. This paradox exists on the level of identity construction and brand identification. Keller talks about the appeal of luxury brands to consumers, and states: "consumers may value the prestige, exclusivity, or fashionability of a brand because of how it relates to their self-concept" (Keller, 1993 p. 4). This statement in its totality can be applied to the handling of user-generated content by brands. The perceived position of the user as an influencer for example, could possibly decrease in the eyes of the user due to the lack of exclusivity of either the collaboration or the 'feature' on the brand account when these collaborations or features happen too often. Thus, incorporating user-generated content into the communication strategy without setting boundaries to the quantity of interactions, features, and collaborations could harm the brand reputation seriously, as have several participants in this study mentioned.

Even though many scholars have stated user-generated content to be of reputational benefit for brands, this study shows pitfalls exist in the process of creating user-generated content that could harm the reputation of a brand. The findings show that when brands do not offer enough freedom to users or overly invite for user-generated content, this creates a sense of dishonesty and irritation, which could finally harm the brand reputation. Moreover, brands can come of as 'sell outs' when they are working together with too many bloggers or interact with too many users as it decreases the sense of exclusivity users have with the brand. Therefore just stating incorporating user-generated content in the brand strategy is beneficial for the brand reputation is too simply put, and a more nuanced view is needed to cover the different aspects of the processes at work here. Implied in this research is that there are clearly reputational

benefits in the inviting of users to create content for brands, as users talk about the positive interactions they have with brands, the free products they receive and the brand identification they feel (Han, Kim, & Park, 2001). However, also taking the challenges into account and looking at the paradoxes that emerged from the results, there is room for improvements that should mainly entail increasing the sense of perceived exclusivity, freedom, creativity and honesty in the process of content creation.

The functionalities of the web 2.0 have given shape to altering relationships between organizations and different stakeholder groups by creating opportunities for participation, engagement, and creation (O'reilly, 2007). These developments are very likely to influence the brand and make the brand itself more of a fluid entity that is not only controlled by the brand itself, but also more importantly shaped by consumers and users on the web (Van Dijck, 2009). For users, this wish of brands to control the brand story is troublesome in the process of content creation, while for brands it is challenging that users are trying to partly take over control. By emphasizing both the pleasures and the struggles in the creation process of user-generated content and showing where frictions arise, wider tensions are made explicit in this study, related to more general struggles over control between consumers and organizations that have taken to the web (Berthon et al., 2002; Kucuk & Krishnamurthy, 2007). To ensure clarity, a visualization of the factors and challenges in relation to the wider theme of identity construction and the identified paradoxes can be found below.



Visualisation 5.1 Factors and challenges in relation to discussion themes

6. Conclusion

Looking at existing literature and the results, the emphasis of current and future research should not be on whether user-generated content could either benefit or harm the brand reputation, but on how the process of creation goes about and what can be improved. It is clear that having a flourishing virtual brand community and active creation of user-generated content adds substantially to the enhancement of brand reputation and creates competitive advantages for companies (Greve, 2014; Arnhold, 2010). However, looking at the multiple annoyances and challenges users come across, guidance is clearly needed as to how exactly user-generated content needs to be incorporated in the communication strategy to ensure a positive outcome for both users and brands.

The factors influencing participation in the creation of brand related content showed to have the underlying theme of identity construction and more specifically brand identification (Golob et al., 2013). Most notable is the finding of users mixing and matching several brands to construct a mosaic that together best expresses them. The brand type is not necessarily important, as long as it reflects the lifestyle and identity of the user (Ratneshwar et al., 2012). This brand identification aspect suggests that a strong brand identity induces the creation of content, but saturation in respect to the amount of brands users can employ might occur (Chernev et al., 2011).

Several paradoxes were implied in the findings on challenges, best practices, and factors influencing motivations. There seems to be a constant struggle taking place between the personal and the brand identity, as users want to incorporate brands in their content, but do not want to be constrained by too many rules. Even though users employ brands to articulate their desired identity, they still want room for interpretation (Ratneshwar et al., 2012). Paradoxically enough, users also stated they do like to get invited to create user-generated content, but they do not want brands to invite for too much user-generated content or interact with too many contributing users. This is remarkable, as the idea that the handling of user-generated content being driven by exclusivity contravenes with the inherent meaning of the word user-generated content being accessible and open to all users. It seems to relate to the appeal of belonging to a selected group and relating the exclusivity of the activities and the brand to the self-concept (Keller, 1993). This implies that a user-generated content strategy aimed at reaching as many interactions and content as possible might not be beneficial for the brand reputation. Also, users stated active inviting for user-generated content

induces the sense of dishonesty, as it is too clear that brands are doing this inviting for marketing and branding purposes, similar to the concept of sponsored user-generated content (Arnhold, 2010). Consequently, campaigns should be loosely structured around a hash tag, as will be elaborated on in the practical recommendations below.

The theoretical implications of this study are that it substantiates existing research on the motivations for user-generated content in relation to brands and adds to it by uncovering paradoxes that exist in the thoughts and behaviour of users. Even though challenges and paradoxes surfaced in this study, users have been clear about wanting more freedom and creativity in the process of creation. It is now in the hands of communication professionals to decide what to do with these insights. Will users get more freedom and control over the brand story or kept constrained by the rules brand set for them? The web 2.0 has given opportunities for engagement and participation, which have altered the relation between organizations and users, and it is now up to users and organizations to determine how these relationships will be shaped and developed in the future. In any case, this study raises questions on how brands can increase the perceived sense of freedom, exclusivity and honesty and ultimately control without actually giving away control in order to come to terms with the user and at the same time minimize the risks for the brand reputation. In other words, pushing the content over the metaphorical wall of control is necessary, but having the content still be created in plain sight so a level of control can be maintained is desirable for brands.

6.1 Recommendations for marketing and communication professionals

The data gathered in this research allows for making recommendations on the design of campaigns and collaborations done by brands. The most important issue is not whether brand managers should control or let go of the brand story by making use of user-generated content in communication strategy, but how they should ensure that the brand story that is being told by users adds value for the reputation of the brand. In short, participants mainly found their freedom, their creativity, and the exclusivity of the campaign or collaboration to be the most important. As brand managers want to be able to at least partly control the brand story that is being told online, the findings suggest the emphasis should be on inducing the perceived sense of exclusivity, freedom and creativity.

Ways to increase the sense of exclusivity and belonging are setting up long lasting collaboration programs with selective groups of bloggers, as relationship building has proven to be successful for the enhancement of reputation (Oly Ndubisi, 2007). Also, introducing special mailing lists with exclusive information or other perks for loyal content creators or reward users by inviting them for exclusive offline events could increase the sense of belonging and community (Arnould et al., 2009). Confining the amount of collaborations, interactions and features could additionally help to ensure the sense of exclusivity that users like to relate to their self-concept (Keller, 1993).

Furthermore, the freedom and creativity all participants talked about implies that brands should not have campaigns or collaborations with too many rules.

Communicating a hash tag to use on social media with the accompanying invitation to show the users' interpretation of a brand or product in general seems to work best. The most successful content can then be displayed and highlighted at a brand owned website to reward and acknowledge the valuable contributions. Moreover, specific creative assignments that are free to interpretation, such as thinking of your own juice combination, are fun for users and beneficial for the product feedback aspect incorporated (Kozinets, 2002). This study moreover has shown that users extract much value from interactions with the brand, so only inviting for user-generated content and leaving it at that is odious.

Thus, the crux of these aforementioned recommendations is that users need to be given the sense of freedom, creativity and value, without them realizing that they are creating content within the confines the brand has set (Van Dijck, 2009). By doing so, brands can harness the full potential of user-generated content in respect to the enhancement of reputation.

6.2 Limitations

There are some limitations to this study that need to be discussed. Firstly, this study is conducted according to a qualitative interpretative design, which implies a subjective nature to the analysis of data and risks a personal bias of me as the researcher. However, this research is carried out with the most rigor and consistency in terms of how the interviews were conducted and analysed. Moreover, the interpretations have been stated as transparent and consistent as possible to ensure clarity of thought decisions. Therefore it can be assured that this study is trustworthy and credible.

Secondly, for this study 11 participants were interviewed. Ideally a couple more could have been added to the sample to ensure the patterns that were found are valid. Unfortunately, this was not possible due to time constraints. Also, the sample included many different types of users that all contribute content to different types of brands in different ways. This made for a diverse sample that brought to light a wide range of important aspects. However, more users from the same sub culture or field of interest could have been interviewed to be able to compare the results and ensure the findings are valid. This could be an idea for future research.

To conclude, all participants were Dutch, which could have influenced the results. Even though participants were asked whether they experienced cultural reasons for their content creation practices and none of them recalled such a thing, there could be more implied cultural reasons for participants' behaviour. By doing a comparative study of users with different cultural backgrounds, it could be assessed whether there are more cultural factors influencing creation.

6.3 Recommendations for future research

Brands are realizing that user-generated content is here to stay and try to jump on the bandwagon due to its positive promises (Bughin, 2007). There is still a lot to be explored in this rapidly developing field, both on the changing relationships between brands and users, as well as on the practical implications that brands should take into account when designing campaigns and collaborations.

Firstly, two participants of this study stated to operate within subcultures on social media, relating to sneakers and denim. Looking at how these practices play out in different subcultures and compare the conventions and rules that exist within these online communities in respect to brands could prove to be relevant to show how to strengthen relationships between brands and users. Case studies focussed on communities that are related to one brand have been done, but taking a more industry-focussed approach could offer additional insights.

Furthermore, now that paradoxes in the practices and thoughts of users have been identified in this study, it could be interesting to explicitly study these paradoxes and see how users perceive these incongruences in their own thinking. Even though questions were asked about conflicting thoughts, more specific information could be

retrieved here. Also, the underlying psychological aspects of online brand identification with user-generated content ask for more in depth study.

To take a quantitative approach it could be helpful to design campaigns based on the best practices as formulated by participants and study whether they are indeed effective by doing an online experiment. Having quantitative proof for the qualitative data gathered in this study could add substantially to the strength of the claims that are made.

Moreover, the satiation aspect that has been talked about in respect to the usage of brands for identity construction needs to be studied in the light of user-generated content to see whether this phenomenon applies to online behaviour as well and how it plays out on the long run.

A final idea for future research could be to let go of the user perspective and interview marketing and communication professionals that have worked on successful campaigns. In this way it can be studied how they try to establish the perceived sense of exclusivity, honesty, creativity and freedom in campaigns and collaborations that this study has found to be very important in ensuring participation.

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Appendix A – Interview Guide

RQ1: What are the factors that influence people’s participation in brand related user-generated content?

RQ2: what are challenges users encounter in the process of creating brand related user-generated content?

RQ3: How can companies successfully invite users to create content for reputational benefits?

General

Tell me something about yourself?

Can you tell me about a typical day in your life? What do you do, where do you go?

Age

occupation,

where do you live (rural/urban)

hobbies,

Online behaviour

What do you do online (in terms of visiting media outlets, social media and production)?

What are your favourite websites or blogs?

What outlets do you check?

What are the social media you use? How do you use them?

Content production general

Can you tell me about your content production behaviour online, and give some examples?

Do you have your own blog or dedicated space where you produce content and have followers?

Why do you think you produce content online?

Where do you produce this content online?

How does this process go about?

How did you get involved in doing this?

When was the first time?

What got you interested at first?

Content production in relation to brands

Can you tell me about your content production in relation to brands and give some examples?

Can you name reasons why you have created content in relation to brands, for example tagging a brand or using a brand owned platform?

What kind of content have you created or do you create for brands? Can you give examples?

What kind of brands do you like to generate content for?

Is there a certain goal when you create content this way?

What was your pre existing relation with the brand?

Was there a specific campaign that got you enthusiastic?

How did you get involved in doing this?

When was the first time?

What got you interested at first? (same as topic above)

Personal

What are some (personal) reasons why you contribute content?

Can you give examples of the situations in which you decide to name a brand in the content you create?

Do you create it from an inner creative drive?

Where do you get your inspiration from?

Why do you think this is?

Meso

Are there social reasons for which you create brand related content online?

Do you have more professional reasons for the creation of content?

Can you explain some more about this?

Are the online places where you contribute content communities?

Have relationship established from the creation of content?

How?

Are your (offline) friends creating content in such communities or in social media in relation to brands?

Macro

If you look at your culture, school, study, work or other places you spend time, do you feel like it is expected of you to create content online?

Do people in your environment do it too?

Reflection

Why do you think companies have started to invite users to create content and what has caused this, compared to the past?

How do brands use this content you think?

Do you think it is working?

What's the purpose of this creation? Social value? Education?

How do you want to be invited

How do you prefer to get approached by brands to produce content, can you name an example of a brand that did this well?

What kinds of brands do you like to create content for or with?

Why is this? What are the best practices to invite people to create content you think? can you name some examples?

What kinds of brands do you not like to create content for or with?

Do you like it when brands actively reach out to fans for the creation of content?

Why do you like this?

What type of content do you like to be asked or non-directly be asked to produce?

Is there something specific you do not like in the invitation to produce content?

Incentives for contribution

What do you desire back from a brand?

If you would get money in return for your contribution, would it change your contribution?

Do you contribute again to a brand that did not reward you for your contribution in any way?

Enhancement of reputation

How do you think brands are benefiting from user-generated content?

How do you feel differently about brands that use and invite for user generated content compared to those who don't?

Can you give two examples of the best user generated brand content invitations you have contributed to?

Can you tell me about an experience of yours where the brand was actually threatened by user generated content, what happened?

How do you feel about brands that do not invite for the creation of content, but do feature the content that people sent them, or comment on it?

How do you feel about brands that do not use possibilities for content creation?

Is there anything you wish to bring up that we have not discussed?