Communities in the sharing economy

How offline meeting can stimulate online community engagement

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Abstract

Nowadays there are many online possibilities to borrow, swap, lend, and rent. Although sharing is as old as mankind, the internet provides a platform on which sharing can happen on a large scale and with greater ease. For sharing platforms, encouraging meaningful interactions and trust between members are important aspects and when platforms do not succeed in this, members are not willing to share. However, many sharing organizations are struggling with stimulating interactions and trust and therefore have difficulty with getting an engaged online community. This master thesis explores how offline meetings for suppliers and demanders, initiated by a sharing platform, can stimulate more online community engagement. The three main building blocks of this thesis are online community engagement, offline meetings and the relation offline meetings and the online community.

Literature on these three elements already indicates offline meetings are still important in forming a more closely tightened community. By means of qualitative interviews among eleven members of four platforms, this thesis shows generalized norms and trust are encouraged by offline meetings and in this way stimulate online community engagement. Moreover, members also get more life contentment by visiting events, as their knowledge grows and they enjoy the social contact with like-minded members. By using the theory of social capital, generalized norms, trust, and life contentment were expected to play in stimulating online community engagement. In addition, this thesis found two other elements that also stimulate more online community engagement that were not present in the literature about this topic. These elements are trust in the organization and the relevance of the platform. After an event, these two concepts together with generalized norms, trust, and life contentment will create a boost for members to engage with the online and offline community again

Contents

1. Introduction

'You are what you share' (Belk, 2014, p 1599). According to Belk (2014) this new wisdom introduces the entry of a post-ownership economy. In other words, nowadays there are many possibilities to borrow, swap, lend, and rent. Sharing products and services with one another can mean a great deal of both practical and economic benefits for consumers, communities, and the environment. Although sharing is as old as mankind, the internet provides a platform on which sharing can happen on a large scale and with greater ease. In the meantime, the sharing economy, sometimes referred to as collaborative consumption, has extensively grown and it can no longer be seen as just some alternative way of consumption (Belk, 2014).

ShareNL, the Dutch knowledge and network platform for the sharing economy, defines the sharing economy as follows: 'Within the sharing economy people among each other consume, produce, and trade products, services, knowledge, and money facilitated by peer-to-peer marketplaces, business-to-business marketplaces, and cooperatives' (Slijpen, 2014). Access over ownership, contribution to sustainable use of the idling capacity of assets, enabled by internet technologies, and encouraging meaningful interactions and trust between people are important characteristics in this type of economy.

This latter characteristic is very important for organizations in the sharing economy since their value proposition is the matchmaking between supply and demand (Dervojeda, Verzijl, Nagtegaal, Lengton, Rouwmaat, Monfardini, & Frideres, 2013). Moreover, a platform is useless without an engaged community of members that trust each other, because the community determines the supply and demand on the platform (Slijpen, 2014). The following example will illustrate this importance very clearly. Peerby is a Dutch sharing organization where members can lend products, such as a drill or a backpack, from their neighbors (Peerby, n.d.). Yet, Peerby is in need for a large community in the cities it is operating in, because when a member wants to lent a drill and there are no members in his neighborhood active on Peerby or the active members in the neighborhood do not want to share their drill, the platform does not add any value for that one member.

1.1 Definition of problem

It is easier to point out 'encouraging meaningful interactions and trust between members' as an important aspect than to put this into practice. When platforms do not succeed in this, the

members are not willing to share (Hsu, Ju, Yen, & Chang, 2007). Especially trust is an important factor for the members' willingness to share in an online community. The lack of trust in a community can break a sharing organization, because when members will not share products, services, knowledge or money on the platform, the organization does not add any value to members' lives. However, many sharing organizations are struggling with stimulating interactions and trust and therefore have difficulty with getting an engaged online community (Slijpen, 2014).

One solution for sharing organizations is to encourage the online community by organizing offline meetings or events. When members of a platform meet each other offline during events, it can possibly benefit the engagement of members to the community. A good example is 3D hubs, an international sharing platform for 3D printers, which initiates '3D hubs meet-ups' in many cities it operates in. These meet-ups are organized with the aim to get to know each other (3D Hubs events, n.d.). In addition, there are many other events organized, such as showcases, design-a-thons, company visits and workshops, in order to talk and brainstorm with like-minded members of the community. All these offline events are organized with the intention to create an engaged community where members want to upload their 3D designs in order to be printed by other members.

This positive effect of offline events on online engagement is supported by Hede and Kellet (2012) who found that offline and online activities can have a potential synergetic effect and that it helps preventing competitive communities to arise. From this it seems that offline meetings or events for members of a community could be an approach to stimulate online community engagement. However, there is little research into this specific area yet, because the rise of the sharing economy and thereby the rise of online sharing communities are relatively new occurrences. Therefore, the purpose of this master thesis is to investigate this possible solution. The leading research question is:

How can offline meetings for suppliers and demanders, initiated by a sharing platform, stimulate more online community engagement on that platform?

1.2 Elements of the research question and sub-questions
The most important concepts regarding this research question are online community engagement, offline meetings, and the interaction between offline and online. Firstly, online

community engagement describes how involved members of a community are on a platform. Literature shows that generalized norms, trust and life contentment play important roles in community engagement (Lee & Lee, 2010; Putnam, 2000). When trying to answer the research question it is relevant to understand how engaged members are to the online community. For example, when a member does not feel engaged with an online community, it may be less relevant for a sharing platform to organize offline meetings in order to stimulate online community engagement. Therefore the first sub-question is:

How engaged do members of a sharing platform feel themselves to the online community?

It is important to notice that his thesis will study the online community engagement from the perspective of the members and therefore the perceived online community engagement of the members is studied. Secondly, the offline meetings between suppliers and demanders are, in this thesis, seen as meet-ups and events where multiple members of a sharing community meet each other in real life. Thus, the moment when two members meet for exchanging the shared product or service is not meant with an offline meeting. The meetings are both for the suppliers, members that own the products and services, and for the demanders, the members that are in need for the products and services. Moreover, the meeting should be initiated by the sharing platform, for instance by the community manager in a specific area. The sharing platforms can have different motivations to organize offline meetings, for instance to bring the online community together or to exchange experiences with members. Yet, for this master thesis it is more relevant to understand what offline meetings and events mean for the members that visit them, because solely the members can explain how offline events influence their online community engagement. This leads to the second sub-question:

What do offline meetings mean for members of sharing platforms that visit them?

Thirdly, the assumption in this master thesis is that offline contact between members can stimulate the online community (Matzat, 2010; Shen & Cage, 2014; Tillama, Dijst, & Schwanen, 2010). Yet, the aim of this study is to explain *how* this effect of offline meetings on online sharing communities works. Although the theoretical chapter will give insight in the effect of offline interaction on online behaviour, this topic is relatively new and therefore few studies focus on this interaction (Matzat, 2010; Shen & Cage, 2014; Tillema, Dijst, & Schwanen, 2010). This study can be seen as an explorative study that tries to find possible

elements of offline meetings that play a role in stimulating online community engagement. Therefore the third sub-question is:

What is the relation between offline meetings and the online community according to members of a sharing platform?

1.3 Social and scientific relevance

This master thesis is a collaboration with ShareNL, the Dutch knowledge and network platform for the sharing economy. ShareNL acknowledges the vital function of an engaged community, which determines the supply and demand on a platform, and notices the difficulty that sharing organizations have to stimulate online community engagement. To inform and advice those organizations, ShareNL sets up events and workshops and collaborates with business, political, media and knowledge institutions. With the results and conclusion of this study, recommendations for sharing platforms can be made. Thus, this thesis is relevant for ShareNL in order to help the sharing organizations. Furthermore, the concept of stimulating online community engagement through offline events is broader applicable. Not only organizations in the sharing economy can benefit from this thesis, other profit and non-profit organizations that deal with online communities and rely on the supply and demand of that community can learn from the findings as well.

Previous research regarding the sharing economy mainly focus on the definition of this specific type of consumption (Belk, 2014), business models (Cohen & Kietzmann, 2014), and trust (Chen, Lai, & Lin, 2014; Kim & Yoon, 2014). However, research on this specific topic is very limited, because this field of study is relatively new. Although the internet is around for quite a while now, this specific type of online communities relies on Web 2.0 (Belk, 2014). Web 2.0 is the terminology for websites that allow a two-way interaction between users and the website, and users among each other (Carroll & Romano, 2011). In this way, users are able to contribute to the content on a website and connect with one another. Furthermore, sharing is not a new practice as well, but Web 2.0 provided a platform to older manners of sharing and allowed sharing communities to arise on a large scale. Therefore research into this specific type of online sharing communities is relatively new and this master thesis can be seen as an exploratory study into this topic.

Even though this research area is relatively new, Matzat (2010) focusses on reducing the social problems of an online knowledge sharing platform through a mixture of offline and online interaction. His findings suggest that the use of offline and online interaction can reduce social problems and can even facilitate online knowledge sharing on the platform. Although this latter statement is very relevant for this thesis, it was not the main focus of the study of Matzat (2010). Tillema, Dijst and Schwanen (2010) also investigate a closely related topic, namely the interaction between face-to-face and electronic communication and the way they affect social networks, in particular networks of family and friends. However, the authors do not specifically focus on online engagement in communities where members are not close relatives, which is the case for sharing communities (Slijpen, 2014).

The two previous studies are one of the few that investigate the influence or effect of offline contact on online community engagement, more literature can be found on how online engagement, mostly internet use, affects offline civic and political engagement (Boulianne, 2009; Gil de Zúñiga, Jung, & Valenzuela, 2012; Hargittai & Shaw, 2013; Kim, Hsu, & Gil de Zúñiga, 2013; Pasek, More, & Romer, 2009). From these studies it appears that online engagement is positively related to political, and more interesting, civic engagement which includes participating in communities. Yet, these studies all investigate the effect of online on offline elements of society, while this thesis studies this effect in the opposite direction. Moreover, from the previous named studies, not all researchers are convinced of the causality of their findings (Gil de Zúñiga, Jung, & Valenzuela, 2012; Kim, Hsu, & Gil de Zúñiga, 2013), which implies that this effect could be a relationship where offline events could stimulate online civic or political engagement. Therefore the research question in this master thesis is worthwhile to study.

First, a review on the background of this field of study will be given in chapter two. Moreover, relevant theories about how offline meetings can potentially stimulate online community engagement will be presented. After the theoretical chapter, the methodology of this master thesis, qualitative interviews, will be discussed as well as the units of analysis, data gathering and data analysis that is used. The fourth chapter focusses on the outcomes of the interviews and will discuss the main findings of this thesis. Lastly, this thesis will end with a conclusion and discussion of what this thesis means for academia and society.

2. Theory and previous research

In order to answer the research question of how offline meetings for suppliers and demanders, initiated by a sharing platform, can stimulate more online community engagement on that platform, it is important to understand the different concepts in this question. The concepts relate to the three sub-questions in this thesis and are online community engagement, offline meetings, and the interaction between offline and online. In this chapter these concepts will be explained by using previous research and relevant theories. For sharing communities, the concept of online community engagement is believed to be influenced by offline meetings, yet, before explaining how this could work, the theoretical framework will first define what online communities are. This chapter will therefore start with presenting a definition of online communities and after that give an overview of the previous research about this topic. This overview clearly shows where this research questions has its origins in the debate about offline and online interaction. Previous research will be used to ground this debate and, moreover, previous literature will highlight relevant theoretical approaches, such as the theory of social capital. After this overview, online community engagement will be discussed by firstly explaining what this concept includes, secondly by the role that the theory of social capital plays in it, and thirdly how offline meeting could stimulate this. This in turn will help the operationalization of the important concepts in the third chapter about the research design of this thesis.

2.1 Defining online communities

One of the first academics exploring the concept of online community is Howard Rheingold (1993). His definition takes a social perspective on the concept and describes it as: "social aggregations that emerge from the net when enough people carry on public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace" (Rheingold, 1993, p. 5). Though this definition is ambiguous regarding to what 'enough people' and 'sufficient human feeling' are, Lee, Vogel, and Limayem (2003) give a more precise definition ten years later. The researchers reviewed the nine most used definitions at that time and define an online community as a: "cyberspace supported by computer-based information technology, centered upon communication and interaction of participants to generate member-driven content, resulting in a relationship being built" (Lee, Vogel, & Limayem, 2003, p. 51). Although this research is already a bit out-dated today, the definition

is still broadly used since it is all-embracing and therefore this thesis takes this definition as a basic foundation to build upon.

Yet, to update and customize the definition for this thesis, an addition is made to the previous definition of Lee, Vogel, and Limayem (2003). Within communities on sharing platforms, encouraging meaningful interactions and trust between people are important characteristics (Slijpen, 2014). It is important for the member that shares his product to be able to identify credible borrowers and trust is seen as a foundation for this sharing process (Chen, Lai, & Lin, 2014). Furthermore, Lee and Lee (2010) point out that an engaged online community, thus where members feel connected to the community and to other members, involves higher generalized norms and trust between the members as well. Moreover, an engaged online community gives the members the feeling of life contentment. Life contentment can be seen as the benefits that members gain from being part of the community. Since the concepts of trust, generalized norms and life contentment appear to be important for sharing and online engaged communities, this thesis defines an online community as: a cyberspace supported by computer-based information technology, centered upon communication and interaction of participants to generate member-driven content which will develop generalized norms, trust and life contentment, resulting in a relationship being built. The concepts of generalized norms, trust and life contentment will be explained more into detail later in this theoretical chapter.

2.2 The debate concerning offline and online interaction

Besides the definition of online communities, the broader debate about offline and online interaction helps understanding the context of this thesis and exposes relevant theoretical concepts. Academics studying the topic of offline and online interaction all mention that this specific debate arose because of the growing use of the internet (Boulianne, 2009; Gil de Zúñiga, Jung, & Valenzuela, 2012; Hargittai & Shaw, 2013; Kim, Hsu, & Gil de Zúñiga, 2013; Pasek, More, & Romer, 2009). The main question in this debate is whether the internet contributes to society, since users have better opportunities to inform and participate in public life, or if it disengages users from society, because it distracts them from public life.

In this light, both Boulianne (2009) and Hargittai and Shaw (2013) refer to Putnam (2000) to argue that internet is primarily used as medium for entertainment and in this way will distract people from spending time in social networks. Therefore internet will decrease the social

capital in an offline community. In short, social capital is explained as a social structure of relations (Bourdieu, 1983; Coleman, 1990). The concept of social capital is profoundly explained later in this chapter. Consequently, this decrease will lead users away from public life and civic and political engagement. However, Hargiattai and Shaw (2013) counter this argument, just like Gil de Zúñiga, Jung, and Valenzuela (2012), Kim, Hsu, and Gil de Zúñiga (2013) and Pasek, More, and Romer (2009), by suggesting that internet is not solely used as a mean to entertain users, but to socially interact and to seek information as well. According to those authors, the latter two activities will in fact increase civic and political engagement.

Indeed, all research, even from Boulianne (2009) and Hargittai and Shaw (2013) who expected that the internet would decrease social capital in a community, conclude that internet use has positive effects on public life (Boulianne, 2009; Gil de Zúñiga, Jung, & Valenzuela, 2012; Hargittai & Shaw, 2013; Kim, Hsu, & Gil de Zúñiga, 2013; Pasek, More, & Romer, 2009). Moreover, most conclude that online social interaction and information seeking complements or facilitates offline civic and political participatory behavior. In particular, Gil de Zúñiga, Jung, and Valenzuela (2012) and Kim, Hsu, and Gil de Zúñiga (2013) indicate that online social activities, such as being active on social network sites, are positively associated with offline community engagement. This is because social network sites are designed for building and maintaining relationships. Moreover, the information from profiles of contacts allows a user to learn more about his contacts. In this way, online interaction can even strengthen face-to-face contact in local communities and, contrary to what Putnam (2000) argues, online social interaction stimulates the building of social capital which enhances civic participation (Wellman, 2005). Sharing platforms have some similarities with social network sites, since the users have to make a profile and can check profiles of other members. Moreover, as mentioned before, sharing platforms encourage meaningful relations between its members. Therefore, the findings of Gil de Zúñiga, Jung, and Valenzuela (2012), Kim, Hsu, and Gil de Zúñiga (2013), and Wellman (2005) could be applicable to sharing platforms as well.

With the conclusions from the academics named above, the debate about the influence of internet on public life is directed to the notion that internet use can contribute to society. Especially when the internet is used for the purpose of social interaction and information searching. However, these academics focussed their research on the effect of online interaction on offline community engagement. Today, with the rise of online communities on

the web, this effect can also be studied in the opposite direction. Then the question rises if offline interactions can influence engagement in online communities, in this case the communities on sharing platforms. In this specific direction, Matzat (2010) and Tillema, Dijst, and Schwanen (2010) already did some research. More specifically, Matzat (2010) investigates how a mixture of online and offline interaction can reduce the social problems in an online knowledge sharing community. For his research Matzat (2010) collected survey data among the members of 26 online knowledge sharing communities in the educational sector. The research shows that when combining online and offline interaction, members of a community trust each other more and that there is less free-riding behavior. However, it does not stimulate a stable membership, but overall the mixture of online and offline interaction reduces sociability problems in a community and even facilitates online knowledge sharing.

Tillema, Dijst, and Schwanen (2010) focus on online and offline communications in social networks as well, but take the influence of the information, the relational and geographical distance, and the frequency of the offline communication into account. The researchers surveyed over 750 respondents and questioned them about their ICT use in general and with regard to their social network in particular. Respondents had to name ten of their relatives and indicate how often they are in touch with those relatives via electronic ways and face-to-face contact. Most interesting to notice for this thesis is that the frequency of offline communication, face-to-face communication, is positively related to online contacts. In other words, when the respondent sees a relative a lot in person, he is likely to contact that relative more via internet as well. Thus, face-to-face communication and online contacts are complementary and stimulate more physical contact with members of the network. However, the frequency of face-to-face and online communication decreases when the physical and relational distance of the members to social network members increases.

As previously mentioned in the scientific relevance, less attention is paid to the influence of offline contacts on online community engagement, because this subject is relatively new. However, from the studies of Matzat (2010) and Tillema, Dijst, and Schwanen (2010) it is evident that offline interactions can also influence online community engagement, either by reducing social problems in a community or by increasing online contact when the physical and relational distance are not too far separated. Since this master thesis will study how offline meetings can stimulate online community engagement, it can be placed in the same specific research field as these two studies.

2.3 Online community engagement

Members of online communities have different motivations to take part in a network, such as a feeling of belonging or social identification (Lampe, Wash, Velasquez, & Ozkaya, 2010). Moreover, these motivations can differ from the motivations that led them to the online community. This implies that members can find a platform for information purposes, but joins the online community because it gives them a feeling of belonging. Besides the feeling of belonging, other social factors, such as social interaction, social identity and the perceived relevance of the community, are motivations to start participating in an online community as well. Lee, Kim, and Kim (2010) argue that these social factors influence the eventual online engagement in brand communities.

Before explaining the concepts that influence online community engagement, first a short description concerning engagement is given. Engagement as a more general concept is seen as a form of flow; flow is a condition in which a person is so involved in what he or she is doing that nothing else seems to matter to him or her (O'Brien & Toms, 2008). Although engagement should be seen as a more passive form of flow, it shares the user elements of focussed attention, control, interactivity and intrinsic motivation with the condition flow. Moreover, users feel the activity that engages them has the ability to challenge their knowledge and skills. Furthermore, engagement is an ongoing process and therefore it has a starting point, a period of engagement, followed by disengagement and then reengagement. Within a sharing community, members can find themselves in one of these stages. For example, when a member asks a question on the platform, this member is very likely to be in a period of engagement. However, when the answer is given and it satisfies the member, he could enter a phase of disengagement.

To evaluate in which phase of engagement members are, Lee, Kim, and Kim (2010) describe several concepts that in a way measure online community engagement. According to the researchers, who researched several online brand communities, online community engagement exists out of the likeliness to provide new information to, actively participate with, and support other members in the community. Moreover, speaking positively about and recommending the community to other people will predict one's online community engagement as well. The authors suggest that the combination of the five mentioned activities indicate consumers' online community engagement. Although these elements are useful to

reveal online community engagement and give an idea about what online community engagement includes, they do not explain how online community engagement is established and which underlying processes can be influenced by offline meetings. Therefore, these activities are seen as external characteristics of online community engagement.

Another explanation for individuals' engagement in online communities is given by the social capital theory (SCT). This theory was already mentioned in the debate about offline and online interactions. Although social capital, the social structure of relations, was believed to decrease when people started to use the internet, it appeared the opposite was true (Boulianne, 2009; Gil de Zúñiga, Jung, & Valenzuela, 2012; Hargittai & Shaw, 2013; Kim, Hsu, & Gil de Zúñiga, 2013; Pasek, More, & Romer, 2009). Moreover, when people use the internet for social and information purposes, the internet has positive effects on civic engagement. In numerous studies SCT is used to explain why offline or online communities work the way they work and how members engage in these communities (Lee & Lee, 2010; Moody & Paxton, 2009; Schafft & Brown, 2003; Shen & Cage, 2014).

Thus, social capital helps explaining why members are willing to engage in a community and, in this way, shows the underlying processes of community engagement. Social capital is basically seen as the benefits or resources that members gain from participating in a community (Bourdieu, 1983; Coleman, 1990; Shen & Cage, 2014). Generalized norms, trust and life contentment can both be seen as fundaments for and outcomes of an engaged online community (Lee & Lee, 2010). As previously mentioned, the first two concepts are foundations for an online sharing community, because norms and trust are needed for the members in order to share products and services (Chen, Lai, & Lin, 2014). In relation to the external characteristics that Lee and Lee (2010) describe, generalized norms, trust and life contentment are seen as internal characteristics of online community engagement in this thesis. The SCT and its concepts are described in the following part of this theoretical chapter.

2.3.1 Social capital theory

The SCT is a broadly used theory, Moody and Paxton (2009) claim this is because this theory is believed to explain many aspects in social life. However, because of this there are multiple definitions of the theory. The theory is developed in the eighties and Bourdieu (1983) and Coleman (1990) are both seen as the founders of SCT (Haüberer, 2011). Yet, the academics

started investigating the concept of social capital separately from each other and got inspired by different researchers and theoretical principles. On the one hand, Bourdieu (1983) has a more economical approach to social capital and refers back to the thoughts about capital of Carl Marx. Moreover, in Bourdieau's view, the relationships among the community members are sustained by material and, or symbolic exchanges. Relating to sharing communities, this would mean that members do not only start relationships with other members by sharing products and services, but will also maintain these relationships. Moreover, members may even make symbolic exchanges as greeting each other and sharing information. On the other hand, Coleman (1990) embeds social capital in a theory that explains the rational choices people make. This theory suggests people start relationships because social interdependencies develop among members. People rationally choose which members can maximize their social capital and will start relationships with the most relevant members.

Although the academics approach social capital from a different view, both authors discuss social capital as a social structure of relationships. The outcomes of this social structure can be seen as advantages or benefits that members gain from each other and from being part of the community. Moreover, social capital is seen as a public good, thus individuals do not own it. Bourdieu (1983) and Coleman (1990) concentrate on close, dense, and institutionalized relations, such as a family network. The advantage of a group with a close structure is that social capital multiplies. Moreover, outsiders are excluded from the group and thus from the collected social capital. However, this focus on close networks does not fully explain social capital according to some critics (Haüberer, 2011). The biggest critique is that social capital in a close group will not lead to new knowledge or innovations, since loose ties or outsiders are not included in social capital. More specifically, new ideas, knowledge and resources will not find their ways into a close group and the group will therefore turn very conservative.

Putnam (2000) extended the research on SCT and brought some relevant changes. Although he bases his ideas of SCT on the work of Coleman (1990), he introduced the concept of less dense, or more open groups to the theory. Moreover, it is the work of Putnam (2000) that popularized the SCT (Lee & Lee, 2010; Moody & Paxton, 2009; Shen & Cage, 2014). According to Putnam (2000) social networks deliver value to individuals since it allows individuals to collaborate and thereby reach collective goals more effectively. The meaningful contributions that Putnam (2000) made to the SCT are the concepts of bonding and bridging. With these concepts, Putnam (2000) added an inward and outward view to the theory.

Bonding social capital refers to the close group on which Bourdieu (1983) and Coleman (1990) concentrated. Bonding holds a network with close ties and emotional and substantial support between the members. It is aimed at the inside of the network and reinforces the homogeneity of the group. Opposed to bonding, bridging stands for a network with loose ties and less support between the members of the network. It is directed to the outside of a group and individuals in this type of network form, in a way, bridges between other members in the group. Bonding and bridging are not two distinct concepts, but they are the opposite sides of the single dimension of social capital (Pugno & Verme, 2012).

The addition of bonding and bridging to SCT is important since this implies that social capital both includes strong and weak relations (Haüberer, 2011). Yet, Lee and Lee (2010) mention another important, however different, variation in social capital. The authors namely notice the variation between network structures and the content in those structures. The network structure links back to Putnam's (2000) concepts of bonding and bridging, since network structure explains how members are related to each other and what the nature of those relations is. The content in network structures is about generalized norms, trust, and life contentment that is shared or flows in the network. The academics argue that the closer a network structure of a community is, the more norms are shared between members and the higher members trust each other. Furthermore, members within a closely structured network will get more life contentment out of that network. For example, in a friend network, members will get happiness out of their interaction with other members. Moreover, the researchers indicate that face-to-face interaction is still essential in creating a more closely tightened network. Although, sharing communities are not friend networks, the concepts of generalized norms and trust are important for members in order to share their products and services. Therefore, members should at least have more close ties than solely loose ties with the community.

2.3.2 Connecting bonding and bridging with network structures and content
When linking the two different variations together, bonding and bridging can be seen as two types of network structures and the characteristics of bonding and bridging as the content that flows in the network. Herein bonding stands for a network structure where the members have more close ties. This means that all or most members have connections with one another and the ties between them are strong. On the contrary, when a network structure is bridging, the members are more loosely connected to each other and ties between them are weak.

Therefore, as mentioned before, some members function as bridges between other members in the network. For a more engaged online community, the network structure should be bonding or at least more bonding than bridging (Shen & Cage, 2014). Referring back to the sharing economy, platforms will not have a total bonding structure, because members are mostly related as neighbors or people with the same interests. Yet, a platform should have a community that is structured in a more bonding way than in a bridging way. This way, members share general norms, trust and life contentment and are willing to engage with each other.

The content in a bonding network structure involves higher generalized norms, trust, and life contentment (Lee & Lee, 2010). The first two concepts are also broadly described by Putnam (2000) who names them characteristics of social capital. Generalized norms are ethical manners and morals that members in a community share among each other. Thus, norms are actions or services that members in a network exchange with one another (Putnam, 2000). According to Patulny (2005, p. 3) norms are 'the motivational basis for social interaction'. This can be explained by the most important characteristic of norms, reciprocity (Blanchard & Horan, 1998; Putnam, 2000). In a balanced situation, this means that individuals in a community will help one another without expecting a direct action or service in return. This is because persons believe that one day the good deed will be given back to them. This holds in a sharing community as well, as a member shares his products and services without getting something back, except thankfulness. Yet, when that member is in need for products or services, he believes the community will also share their products and services with him.

According to Putnam (2000) generalized norms, or norms of reciprocity as he names it, are one of the building stones for trust. The concept of trust is distinguished into generalized and particularized trust (Uslaner, 2002). The first type of trust relates to the emotional thinking of humans, while the second form links to the rational thinking. Consequently, generalized trust is based on the faith that people have in one another and particularized trust builds upon the information available about the others. Generalized trust is relevant for this case, because when being part of an online sharing community an individual has never physically met the persons he speaks to online, and therefore he will base the trustfulness of the other members on generalized trust. This holds that he will give the other members the benefit of the doubt. On sharing platforms this includes that members basically presume that all the other members are there for the same reason as them, thus the ease of sharing products and services instead of

buying them. This leads to the assumption that other members will not break their trust or sabotage the platform.

Furthermore, when linking the concepts of bonding and bridging to trust, it appears that strong social ties foster more generalized trust (Putnam, 2000; Bouchillon, 2013). Thus, bonding social capital reinforces trust, while this is not the case for bridging social capital. Moreover, trust will lead to more cooperation between the members in a network and this will in turn stimulate trust. Again, in an engaged sharing community it is necessary that the structure is more bonding than bridging, since this will stimulate trust among members. However, individuals do not blindly trust members; they base peoples' trustworthiness on a prediction of their behaviour or the intention of that behavior (Putnam, 2000). With face-to-face interaction people have to ability to mind-read the other. In other words, based on the actions, movements, and the words of the other, people try to interpret what the other is thinking. Yet, within mediated interaction, thus online communication, people communicate through a technological medium and consequently miss conversational cues. Computer-mediated communication makes it more difficult to determine the intensions of individuals. Yet, on a sharing platform profiles of the members provide information on which trustworthiness can be estimated. Moreover, some sharing platforms have a rating systems where members evaluate each other, for example by giving stars. This is a way for members to indicate the trustworthiness of other members. Still, a member is never sure if the online information is accurate.

For this reason, it is more difficult to interpret the intention of the other through mediated interaction and this brings some problems (Matzat, 2010; Rhoads, 2010; Urry, 2007). Matzat (2010) mentions problems as the lack of trust and more free-riding behavior when there is solely communication mediated by a computer. Urry (2007) concentrates on the lack of emotional and affective elements that computer-mediated communication has as opposed to face-to-face interaction. However, it is not impossible to determine intentions in computer-mediated communication, though, Urry (2007) indicates that computer-mediated communication is dependent on face-to-face interaction to develop trustful relationships. For this thesis, meetings organized by a sharing platform are opportunities for the members to meet each other and have a face-to-face conversation. After the meeting it will be easier for the members to interpret the intentions of members online.

Besides generalized norms and trust, life contentment is a third element in the content that flows through a close network (Lee & Lee, 2010). Although life contentment is not explicitly incorporated to SCT by Putnam (2000), it is included in this thesis. This is because Lee and Lee (2010) point out that having positive relationships with other members in a social network results into improved life contentment. Therefore, it can be seen as a beneficial outcome of social capital. Moreover, Helliwell, Barrington-Leigh, Harris, and Huang (2009) conclude that social support, a benefit of social capital, is closely connected to life contentment. Social capital is proved to have a positive and significant effect on individuals' life satisfaction. This is because social capital satisfies people in non-economic outcomes, such as social contact. It may well be that members from sharing platforms will experience social benefits from being part of that community. For example, within sharing services that are focussed on neighborhoods, neighbors get to know each other better and they can support each other. Not only with sharing products and services, but also with for instance watering the plants when a neighbor is on vacation. However, as mentioned before, offline contact will help members to get to know each other and develop a trustful relationship.

2.4   Concepts for operationalization

In this theoretical framework an online community is defined as a cyberspace supported by computer-based information technology, centered upon communication and interaction of participants to generate member-driven content which will develop generalized norms, trust and life contentment, resulting in a relationship being built. The three concepts of generalized norms, trust and life contentment in this definition are very relevant for the operationalization in this thesis, because these concepts are the underlying principles of online community engagement. Within the data gathering of this thesis, the interviews will concentrate on these concepts. As previously mentioned, the engagement of an online community can range from bridging, on one side, and bonding, on the others side. It is assumed that a more engaged online community on a sharing platform has a more bonding network structure than a bridging network structure. The data about the concepts of generalized norms, trust, and life contentment will give insight in the network structure of a particular platform.

In these thesis, generalized norms, trust, and life contentment are the internal characteristics of online community engagement (Lee & Lee, 2010; Putnam, 2000). The external characteristics that were mentioned in this theoretical framework will also be used to get a

feeling of members' online community engagement (Lee, Kim, & Kim, 2010). Therefore, the likeliness to provide new information to, actively participate with, and support other members in, speaking positively about, and recommending the community to other people will also be included in the operationalization.

The incorporation of internal and external characteristics of online community engagement in the operationalization will eventually provide an overview of the engagement of members in an online sharing community. Yet, this will not explain how online community engagement can be stimulated by offline meetings. Lee and Lee (2010), Matzat (2010), Shen and Cage (2014), Tillema, Dijst, and Schwanen (2010), and Urry (2007) all suggest that face-to-face contact still plays an important role in online communities, since face-to-face interaction is necessary in developing trustful relationships in online communities. In this thesis, the meetings or events that sharing platforms organize are seen as an opportunity for the members to have face-to-face interaction with each other. Furthermore, face-to-face communication can enrich generalized norms, trust, and life contentment. This leads to the assumption that face-to-face interaction between members on a sharing platform enhances the content in the network structure, and thereby stimulates online community engagement. This assumption is visualized in the model below (figure 1). It is important to note that this model will not be tested like a conceptual model in quantitative research. The figure is placed in this chapter to give an overview of the sensitizing concepts of this master thesis.
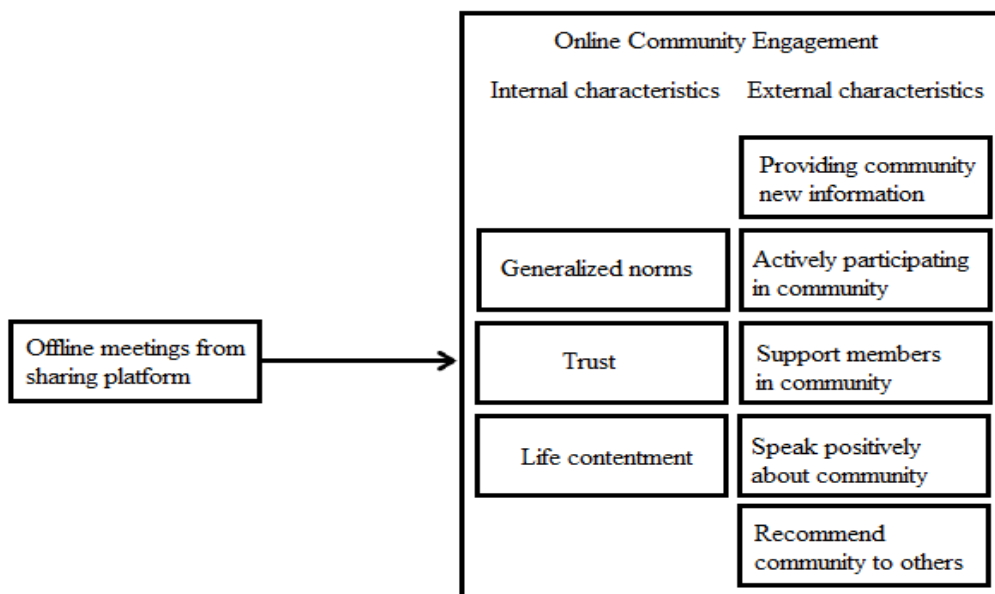

Figure 1. Conceptual model of this master thesis

3. Method of research

As shown in the overview of sensitizing concepts of this master thesis, there are several elements that play a role in how offline meetings for suppliers and demanders, initiated by a sharing platform, can stimulate more online community engagement on that platform. These concepts all appeared when analyzing the literature around this topic. Yet, there could also be other aspects that help explaining how offline meetings can influence the engagement of an online community. Moreover, the sub-questions of this thesis support finding these aspects, as the sub-questions concern the perspective of the members of a platform. Therefore, four platforms from the sharing economy and a contiguous sector, e-participation, are critically studied. Within these platforms members who went to offline meetings and events are interviewed. As previously mentioned, it is important to notice that not the actual online community engagement is measured, but the perceived online community engagement. This is because a qualitative approach, interviews, is used in order to gather the data.

In this master thesis, a qualitative approach is used, because this approach is more suitable when a research topic needs more exploration (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Moreover, a qualitative method allows for a deeper understanding about the topic. This is necessary in this thesis since the question of how offline meeting can possibly stimulate online community engagement includes a more complex and detailed explanation than the effect of one variable on another. This methodological chapter will first give a description of interviews as a qualitative research approach and why this is the most appropriate method for this master thesis. After that the units of analysis, the four different platforms, are described. The chapter will end by discussing how the data gathering went and how the data is analyzed.

3.1 Qualitative interviews

Qualitative interviews are conducted in order to explore how the concept of offline events can conceivably stimulate online community engagement. Since this thesis focussed on the interviewee's point of view, qualitative interviews were an appropriate way to explore this topic (Bryman, 2008). However, with this approach the perceived online community engagement by the members of a community is studied and not the actual online community engagement, since interviews do not provide statistical data of that. Yet, this was no problem or disadvantage for this thesis, since the research question is not if offline meetings stimulate online community engagement, but how this interaction works. Moreover, the previous

includes that it is assumed that offline events stimulate online community engagement. This assumption is drawn from previous research that concluded that offline interaction positively influences online interaction (Matzat, 2010; Shen & Cage, 2014; Tillema, Dijst, & Schwanen, 2010).

The interviews for this thesis are semi-structured interviews. This means that a topic list was made that covered relevant topics and questions regarding the research question (Bryman, 2008). The topic list was used as a guideline for the interview, but the questions that were eventually asked depended on the responses of the interviewees. Within the interviews the external aspects of online community engagement and the internal characteristics of online community engagement are operationalized for the interviews. The elements in these two concepts are translated to open interview questions. In this way, the questions will result in rich and detailed data, because interviewees are encouraged to answer the questions in their own phrasing (Bryman, 2008). Conducting surveys would not be relevant for this thesis, because this method leads to a general description of the population (Sapsford, 2007). Although a survey would allow to study a representative population, the data from the survey will not explain how offline events can possibly stimulate perceived generalized norms, trust and life contentment of the members in a community.

3.2 Units of analysis

As previously mentioned, the point of view from this thesis is from the members of sharing platforms. These members are the units of analysis, yet, because there are many different sharing platforms, a selection of sharing organizations was made. Moreover, it is important to place the results of the interviews in the context of the organizations (Bryman, 2008; Talja, 1999). Therefore it was chosen to study four organizations instead of all different kinds of organizations. It felt more relevant to place the results of several members from the same platform into the context of that organization than to place the results of one member into the context of that one organization. Furthermore, it was chosen to study multiple organizations instead of solely one organization, because this thesis is an explorative study and therefore wants to make comparisons between several organizations.

In order to select relevant platforms for this thesis, a longlist of interesting platforms was made. Interesting platforms had to meet the following two criteria: first, the platform relies on its online community for supply and demand and second, organizes offline events for its

members, such as meet-ups, workshops, showcases, and etcetera. Concerning the first criteria, sharing platforms can be seen as empty platforms; the members fill the platform with supply and demand. In addition, it is a specific choice to solely select cases that involve offline events as opposed to comparing cases of organizations that initiate and do not initiate offline events. This decision was made because this thesis has the aim to explain *how* offline events can stimulate the communities' online engagement, and not *if* offline meeting are a manner to stimulate online community engagement.

The longlist contained organizations from the sharing economy and e-participation sector. The latter sector relates to the sharing economy, because the existence of this organization also depends on the input of the members as well. Although the two different sectors show similarities in the way they work, there may be differences in the online community engagement of the platforms, what offline events mean for member, and the relation between offline meetings and online community engagement. The e-participation sector was included because it felt relevant to compare a contiguous sector and learn from the results of the e-participation platform. Furthermore, ShareNL has knowledge about developments within the sharing economy, yet, the results from the e-participation sector are seen as an out-of-box view and led to important results about the context of online community engagement on a platform. The organization that was chosen from the e-participation sector is the BioBased Economy. This platform was chosen as the Linkedin group of the organization that met the two criteria named above and the group is very active, since multiple members post updates in the group each day.

Besides the BioBased Economy Linkedin group, three cases are chosen from the sharing economy, namely 3D Hubs, MyWheels, and Home Exchange. These sharing platforms come from three different disciplines within the sharing economy, respectively services, mobility, and accommodation. It was chosen to study three different sharing organizations in order to investigate a diverse group of platforms. This felt relevant, because the context of the three sharing platforms differs as will be explained later in this chapter, and this can be important when analyzing ant interpreting the results. Other disciplines in the sharing economy are goods, skills, clothes, insurances, finance, knowledge, care, and work (Slijpen, 2014). These disciplines were not chosen because of two practical reasons. Firstly, not all disciplines have platforms that organize offline meetings and are therefore not interesting to study for this

thesis. Secondly, according to ShareNL the platforms that were chosen are experienced in organizing events for both suppliers and demanders.

Within the cases, members of the platform were interviewed. It was important that these members also attended offline meetings and events of the platform, because only then they can express how offline events changed their online engagement in the community. The results of this master thesis are based on eleven interviews. From the cases of 3D Hubs and MyWheels both three members were interviewed. From the sharing platform Home Exchange, it was solely possible to interview one member. For this case, the results were reflected with the community manager of Home Exchange in Netherlands and in this way it was found that the results from the interview with the member are representative for more members of Home Exchange. Lastly, four interviewees from the BioBased Economy were interviewed. As will be explained in the next part of the chapter, the BioBased Economy group exists out of different parties, companies, and institutions that all relate to the BioBased Economy. Therefore, it was relevant to interview more members. Moreover, in order to compare the cases for the sharing economy and the e-participation sector in a fair way, it felt necessary to collect more interviews in this latter sector. A more detailed description of the four analyzed cases is given below.

3.2.1 3D Hubs

3D Hubs is an international, online sharing platform for people who have 3D designs, but do not own a 3D printer (https://www.3dhubs.com/). When people make an account on the platform, they can upload their design, choose a member with a printer in their local area and then that member will print the 3D design. A member with a printer is called a 'hub' and these hubs can actually be seen as little printer shops, since the hubs offer a 3D printing service. Moreover, the hubs get paid by the members who want to print their 3D design. The sharing process of 3D Hubs starts online, by uploading a 3D design. Then the hub will download this design and print it. When the design is printed, the member can pick up their design at the hub.

Furthermore, 3D Hubs emphasizes that members become part of the community and this can already be seen on the platform itself. Besides finding local hubs, the platform also offers a forum, 'talk'. Within talk, members and hubs can ask questions, give each other advice, show 3D projects or place relevant articles about and links to 3D printing. Moreover, members can

specify their post to certain communities, for example to their local community. From the forum, it becomes evident that members of this platform are really active online. Furthermore, on the platform and in the talk meet-ups and events are announced. These meetings are organized by the 'mayors' of a city or area, a mayor can be seen as a sort of voluntary community manager of the local communities. The meet-ups are organized in order to get to know each other, but members can join other events, such as showcases, workshops and brainstorm sessions, as well.

This case was selected from the longlist, since the supply and demand of this platform comes from the members and the hubs. Furthermore, 3D Hubs initiates offline events for their local, online community and that suits the topic of thesis very well. In addition, when using the platform, it seems this platform is working on establishing a community feeling among members. This can be seen in the prominent place that scheduled events have on the website and on the talk functionality of the platform.

3.2.2 MyWheels

MyWheels is a Dutch car sharing platform and the members can either rent a 'shared car' or can lend out their car in their own local area (https://mywheels.nl/). A shared car is a car that is bought by the platform and that is placed into a neighborhood where members can easily use the car. Every shared car has an administrator and this administrator is the contact person of the car. Moreover, the car has a fixed parking spot nearby the administrator. The platform is a non-profit organization and works with many volunteers. For instance, being an administrator of the shared car is a voluntary task. Moreover, MyWheels is aspired by the ideals of creating a sustainable and liveable neighborhood. Instead of every neighbor owning a car it is more sustainable to share one car. Furthermore, in this way, neighbors also get to know each other.

When members register at MyWheels they can find cars, both shared and private cars, in their local area. Members can reserve cars on the website and via the mobile application of MyWheels. Moreover, the mobile application shows were a certain car is located. Although members can share cars everywhere in the Netherlands, most cars will be shared in the area where the members live in. In other words, a member will mostly use a car that is located in its own neighborhood. Therefore, MyWheels is very much focussed on the local community. Every year, the organization of MyWheels organizes a national event for its members. On this

event the current state of affairs and new developments are presented and discussed. Besides these national events, MyWheels appoints coordinators in the places they operate in. It is the coordinators' duty to organize meet-ups for both members and potential members where members can meet each other, ask questions about the platform and can convince potential members to join the sharing organization. According to ShareNL, MyWheels is very experienced in organizing offline events and therefore the platform is an interesting case to study in this thesis.

3.2.3 Home Exchange

Home Exchange is an international sharing platform. On the platform members from around the world can exchange houses for a period of time. In other words, instead of going on vacation to a hotel or resort, members go on vacation to another house. The sharing platform started as a printed, mailed book with the homes of people that wanted to exchange. Today, there are over 65.000 homes in 150 different countries registered, so the possibilities for exchanging are almost endless. As Home Exchange states, Home Exchange has grown into a social network and members can travel anywhere, live like locals and moreover, stay for free.

Before members can exchange houses, a newly registered member has to list its house in order for the community to see it. In other words, the member has to create a profile of itself and its house. After this, a member can search for desired locations and check the houses that are available. By sending a message, the member can let other members know he is interested in exchanging houses. Thus, a member can both send and retrieve inquiries and in this way arrange an exchange. An exchange is a deal that is made between two members about when the members will exchange, the duration of the exchange, and other practical details. The platform advices members to partner up with like-minded members in order to get an ideal vacation for everyone. Within the countries Home Exchange is operating, it strives to organize events for members. During these events members can share experiences and stories. Potential members can also join events to get a feeling of how Home Exchange works and ask questions.

Home Exchange is chosen, because the platform works according to the basic principles of the sharing economy, thus members determine the supply and demand of houses on the platform. Moreover, it is an interesting third case, since it focusses on an international

community, whereas 3D Hubs and MyWheels are more centered around the local area of members. Lastly, Home Exchange also offers events in the Netherlands.

3.2.4 BioBased Economy

The fourth case of this master thesis is the BioBased Economy, and more specifically the Linkedin group of the BioBased Economy (https://www.linkedin.com/grp/home?gid= 2973430). The website and Linkedin group are focussed upon the transition from an economy that uses fossil resources to an economy that uses bio mass resources. The BioBased Economy is a project that was founded by the Dutch government in order to encourage and bring the different parties of this transition together. For this purpose, not only a website was built, but also a Linkedin group was set up.

This thesis focussed solely on the Linkedin group, because the content on the Linkedin group is created by the members. Members post questions, interesting links and articles in the group and the events of the BioBased Economy and other relevant events are announced. The BioBased Economy organizes two events every year. One event is focussed on new knowledge and developments in the BioBased Economy. The other event is a network event where members can meet potential business partners. Besides the two events from BioBased Economy itself, members can find relevant other events in the Linkedin group as well. Members have multiple possibilities to visit offline events and this is the reason that the BioBased Economy is chosen as a case in this thesis. Moreover, another reason to choose this platform is because the Linkedin group of the BioBased Economy seems very active as lots of updates and articles are posted by the members.

Before describing the data gathering, an overview of the interviewees is given in table 1. The table gives insight is the gender and age. Moreover, it shows from which platform the interviewee is a member of. Thus, this overview presents the interviewees of this master thesis were.

Name	Age	Gender	Platform
Aaron	21	Male	3D Hubs
Alf	53	Male	3D Hubs
Merijn	43	Male	3D Hubs
Dinand	51	Male	MyWheels
Martien	42	Female	MyWheels
Saskia	44	Female	MyWheels
Priscilla	39	Female	Home Exchange
René	59	Male	BioBased Economy
Kees	58	Male	BioBased Economy
Wouter	32	Male	BioBased Economy
Philip	33	Male	BioBased Economy

Table 1. Overview of the interviewees of this master thesis.

3.3 Data gathering

As previously mentioned, eleven members where interviewed from which seven come from the sharing platforms and four from the BioBased Economy Linkedin group. The interviewees were found with the support of community managers or contact persons of the platforms. The community members of sharing platforms and the contact person of the BioBased Economy gave tips about how to find members, for example by posting a message on the platform, visiting an offline meeting, or they named members that could be asked for an interview. The potential interviewees were approached with a message that this thesis covered the relation between offline events and online platforms and if it was possible to talk about this with the specific member. It also included how the contact details of that persons were found and the contact information of the researcher. There was no other information given about the topic of this thesis in order to prevent any bias in the answers of the interviewees.

The interviews had a duration of approximately 45 to 50 minutes and all the interviews were recorded, with the permission of the interviewees. Besides this, before the interview it was explained where the recordings would be used for. Moreover, the permission to use quotes from the interview was asked. Almost all interviewees gave their approval for using their quotes, three interviewees preferred to see their quotes before this thesis would be published.

These interviewees were contacted after the results chapter was finalized. Moreover, before the start of the interview, it was explained that the researcher was interested in their story and opinion, thus there are no wrong or right answers.

The topic list of the interview was divided into four parts (see appendix A). First some introductory questions were asked. These questions were relatively simple questions, such as what the interviewee thinks of the organization, and they had to aim to make the interviewee comfortable in telling their story. The second part of the topic list covered the concepts relating online community engagement. This part of the interview concerned the first sub-question of how engaged members of a sharing platform feel to the online community. Within this part the external characteristics of online community engagement were translated to open questions. For example, 'on a scale from one to ten, how active are you in the community? And can you explain this number?' The number will show the participation of the interviewee in the community, the first aspect of online community engagement according to Lee, Kim, and Kim (2010). Moreover, the reasons for being not, moderate or highly active in the online community, already give an insight in the evaluation of the community. This latter aspect is also an external characteristic of online community engagement (Lee, Kim, & Kim, 2010).

After the external characteristics, a question relating the network structure was asked in order to explore the structure of the network. For this question it was also asked if an interviewee could indicate how connected he felt on a scale from one to ten. The number, together with the explanation of this number, gives an insight in how closely the network is structured. In other words, if the online community is more bonding structured or more bridging structured. This is of course self-reported, since it is based on the story of the interviewee and the network structure is not measured in any quantitative way.

Next, the internal characteristics of online community engagement, generalized norms, trust, and life contentment, were incorporated in the topic list. For instance, it was asked if interviewees expect something in return when they help other members and why. The answer to this question will show if there are generalized norms among the group. Moreover, life contentment was operationalized as 'what does the community bring you or what do you get from it?'. Some interviewees, for instance, answered that they have met new friends through the platform. This answer is a clear example of life contentment. With the questions relating external characteristics of online community engagement, network structure, and internal

characteristics of online community engagement, an overall view of the interviewee's perceived online community engagement was sketched.

The third part of the topic list contained questions referring to the offline meetings or events that an interviewee visited. This part of the interview covered the second sub-question, namely what offline meetings mean for the members of sharing platform that visit them. Besides asking which meeting the interviewee attended, the interviewee had to mention the goal of the event. Moreover, expectations and experiences about both the event and the other members on the event were asked. With these questions the motivation and evaluation of the meeting became evident. Lastly, the fourth part of the topic list contained questions regarding the relation between the meetings and the platform. The third sub-question, what the relation between offline meetings and the online community is according to members of a sharing platform, relates to this part of the interview. It was not directly asked how the meeting influenced the online community engagement, because this question would be too difficult to answer. Therefore, multiple questions covered potential changes on the platform and with the community on that platform. For instance, 'can you compare the use of the platform before and after the event?' With the answers on these questions relevant aspects relating the research question were found. This is profoundly described in the result chapter.

3.4 Data analysis

From the interviews transcripts were made in order to analyze the gathered data. The interview data was analyzed by means of a discourse analysis, because this approach produces knowledge and meanings out of the certain context (Talja, 1999). More specifically, a discourse analysis can be used when a meaning about a topic needs to be clarified and this type of analysis 'helps to create and reproduce systems of social meaning' (Tonkiss, 1998, p. 243). Thus, a discourse analysis allows for analyzing how a discourse among society, in this thesis the members of online platforms, constructs social realities (Van den Berg, 2004). Furthermore, a discourse analysis enables to place the findings in the broader social scope.

For this master thesis, it would not be appropriate to use a thematic analysis, because this type of analysis is more interpretative and 'consists of segmenting the data and reassembling them with the aim of transforming the data into findings' (Boeije, 2010, p. 94). Even though a thematic analysis investigates meanings about things, persons, and locations (Straus & Corbin, 1998), it does not include or show the foundations on which these meanings are built

upon. That would create a problem for this thesis, since it is important to understand how offline meetings can influence the external and internal characteristics of online community engagement. The discourse analysis in this thesis followed five steps (Taylor-Powell & Renner, 2003):

1. Get hold on the data
   - The interviews are transcribed and read multiple times in order to get a hold on the data and know the data from inside out.
2. Categorize the data
   - Important sections relating to the research question are coded in an open way.
   - Thus, this step identifies the patterns in the interview data.
   - Patterns will be organized into themes.
3. Focus the analysis
   - Per theme similarities and differences will be highlighted.
   - Relations between questions are explored.
4. Identify patterns within and between platforms
   - First, within the platforms the overall patterns, similarities and differences will be summarized.
   - Second, by comparing the overall patterns per platform the larger patterns between the cases can be found.
5. Interpret the results
   - The key findings from the analysis are interpreted.

3.5 Reliability and validity

For the analysis of this thesis, the software NVivo was used. NVivo is a data analysis software for qualitative analysis and mixed methods research and it offers tools to deeply analyze unstructured data (http://www.qsrinternational.com/products_nvivo.aspx). With this software relevant sections of the interviews could easily be open coded and saved. Concerning the credibility of this master thesis, this research strived to be as reliable as possible and therefore the process of data gathering and analysis were openly described. Besides this, the internal validity is guaranteed by analytic induction by the following three steps: pointing out key themes in the data, compare variations in the data, and lastly by

capturing the data in a comprehensive overview. Furthermore, the external validity is tried to cover by giving a description of the sampling of the interviewees.

3.6 Conclusion

Within this chapter it was first explained that a qualitative research approach was used in this thesis because this approach allows for an exploration and deeper understanding of a research topic, in this case how offline meetings can stimulate online community engagement (Straus & Corbin, 1990). Secondly, interviews were described as the best way to gather data since the data then represents the thoughts and ideas of members of the platforms. The selected platforms are 3D Hubs, MyWheels, Home Exchange, and the Linkedin group of BioBased Economy. From these platforms, eleven interviews were conducted. Thirdly, after the transcription of the interviews, a discourse analysis was executed. Moreover, it was explained that this type of analysis would be most appropriate, since it enables researchers to produce knowledge and meaning about a certain topic (Talja, 1999). Fourthly, the aspects of credibility, internal and external validity give insight in the quality of the results that are found in this master thesis. Lastly, the outcomes from the discourse analysis are presented in the next chapter.

4. Results

In this chapter the results from the analysis of the interviews will be discussed. The results will eventually answer the research question of this master thesis, which is how offline meetings for suppliers and demanders, initiated by a sharing platform, can stimulate more online community engagement on that platform. From the discourse analysis, three main themes appeared and those themes can be seen as building blocks that will lead to answering the research question. The themes are (1) perceived online community engagement of members, (2) visiting offline events, and (3) the relation between offline and online interactions. This chapter is divided in three paragraphs that match these three themes. Per theme the sub-themes will be illustrated with quotes from the interviews. Moreover, overall patterns and differences between the cases will be explored. Before explaining the three themes, the specific characteristics of the four different platforms in this thesis will be discussed. The characteristics of the platforms namely influence the viewpoint of the interviewed members on online community engagement, events and the relation between these two concepts.

4.1 Characteristics of cases

As previously mentioned, members from four different platforms are interviewed for this thesis. During the analysis of the interviews, it became evident that the different characteristics of the platform influenced the answers of the interviewees. These characteristics are important to understand before explaining the results of this thesis, since it makes the results more relevant. There is not only a difference between sharing organizations and the e-participation platform, but also between the members of the sharing organizations. More specifically, members from two platforms said they do not feel there is an online community. This difference and other characteristics are separately discussed below and are summarized in table 2.

4.1.1 3D Hubs

After interviewing three members of 3D Hubs from three different local areas, it appears that the community of 3D Hubs is both active online and offline. Besides getting orders via the platform, all of the interviewees are using the 'talk' of the platform. The talk, which can be compared with a forum, is used by the interviewees to ask questions, answer questions of other members and to share and gain knowledge about 3D printing. The interviewees evaluate

the online community positively, as they find the online community both helpful and relevant. Characteristic for 3D Hubs is that being active online is part of the sharing process. In other words, members need to upload their 3D design in order to let it be printed by another member in their neighborhood. Besides this, 3D printing is also an activity where a computer is needed. Another specific element for 3D Hubs is that sharing and gaining information about 3D printing is very important for the members. It is a foundation or argument for almost all answers the interviewees give. All three interviewees explain that the main reason for members to participate in the online community is because members on the platform are very willing to share information. Moreover, the biggest benefit of being part of the community is to gain new knowledge and through that learn how to print better. Not surprisingly, a reason to visit events is gaining new information and tips and tricks about 3D printing.

4.1.2 MyWheels

With MyWheels members of the platform share cars with other members that live in their neighborhood. The platform is very locally oriented and this appears from the interviews as well. The three interviewees all speak about the community in their neighborhood or around a car. Moreover, they do not really have the feeling of an online community, because they only use the platform, both on the website and on the mobile application, to reserve a car. The actual service, sharing cars, is offline and this is the reason the interviewees do not really use the website of MyWheels for participating in an online community. Another result which specifically relates to MyWheels, is that the ideology of MyWheels, car sharing in order to create a better world, is still visible. This is also the case, because the three interviewees are members for already quite a long time. Two of them registered on MyWheels because of idealistic arguments, for the third interviewee practical aspects were a reason to start as well. Lastly, members say they visit events in order to get information about developments within the organization and to exchange experience with other members.

4.1.3 Home Exchange

The third case is Home Exchange where members of the platform around the world exchange their houses. It should be mentioned that only one member of this case was interviewed. However, the results are verified by the community manager of Home Exchange in the Netherlands. She feels these results are representative for more Home Exchange members. Concerning online community engagement, the interviewee tells right away that she does not have the feeling there is an online community, yet, she explains there is a community of home

exchangers that stayed in her house. Actually, this community is very closely connected and with some of them she has contact on a daily basis, even though they live on the other side of the world. Again, in this case the actual exchange occurs offline and the online platform only shows potential homes to exchange with. Furthermore, there are no facilities on the platform to form an online community and when two members find each other on the platform, they will have contact outside the platform through e-mail to arrange an exchange. Besides this, the offline meetings are not very relevant for the interviewee, as she cannot meet potential members to exchange her home with, because potential members live outside the Netherlands and are not likely to attend an event in the Netherlands. The main reason to visit an event is to have a fun time and to expose the platform to potential members.

4.1.4 BioBased Economy

As previously mentioned in the method section, the Linkedin group BioBased Economy is business oriented and this clearly appears in the analysis of the four interviews with members from this Linkedin group. The interviewees have the feeling that when an organization does something with the BioBased Economy, employees of that organizations should be a member of this Linkedin group. Very specific to this platform is that sharing knowledge and finding possible business partners are the two main arguments to be active in the community and to visit events. Although this platform contains a business network where members will probably have a different relation with each other than in a neighborhood, all interviewees feel connected to the group, because all members of the group share BioBased aspirations and the ideas and values that match with moving to a sustainable economy. Furthermore, interviewees admit they regularly check the Linkedin group of the BioBased Economy. In this way, the interviewees stay up to date about relevant and interesting developments in de secor.

Platform	Feeling of online community	Exchange /sharing happens:	Geographical orientation	Reasons to visit events
3D Hubs	Yes	Online on the platform	Locally oriented	Gaining new knowledge, meeting other members
MyWheels	No	Offline around the car	Locally oriented	Meeting other members and information about developments within organization
Home Exchange	No	Offline around the houses	Globally oriented	Expose platform to potential members
BioBased Economy	Yes	Depends on business deal	(Mostly) nationally oriented	Meeting other members (potential partners), knowledge gaining

Table 2. Overview of characteristics of platforms

4.2 Perceived online community engagement

The first main theme that will be discussed is perceived online community engagement. As explained previously, in this thesis online community engagement cannot be measured since a qualitative method is used. The interviewees gave a lot of information about communities on the platform, but this is the perceived online community engagement of the interviewees. The perceived online community engagement of the interviewees refers back to the first sub-question. Thus, the answers of the interviewees give a very good insight in how engaged members of a platform feel themselves to the online community. This theme is divided in three sub-themes: external characteristics of online community engagement, internal characteristics of online community engagement, and plausible elements in online community engagement. The first two sub-themes relate to the theory that is used in this thesis, during the open coding of the interviews it appeared many codes connected to the theory discussed in the previous chapter. Although many codes matched the theory, the third sub-theme shows

elements that were not found in the literature, but these elements can play a role in the online community engagement of the members.

4.2.1 External characteristics of online community engagement

The first theme that is discussed relates to the *external characteristics of online community engagement*. In the theoretical framework it was mentioned that according to Lee, Kim, and Kim (2010) online community engagement on brand platforms involves the likeliness to contribute to the community, actively participate in the community, support other members, speak positively about the community, and recommend the community to others. These aspects are seen as the external characteristics of online community engagement, because together these characteristics give a representation of the perceived community engagement by a member. In this paragraph the five elements are discussed separately. Firstly, the contribution of the interviewees in the online communities varies. Five out of eleven interviewees say they post relevant articles and information in the online community. These are members from 3D Hubs and the BioBased Economy Linkedin group and their main reason to share this new information with other members is to inform them about the new possibilities and developments, as the following quote explains:

'My only activity is that when I occasionally have something interesting, an article or document from which I think I want to share this with other people, that I post it so that other people know it is there as well' Kees – BioBased Economy.

As this quote illustrates, the members contribute to the online community by sharing new knowledge within the community. Yet, two members of the BioBased Economy Linkedin group say their contribution is more passive and that they mostly just use the information that is shared in the community for their own purposes. Besides online contribution, the three interviewees from MyWheels admit they contribute more offline by sending press reports about the platform to local newspapers, distributing flyers in their local neighborhood, and one interviewee actually explained she brought the sharing initiative to her neighborhood since it was not active there yet.

The interviewees vary on how active they participate in the online community. This variation goes from no participation to a very active participation and interviewees seem to participate both online as offline. Six interviewees from 3D Hubs, BioBased Economy and MyWheels,

describe their participation as sharing their product or service, for which the platform is meant, and sometimes post a relevant article or respond to a question of a member. One of those interviewees points out that his activeness depends on the fact if he is in need for information. When he asked a question in the online community, he is very active, otherwise he admits he is not really participating in the community. Besides participating in the online community, members from 3D Hubs and MyWheels tell that they are participating a lot in the offline community. They mention that they voluntarily organize events for the online community of the platform in their local district or give publicity to the community in their local area:

'You see meet-ups organized everywhere, except in Rotterdam. When nobody organizes an event, maybe I should do it. Why shouldn't I do it? It costs time, but I get a lot of knowledge for it in return' Merijn – 3D Hubs.

This quote shows the interviewee would like to meet other 3D Hubs members in his area and one way to do this is to start organizing events for those members. Another way to participate in or for the community is through social media. Facebook and Twitter are named as other media on which members of a community communicate with each other and with potential members. One interviewee from Home Exchange admits that she actually does not participate on the online platform at all, yet, she points out that the platform does not has a functionality to undertake activities on the platform other than sharing your house:

'I only e-mail with people whom I think I want to exchange with and I keep my profile updated, but besides that there are no activities on the platform I can do' Priscilla – Home Exchange.

This quote illustrates that on this platform an online community would not develop because of technological reasons. In other words, the platform does not offer functionalities for members to engage with the online community. Yet, this interviewee explains she feels part of a community of members that visited her home. Thus, the members who stayed in her house form a community for her and she still has online contact, via e-mail and Facebook, with those members. However, this contact is not through the platform, because the platform does not offer possibility for that. Although this member cannot be part of an online community on Home Exchange, she is very willing to help other members. This is the same for the other ten

interviewees, since even though their contribution and participation in the online communities varies, they say they all support other members in the online community. This is illustrated by the following quote:

'You have the community that mostly helps each other online to support clients of 3D Hubs. I feel like most people do that' Aaron – 3D Hubs.

This quote does not only illustrate that the interviewee is willing to support other members, but also that he has the feeling everybody in the community would help other members. Thus, when a member asks a question or is in need for advice, either in the online community or in the offline community, the interviewees have the feeling that they or other members would answer that question. Solely one interviewee admits that he does not feel himself directly addressed when he does not personally know the members:

'You don't feel directly addressed. See, when you know someone who asks 'who knows something about this' then I say you should go to this or that person' Kees – BioBased Economy.

However, as the quote illustrates, when the interviewee would personally know the member he would help. This is an interesting result for this thesis, because it shows that some members prefer to know other members before supporting them. This can be related to the argument of Urry (2007) that computer-mediated communication lacks emotional and affective elements and because of this it is impossible for people to interpret the intentions of others online. When this member of the BioBased Economy Linkedin group would meet other members on an event, he can decide more easily what the member's intention is online. Regarding the analysis of how the interviewees evaluate the online community, eight interviewees give a positive evaluation, one interviewee is less positive, another is negative and the last interviewee mentions there is no online community. However, all the interviewees would recommend the online community and platform to family, friends and colleagues. The interviewees who give a positive evaluation mention that the community is very active and social, which can mean that members share information with each other, support each other or are open for new ideas. Just like the following quote illustrates:

'They are very social people and open for new ideas and not scared to give up their car, to name something. That is special in these times' Dinand – MyWheels.

This quote shows a very positive evaluation of the community, yet, one interviewee makes the comparisons with a class of students at an university; you have good students and less good students. Therefore the community would always score on average for this person. One interviewee from MyWheels mentions the online community is too big and therefore she does not see the offline community as very closely connected. The only interviewee that expresses a negative feeling towards the community explains that this is not because of the members, but because of the content of the information they share. He sometimes feels that the information they share is too subjective instead of objective, as he explains:

'You can say you are working on an innovation and that you want to share that with people, but the way they speak about it looks more like an advertorial instead of a message or announcement that is objective' René – BioBased Economy.

This quote comes from an interviewee from the BioBased Economy which is business oriented. This interviewee sees promoting organization or services and products as something more subjective, while members on 3D Hubs promote themselves as well by sharing posts about their 3D prints. Yet, this is not seen as subjective, but as information sharing. A plausible reason for this is that 3D printing is a hobby for the members of 3D Hubs and not their actual job. Besides this distinction between the sharing economy and the case from the BioBased Economy, there is a similarity as well. Namely, in the analysis of the cases it appeared that 3D Hubs and BioBased Economy are both very active online platforms. Although the level of online participation varies from average to high, all interviewees are at least active online. This is in contrast with the cases of Home Exchange and MyWheels where the interviewees solely use the platform for the service, but mostly not more than that. Moreover, these interviewees also mentioned they are not very active in the online community. An argument for this, mentioned by two interviewees of these cases, is that the platforms do not have functionalities to stimulate online community engagement:

'I only email with people from who I think I want to exchange houses with and I keep my profile up-to-date, but other than that, there are no activities to engage online' Priscilla – Home Exchange.

Like the quote illustrates, the platform does not have functionalities for the members to get engaged in the online community. However, these interviewees, especially from MyWheels, are contributing a lot in the local, offline community. Furthermore, the interviewees tell they have no feeling of an online community. A plausible argument for this is that MyWheels and Home Exchange are offline oriented services. This means that the service or product is shared in real life. Contrasting to members of 3D Hubs and the BioBased Economy Linkedin group, these interviewees have a feeling of an online community and also engage with this online community. This can be explained by the fact that the service, or at least a part of the service, happens online. For example, a member of 3D Hubs has to find a hub in its neighborhood on the platform and upload its design on the platform in order for the hub to print it. Furthermore, 3D printing is also an activity where a computer is needed. Concerning the BioBased Economy group, internet is not directly needed for companies to meet each other. Yet, the online group simplifies the process, because members can search the group on potential business partners. Besides this similarity between 3D Hubs and the BioBased Economy, the platforms have something else in common. On both platforms exchanging and sharing information is an important activity, like the following quote will explain:

'Some people are very generous with sharing information about what they have made and that is the best. Recently somebody made an urn, completely designed and printed. That are things from which I think: that is so cool and very personal. Yes, they really think sharing is better and then more people will do that' Merijn – 3D Hubs.

As the quote illustrates, members on the platform feel that sharing information is better than keeping it secret. Furthermore, since this shared information is valuable for the members, as the interviewees all explained, the platform is very relevant for members and therefore worthwhile visiting. Although solely the interviewees 3D Hubs and the BioBased Economy Linkedin group feel part of online community, all interviewees, also from MyWheels and Home Exchange, feel somehow engaged to the community, either offline or online. This is because most interviewees contribute and participate in the community, speak positively about the community, they would all support other members and recommend the community (Lee, Kim, & Kim, 2010).

4.2.2 Internal characteristics of online community engagement

The previous sub-theme showed that overall the interviewees are engaged with the online community. However, this sub-theme does not explain the underlying processes of this online community engagement. These underlying processes are explained is this sub-theme, internal characteristics of online community engagement. During the open coding some codes related very much to the concepts in the SCT. As mentioned, the network structure explains the closeness of connections in a community and in a sharing community this structure should be bonding, or at least more bonding than bridging (Shen & Cage, 2014). Nine interviewees from all the different platforms say that they feel somehow connected with the online community, mostly because other members share the same thoughts and interests as themselves:

'Connected in the way that I realize that I am part of a virtual community of people that I would never have met otherwise, also not via network events, because there you can only have contact with a limited amount of people' René – BioBased Economy.

Moreover, this quote illustrates that the member is aware that nowadays he has a better opportunity to meet these like-minded people. This thought is also shared by members of 3D Hubs and Home Exchange. MyWheels members do not mention this benefit, as they mostly exchange with members in their neighborhood. Furthermore, three interviewees from 3D hubs and the BioBased Economy said that in order to form an online community, the members need a collective goal they can work on and be part of. For example, one interviewee from 3D Hubs named a very practical goal, as organizing a fair together. A member from MyWheels also suggested a collective goal was needed in order to form a local, offline community. The interviewees believe this is necessary since the collective goal will bond the members in a community, as the quote illustrates:

'I think for a group to perform you need a bit of a community spirit, so together you should want the same. […] That you have the feeling of okay, let's do this and everybody does one's best for it' Kees – BioBased Economy.

From the quote is appears that the collective goal will bring community spirit and this will result in participation and contribution of members in the group. However, the feeling of engagement is not so strong that it can be seen as a completely bonding structure. A bonding structure would mean a network with close ties and emotional and substantial support

between the members (Putnam, 2000). From the analysis, three main reasons for the less close ties appear. Firstly, interviewees do not feel close connections because they do not really know the other members on the platform and they do not have extensive contact with those other members. Secondly, three interviewees point out that they registered on the platform for practical reasons. They just want the service that is offered, as the following quote illustrates:

'I don't really notice something of an online community. It is just an exchange platform' Priscilla – Home Exchange.

Thus, the member from Home Exchange sees the platform just as a service to exchange houses and not as a way to develop or engage with an online community. This is also representative for MyWheels, though the members of MyWheels feel part of an offline community. Thirdly, three members name the amount of members as a problem to feel connected. Interesting to mention, for one of MyWheels interviewees a community of 100 or 200 members felt too big for a community, while some others mentioned these amounts as too small for an online community:

'When I applied the group was very small, something like 2000 or 3000 printers were registered in total. Today, you see it grow. It's going exponentially fast. If I'm correct, there were 10.000 printers registered two months ago and this morning I checked it and now we are on 14.000. So, it was not a group at first' Alf – 3D Hubs.

The difference between the members of MyWheels and 3D Hubs can be explained from the background of the platform. Where MyWheels started as a small and local organization where members knew each other very well, this is not possible anymore when a local community reaches over 100 members. Yet, 3D Hubs started with 300 printers worldwide and in this way, a hub could be the only one in town. Nowadays, there are multiple hubs per city and those hubs can meet each other during events and form a community. Although some interviewees do not feel closely connected to the online community or, in the case of MyWheels and Home Exchange, feel an online community does not even exists. Six interviewees mention that an online community feeling is something that needs to grow and that needs time. The events play a role in stimulating a community feeling, as interviewees tell that it is easier to talk to members when you have seen other members a few times and got

to know them better. The next quote is a really good illustration of how those interviewees feel:

'It is like you enter a room where you don't know anybody and only at the end of the night you get a feeling of a nice club of people. I'm standing a bit in the beginning of that room, waiting' Alf – 3D Hubs.

This quote shows that every event will be a step further in getting to know other members and eventually in developing an online community. In that online community, content can easily flow between the members. With content Lee and Lee (2010) and Putnam (2000) mean generalized norms, trust, and life contentment. As previously mentioned, the researchers claim that in a more bonding network structure these elements can be more easily transferred between members. This also appears from the interviews. Concerning generalized norms, ten out of the eleven interviewees agree there are generalized norms in the community. Some interviewees literally say that members in the group share the same standards and values. Moreover, seven interviewees explain this is because members share goals, ideologies or are like-minded. Besides this, five interviewees say this feeling is strengthened because they never had strange or negative experiences with other members or never experienced situations that were inadmissible:

'Most people use the cars in a decent way, something very practical. I rarely hear complaints about people being too late or those kinds of things. On average, no strange things happen' Martien – MyWheels.

This quote refers to what interviewees from all cases mention, namely as long as nothing inadmissible happens, they believe members is the community are overall the same kind of people as themselves. Furthermore, all interviewees agree that they do not expect anything back when they helped other members in the online community. One interviewee mentions that one should not expect something back, as this is not the core principal of sharing. Yet, some interviewees explain that although they do not directly expect something in return, they would appreciate it when other members share information or answer their questions when asked, as the following quote will explain:

'If you made a print, a nice print, it would be nice if you share your settings […], because it is a nice print and your client likes it, but he only has to have little knowledge about it. We, as hubs, also want to make those prints with a high quality. So, than it is easy to have those settings' Aaron – 3D Hubs.

This quote is also in line with the literature, where Blanchard and Horan (1998) and Putnam (2000) argue that in a balanced situation individuals in a community will help one another without expecting a direct action or service in return. This is because persons believe that one day the good deed will be given back to them. In the case of 3D Hubs, sharing information about nice 3D prints can be seen as a good deed that is given back. Solely one interviewee from the BioBased Economy does not have the feeling that members share norms in the online community, because he feels the community exists out of too many different parties. This seems plausible for this interviewee as all different kinds of parties that have a connection with the BioBased Economy can register for the Linkedin group.

Relating to trust, ten interviewees say that overall they trust the other members on the platform; only one interviewee directly says he does not trust the other members in groups. Moreover, seven interviewees even say they highly trust the other members. The answers on the question why the interviewees trust other members vary. Some interviewees, both from the sharing economy and the e-participation sector, say it is because the other members are nice and honest people or as mentioned previously, they have no strange or negative experiences with other members. As long as their trust is not broken, they will trust the others in the community. Three interviewees point out that they have an online reputation that they want to keep up and other members have the same, as the next quote will illustrate:

'Your reputation is on it, […], so then you want to keep up that reputation. You have to treat your clients well and we talked about it yesterday during the meet-up that normal companies hire someone, they don't mind to do their job less good, but we as hubs work for ourselves and then you want to make sure you offer something good' Aaron – 3D Hubs.

Thus, if a member wants a good reputation, he has to do its best for the community in order to get a good rating. This then will increase the overall trust in the online community. The latter result in in line with Matzat's research (2010) who found that a mixture of online and offline interaction can reduce the social problems in an online knowledge sharing community and

that members of a community trust each other more. Last, two interviewees from sharing platforms also mention the fact that people apply voluntarily to the platform and therefore they have the feeling members will not sabotage the platform or other members:

'Nobody joins such a club to sabotage, or to make money, or to thwart the whole thing. So, they are all willingly people that think positive' Saskia – MyWheels.

This quote shows that the interviewee presumes all members on the platform can be trusted. Moreover, this relates to what was mentioned as an important characteristic of the sharing economy, namely that the sharing economy is based on trust between the members (Slijpen, 2014). Besides trust, in the theoretical framework social capital was explained as the benefits of being part of a community (Bourdieu, 1983; Coleman, 1990). All of the interviewees mention that they gain benefits from being part of the community. The most important benefit, mentioned by eight of the eleven interviewees, is the knowledge they can gain through the platform. The following quote explains how most of the interviewees think, namely that members share information, developments or settings on the platforms:

'I want to keep up with the knowledge about a few subjects that are posted there and when we have questions or look for potential partners, I would search in that group for answers as well' Wouter – BioBased Economy.

As shown with the quote, the online community is relevant to follow as it keeps the interviewees up-to-date. Yet, this is only the case for 3D Hubs and the BioBased Economy Linkedin group. Still, members from MyWheels mention they search on social media for information about car sharing. Moreover, interviewees also tell that the community is very relevant for asking questions, keeping on track on interesting discussions or finding potential partners. Especially, the interviewees from 3D Hubs and BioBased Economy mention the community provides them with very relevant contacts or even with business deals. Furthermore, interviewees also get a certain life contentment out of the online community. For some this means that they get to know tips and tricks to perform better in their hobby or they like the fact they are part of the sharing economy, like the following quote explains:

'I also find it nice and cool to say that I do not have a car. I always have the idea that some day when I'm at Linda de Mol with that Million game, that when I win the car I can say: I don't want it, because I already have 200 cars' Saskia – MyWheels.

This member is very aware about the ideology behind MyWheels and feels proud to be part of that. Lastly, three interviewees mention that they have made new friendships through the platform:

'And again, I told it brought me some friends and that has value to me as well' Dinand – MyWheels

Making new friends can possibly be seen as the biggest benefit for one's life contentment since Lee and Lee (2010) suggest that having positive relationships with other members in a social network results into improved life contentment.

4.2.3 Plausible role in online community engagement

Within analysing the interviews, three sub-themes appeared that did not directly relate to external or internal characteristics of online community engagement, yet these sub-themes could not be neglected as they explain plausible elements that can play a role in online community engagement. Moreover, these elements did not appear in the literature around this thesis topic, but were found in the interviews. Relating the first sub-question, these elements influence how engaged members feel themselves to the online community. The first element is platform relevance and as the name describes, six interviewees from 3D Hubs and the BioBased Economy Linkedin group prominently express why the platform is relevant for them in their interview. Five out of the six interviewees say that the platform is very relevant to them, because they can stay up-to-date with the latest knowledge and follow interesting discussions, as the following quote illustrates:

'Well, what I get from it, is that from time to time I am informed about the news, developments and cases that matter in de BioBased Economy. Moreover the discussions that take place about certain topics, that may not directly have my priority, are interesting to have knowledge about' René –BioBased Economy.

The mentioned relevance of the platform by the interviewee is the reason to go to the online platform and engage with the online community. This is only the case for 3D Hubs and BioBased Economy, since these two platforms offer online functionalities for their members to engage with the online community. Another plausible role in online community engagement is the feeling of connection to the organization behind the platform. Six interviewees, spread over the four platforms, express that they feel connected to the organization, because they have met people that work for the platform, the values of the platform match with their own values, or because they were a member from the start of the organization:

'Yes, they are all people who care about the organization and besides their work, family and hobby's make an effort for car sharing and that is what I always like about MyWheels compared to Green Wheels. It feels way more like a community and there is an ideology behind it' Saskia – MyWheels.

This quote even illustrates why the members of MyWheels prefer MyWheels over another car sharing service. Moreover, some interviewees even used the word 'we' to describe a situation or accomplishment of the organization. With this description, it becomes evident that members feel closely connected to the organization and feel like it is a community. Moreover, it makes them active members for that organization, both offline and online. The third element that could play a role in online community engagement of the interviewees is a change that occurred in the community they are part of. Five interviews from three different cases mention they have the feeling that the organization changed recently. Three interviewees explain that the organization was professionalized and thereby the contact with the organization and new members is more businesslike, as the following quote expresses:

'Car sharing grows, and that is good, but it also makes it more professional, also often the members become more professional. In the beginning I knew everybody who was a member, but that is not the case anymore' Martien – MyWheels.

Moreover, as the member from MyWheels explains, first she knew all the other members in her area, this stopped when the community grew bigger and the organization had to professionalize. This is also applicable to the two other MyWheels members. For members from 3D Hubs and the BioBased Economy Linkedin group this change was more positive, as

two interviewees from these platforms mention that the shared knowledge and articles have more quality than before. This change links back to the first plausible role in online community engagement because a higher quality of knowledge makes going to and participating in the online community even more relevant.

4.3 Visiting offline events

The second main theme in this thesis is the theme *visiting offline events*. As the name suggests, this theme contains all the relevant references about the events that interviewees named. This theme refers to the second sub-question of this thesis, namely what offline meetings mean for members of sharing platforms. The meaning of meetings is explained according to the several purposes that the events can have. Continuing on the purposes of events, the most named goal for an event, mentioned by ten of the eleven interviewees, is to strengthen the community feeling and to get more engaged members. For most of the interviewees this is also a reason to go to the event or even to organize meetings themselves. They want to meet other members and therefore the events have a social function as well. The interviewees admit that they visit the events or meet-ups because they are curious who the other members are. The following quotes are also representative for the ten other interviewees:

'I think curiosity to who are those other people that are busy with it and how it works in other places' Martien – MyWheels.

'To strengthen the community, actually you just do the same as you do online. Online they show their printers, their work and they give tips and tricks. Offline we do the same, but then you are with people and you have a nice presentation. You are more engaged and get to know those people personally' Aaron – 3D Hubs.

'There is a theme, but the underlying thought is often that companies get to know each other and pick up things together' Wouter – BioBased Economy.

As the quotes illustrate, the members wonder what kind of people the other members are, how they use the platform, and they want to get information and inspiration from those other members. This refers back to the theoretical framework where Gil de Zúñiga, Jung, and

Valenzuela (2012) and Kim, Hsu, and Gil de Zúñiga (2013) indicate that online social interaction and information seeking activities are positively associated with offline community engagement. The interviewees expose that the findings of these researchers still hold. Moreover, some of these interviewees from sharing platforms are even volunteers for the platform and organize the events themselves. Although interviewees from both the sharing economy and the e-participation sector mention events are organized for community and information purposes, for the sharing economy platforms this means that members informally get to know each other and learn from experiences of other members. While for the interviewees of the BioBased Economy Linkedin group these purposes hold to broaden your business network and gain knowledge in order to make your product or service better.

Another frequently mentioned goal is to collect knowledge on a certain topic. This goal is often named together with the previous goal of strengthening the community feeling. Seven interviewees mention that the events or meet-ups mostly have a theme that is discussed. Interviewees say they learn a lot on events and through presentations and discussions with members interviewees get to know pros and cons of products, tips and tricks that they can apply or simply that they get advice from others. This result is illustrated by the following quote:

'Every time I learn something new that I can take home with me. […] Even if it is three hours, like last time on Monday night, I unexpectedly learned new things from which I did not know it was possible' Merijn – 3D hubs.

As the member of 3D Hubs explains, he gains new knowledge every time he visits an event. This is because in addition to presentations, sharing experiences with other members is seen as valuable knowledge as well. Three other, less frequently named goals are to get business deals out of an event, to expose the platform to potential members and to participate in the organization. Interviewees from the BioBased Economy Linkedin group and 3D Hubs, the platforms that are more business oriented, say that an event can also be commercially interesting because you can meet potential clients or partners. Five interviewees, spread over the sharing platforms, also mention a goal is to expose the platform, as the next quote will show:

'The goal… I think it was to give publicity, but also to convince potential home exchangers' Priscilla – Home Exchange.

From this quote is becomes evident that the event is more focussed on convincing individuals to become a member. Lastly, two interviewees tell that some events they go to were to have a say in the organization of the platform and to discuss which direction the platform should go:

'And what we often did was checking the occupation of a car, if we could do something about it. Shall we move the car to another neighborhood? What kind of cars do we need? One time there was a man who was in need for an automatic car, so we bought one' Dinand – MyWheels.

This last goal of having a say in the organization solely relates to the members of MyWheels, because the platform was organized like this when it started. Although the three latter goals are less frequently named, they can have influence on the online or offline community engagement of members. For 3D Hubs and the BioBased Economy meeting potentials clients or attracting new members can be reason to engage more in the online community. For Home Exchange, when offline meetings are organized in every country the platform is operating in, new members mean new houses to exchange with.

4.4 Relation between offline and online

Within this last theme, the results on the relation between the offline events and online community engagement will be discussed. This last main theme covers the third sub-question concerning the relation between offline meetings and the online community according to members of the platform. First, the changes that interviewees noticed after visiting will be discussed as this links very closely to the previous theme of visiting offline events. After that, the references that interviewees make to offline and online interaction are explained. While analyzing the interviews it turned out that the interviewees disclosed some changes they noticed after they went to an event of the platform. These changes can be categorized in two sub-themes, being *boost after the event* and *trust after the event*.

Starting with the first sub-theme, ten out of the eleven interviewees express they get a boost to get engaged again after visiting an event. Most of the interviewees explain that this boost comes from the enthusiasm that is spread on an event because they have spoken to like-

minded people and have the feeling everybody is on the same level again. Yet, the boost can also be caused by the relevant information and contacts members gain on an event. According to the interviewees, the boost results in organizing events with local members, searching for new events to visit, recruiting new members, updating online profiles and following relevant members online. However, some interviewees admit that this boost is solely temporary, as the following two quotes will illustrate:

'I have met all interesting people, followed them online, checked what they did in their lives and then I saw another event. I thought it was interesting to join, but it was on a Monday afternoon when I could not go, and when that happened a few times, the feeling weakens' Philip – BioBased Economy.

'Yes, well, it passes quite fast, but you get a push again to go to the platform and update your profile and to make contact with other people' Saskia – MyWheels.

The first quote shows that the event was very valuable for the interviewee and that this resulted in an online search for the persons he met and for new events. The second quote also exposes that the boost makes the interviewee go online and engage with the platform. Yet, both interviewees explain this boost decreases after a while. Furthermore, even though ten interviewees admit they get a boost after the event to get engaged again, both offline and online, only two interviewees still have contact with members they met on the event. They keep in touch through e-mail or having a cup of coffee and talk about their projects or developments. Six other interviewees say that they do not really have contact with members they met on the event. The most evident reason for this is that the members did not appear to be relevant enough to keep in touch with, yet, interviewees also admit that their network grew and new relations can pay off in the future, like the next quote will express:

'You have those so called meet and greet tables, […] and most of the time they are valuable contacts, but I cannot say I ever got a paid job out of it. No, but those relations can pay off at some time' René – BioBased Economy.

Besides that the quote indicates that the interviewee does not have contact with the met members on the event, he also explains that this can still happen in the future. Regarding online contact with members in general, eight interviewees explain they have contact with

members on social media, where Facebook and Twitter are mostly named. The following quote will illustrate the reason for members to have contact on social media instead of on the platform:

'As said, I find it difficult to keep in touch via the platform. I also posted 'nice that you came', but I cannot see who reads that and the only way that I can keep an eye on that is when I directly talk to them in the Facebook group' Alf – 3D Hubs.

As the quote illustrates, members have online contact on other media than the platform because the platform simply does not have a functionality for contact between the members or this functionality does not satisfy the needs of the members. This interviewee even started a Facebook page to contact other members of the platform. Yet, besides the medium that is used for communication between members, one interviewee mentions that it will be easier to contact with members in the future because he knows those members personally and therefore trusts them. More interviewees admit that their trust in members of the platform changed positively after having met them on an event. The reason for this is well explained in the following quote:

'To get everybody together and when people know each other, they also know who they are dealing with and then trust grows and you can do fun stuff with each other' Alf – 3D Hubs.

This explanation of why trust grows is representative for the other interviewees. Though, as previously mentioned, some interviewees also see trust as something that needs time to grow. Furthermore, two interviewees explain that they already trusted the community a lot before the event, because no member ever broke their initial trust. From the previous, it becomes evident that trust is an import aspect in the interaction between offline and online because overall trust grows on offline meetings and this perseveres online. This outcome relates to the theory, where it was found that face-to-face interaction is still essential in forming an online community (Lee & Lee, 2010). Four interviewees even literally mention the exact same conclusion as Lee and Lee (2010). Moreover, those interviewees express that they think it is nice and enjoyable to meet other members face-to-face and have personal contact. Besides the nice feeling the interviewees describe, three interviewees express that personal contact with other members of the platform has more impact than online contact. This is illustrates by the next quote:

'Well, at every event you have spoken to some people and because of that you know them better and understand what they want and what they are doing, and that stays in your memory' Kees – BioBased Economy

From this quote it appears that the interviewee remembers personal contact or the member better and this could be a foundation for more contact or a relation, friendly or business, later on. In addition, the interviewees feel that the face-to-face interactions on events are just as valuable as the face-to-face interaction they have when they exchange 3D prints, cars or houses. As the following quote will illustrate, they have the feeling that it is easier to talk or to respond online when they know the member personally:

'Well, it is more that you meet people personally and when they have a question you know who it is and you have met that person, so it talks easier' Merijn – 3D Hubs

Although it makes it easier to engage with members online, four interviewees say they do not feel that they engage more with the online community after the event. One reason mentioned for this is that the interviewees are already engaged with the community and the platform. Another reason mentioned by one of the interviewees is that after the event, there are no posts about the event online and therefore no online discussions between the members can take place about the meeting. Furthermore, one interviewee also mentions that although he does not get more engaged with the online community after an event, it is the online community that gives him the possibility to go the events. In this way he can bring online to real life:

'Online, the platform, allows that a community can develop, but offline causes that you get a bond with each other' Aaron – 3D hubs.

4.5 Key findings of this thesis

From the first theme of online community engagement it became evident that the members of the platforms which have a functionality for an online community to interact and feel engaged with the online community. Together, the external characteristics (Lee, Kim, & Kim, 2010) and internal characteristics (Lee & Lee, 2010; Putnam, 2000) of online community engagement gave a good and overall view of the perceived engagement with the online community. Moreover, from the interviews it appeared that the trust in the platform and the

relevance of the platform are two other elements that play a role in one's online community engagement on sharing platforms. Trust stays a very important aspect for platforms in the sharing economy (Hsu, Ju, Yen, & Chang, 2007; Slijpen, 2014). This was already mentioned in the introduction, but it is supported by the outcomes of this thesis.

Concerning visiting offline events, the second theme, the members mostly go to offline events for the purpose of meeting the online community and knowledge sharing. This is similar to what was found in the literature about this thesis topic, as Gil de Zúñiga, Jung, and Valenzuela (2012) and Kim, Hsu, and Gil de Zúñiga (2013) indicate that online social interaction and information seeking activities are positively associated with offline community engagement. Besides these two main goals of offline meetings, other goals are to get business deals out of an event, to expose the platform and to participate in the organization.

Lastly, regarding the interaction between offline and online, the members express they get a boost to get engaged again after the event. According to the members, this boost results in more online engagement and more offline engagement with the community. Furthermore, members also explain that their trust in other members grows after an offline meeting. Referring back to the conceptual model that was presented in the theoretical framework, offline meetings encourage trust, and with that encourage generalized norms and life contentment. These three concepts are the internal characteristics of online community engagement (Lee & Lee, 2010; Putnam, 2000). Yet, as mentioned by the members, trust and a community feeling need time to grow. It is not encouraged by organizing a single event because it is seen as a process. Moreover, online community engagement can only be stimulated when the platform has functionality for the online community to interact, such as 3D Hubs and the Linkedin group of the BioBased Economy offer.

The three main themes that were found in the analysis relate to the three sub-questions in this master thesis. With the results from the interviews, these sub-questions can be answered. In this way, the main research question can be answered. Furthermore, some outcomes of the interview can be translated to recommendations for sharing platforms. This is all described in the next chapter of this thesis.

5. Conclusion and discussion

This master thesis started with the question how offline meetings for suppliers and demanders, initiated by a sharing platform, can stimulate more online community engagement on that platform. Important elements in this question are firstly, online community engagement, which is believed to be stimulated by organizing meetings for members. The sub-question relating this element was how engaged members of a sharing platform feel themselves to the online community. Again, the eleven interviews resulted in an overview of the perceived online community engagement, as this thesis was interested in the perspective of the members. Secondly, the offline meetings or events should be initiated by the platform and this is not the offline interaction between members when they exchange products and services. Furthermore, the sub-question that covered this element questioned what the meaning is of offline meetings for members of a platform that visit these meetings. The last element is the interaction between offline meeting and online community. The sub-question concerning this element was what the relation is between offline meetings and the online community according to members of a platform.

This chapter will first start with the conclusion of this thesis. Herein, the sub-questions will be answered and this will lead to the answer of the main research question. Moreover, some recommendations are made for sharing platform. After the conclusion, it is discussed what the results and conclusion mean for literature surrounding this thesis topic. Within the discussion, the limitations and directions for future research are also presented.

5.1 Answering the sub-questions

Throughout this thesis plausible answers on how offline events can possibly stimulate online community engagement were sought in previous research and the theory of social capital. In previous research it was found that the internet can contribute to society when it is used for the purpose of social interaction and information search (Boulianne, 2009; Gil de Zúñiga, Jung, & Valenzuela, 2012; Hargittai & Shaw, 2013; Kim, Hsu, & Gil de Zúñiga, 2013; Pasek, More, & Romer, 2009). Yet, in this thesis the relation is turned around in how offline events can stimulate online community engagement. Matzat, (2010), Shen and Cage (2014), and Tillema, Dijst, and Schwanen (2010) already found that the internet indeed can positively influence society. According to Lee, Kim, and Kim (2010) the external characteristics of online community engagement are the likeliness to provide new information to, actively

participate with, and support other members in the community. Moreover, speaking positively about and recommending the community to other people are linked to one's online community engagement as well. However, these characteristics do not explain the underlying processes that can be influenced and stimulated by organizing offline meetings. To explain the underlying processes, the theory of social capital is used. Academics that apply the SCT point out that a network can be structured in a bonding and in a bridging manner, wherein the first one stands for a network with close ties and the latter for a network with loose ties (Lee & Lee, 2010; Putnam, 2000). Moreover, in a bonding network the members share more generalized norms and trust. The members will experience more life contentment as well. Finally, several researchers argue that face-to-face contact is still important in creating a bonding network (Lee & Lee, 2010; Matzat, 2010; Shen & Cage, 2014; Tillema, Dijst, & Schwanen, 2010; Urry, 2007). This is an important argument referring to this thesis, as a sharing community should have a more bonding network structure than a bridging network structure.

These insights guided the interviews with members of three sharing platform and one e-participation group. Regarding the first element of the sub-question, how engaged members of a sharing platform feel themselves to the online community, it can be concluded that overall the interviewees agree that the communities have a more bonding structure than a bridging structure (Putnam, 2000; Lee & Lee, 2010). This means that the members feel they have more close ties as opposed to loose ties with other members and this can for example be seen in the fact that members mention they will support other members. Moreover, in general the members from the platforms have the feeling they share generalized norms and trust the other members in the group. This is in line with the research of Lee and Lee (2010) who also concluded that in bonding network structures, or a network with a more bonding than bridging network, the members share more generalized norms and trust. Although most members from the platforms feel part of a community, this can both be offline and online. When a sharing platform is focussed on offline exchanges and focusses less on the online platform, for example MyWheels, the members will very likely feel part of an offline community. However, from the 3D Hubs, where members can communicate with each other via a forum, it became evident that the members feel there is an online community.

Concerning the second sub-question, what offline meetings mean for members of a sharing platform that visit them, it appears that members mention that their behaviour within the

offline or online community does not change directly after one event. However, offline events are part of the process of creating a community feeling. Especially when members perceive that an event is organized with the goal to strengthen the community or to collect knowledge. It appears that members experience a boost after an event organized with these two goals. This boost stems from meeting like-minded people and receiving relevant information and results in both more offline and online community engagement. This is in line with the findings of O'Brien and Toms (2008) who concluded that engagement is an ongoing process. It should be mentioned that this offline and online community engagement is self-reported and not measured. Although this can be seen as a limitation, the qualitative research approach of this thesis is still thought to lead to a better answer to the research question than with a quantitative research approach. Thus, for members that visit offline events, this means that they will get to know the community and that they will gain knowledge. In this way, an offline event can create a boost among the members and this can stimulate online community engagement. This outcome relates to the findings from Matzat (2010), Shen and Cage (2014), and Tillema, Dijst, and Schwanen (2010) who also found that offline interaction can positively influence an online community. However, it should be mentioned that the boost that members feel is temporary and, according to the members, disappears after a while.

The boost that members experience after visiting an event also relates to the answer of the third sub-question. This sub-question covered what the relation is between offline meetings and the online community according to members of a sharing platform. The boost that members feel is a first aspect in relation between offline meetings and online community engagement, a second aspect is that members agree that such offline moments make it possible to develop a community feeling. In other words, the online platform makes it possible for a community to arise, but a bond between the members is created when meeting each other offline. This is because offline members get the feeling that they really get to know each other. Moreover, members develop a feeling of who they are dealing with during the meet-ups and, according to the results, this is important for the members.

Reflecting back on the theoretical framework, this outcome corresponds with the conclusion of Lee and Lee (2010). The researchers suggested that face-to-face contact is still essential in order to form generalized norms and trust in an online community and for the members to experience the benefits from being part of the community. When members know the other members in the online community, because they have seen each other in real life, it is easier

for them to interpret the intention of the other members in the group (Matzat, 2010; Rhoads, 2010; Urry, 2007). Moreover, this is a foundation on which the content, generalizes norms, trust and life contentment, can develop and flow through the network. This finding from the theoretical framework reflects in the results of the interviews as well. Members agree that their trust in other members grows during and after events, because they get a feeling they know each other. This outcome is very relevant when relating it to sharing communities, because as already mentioned in the introduction, sharing platforms can only exist because members trust each other (Hsu, Ju, Yen, & Chang, 2007; Slijpen, 2014). When members would not trust each other, they would not share products, services and knowledge and this would mean that there is no supply and demand on the platform.

5.2 Conclusion and recommendations

This thesis shows that offline meetings and events for suppliers and demanders, initiated by a sharing platform, can stimulate the growth of (perceived) generalized norms, trust, and life contentment. In this way, online community engagement can be stimulated. Therefore, it is recommendable for sharing platforms to organize offline meetings and events. Yet, this is a process and cannot be established after organizing a single event. As previously mentioned, the experienced boost is temporary and just a few members keep in touch with other members who they have met offline. As most interviewees explain, events help to get to know the other members and in that way help to develop trust in the community.

This insight is very relevant for ShareNL, which informs sharing organizations. Therefore, the results are translated to some recommendations that ShareNL can exchange with organizations in the sharing economy. When a sharing initiative would like to stimulate online community engagement, it is important to explore if the members of the platform feel there is an online community. For some initiatives this will not be the case, as seen in the cases of MyWheels and Home Exchange, the actual exchange occurs offline and the platform is a way to arrange that service or get that deal. Moreover, the platform does not offer a functionality for the community to engage online. In this way, being active in an online community may not even be relevant for the members. When this is the case, offline events will not be relevant to organise in order to stimulate online community engagement, but they can be relevant to let the offline community feeling grow.

Another element in how offline events can stimulate online community engagement is that members feel more engaged with the organization as well. From the results it appeared that after an event trust in the organization grows. Besides this, events can stimulate the relevance of the platform for the members. This is most visible in the knowledge that members gain during events. The feeling of engagement to and relevance of the platform are therefore also two aspects that can be strengthened during an event and in that way stimulate online community engagement. Trust in the organization and the relevance of a platform are therefore also two elements that are encouraged during offline events and in this way will stimulate online community engagement. These two aspects were not found in the literature about this topic, but from the analysis of this thesis these aspects appeared to have a role in online community engagement. Furthermore, these findings lead to a second recommendation. Namely, one interviewee mentioned that after the event he did not see any posts relating to the event. Therefore, no online discussion between members who went to the event took place. From this, it is recommended for platforms to post messages about subjects that were discussed during the event on the platform. This would stimulate the relevance of the platform that is encouraged during the event. Hence, visitors of the event can bring their offline experiences to the online platform. Moreover, this could also increase the duration of the boost that members feel after an event.

Furthermore, there is a third recommendation for sharing platforms. Within the findings it appeared that interviewees also use other media to communicate with other members. Interviewees use other media, mostly Facebook or Twitter, since the platform simply does not have a functionality for contact between the members or this functionality does not satisfy the needs of the members. One interviewee even started a Facebook group to contact other members of the platform. When a sharing platform wants to attract more engaged users, it should offer a functionality where members can easily talk to each other. This function could work as a Facebook group, because members are used to this interface and can easily work with this.

Concluding, offline meetings can stimulate online community engagement because it enables the growth of the community feeling and this will be transferred to the online community. The underlying process is that members get to know other members offline and this gives them a chance to learn about the other's intentions. This will stimulate trust among members and result in a community which is more bonding structured than bridging structured . However,

this effect will not occur for every sharing platform. This thesis shows that platforms within the sharing economy differ from each other. Hence, it depends on the character of the platform whether the members will feel there is on online community. Yet, stimulating offline community engagement can also be a reason to organize events for sharing organizations.

5.3 Discussion

Reflecting back on the theoretical framework, the research question of this thesis has its origins in the discussion about the contribution of internet to society. Thus, if the internet contributes to society, since users have better opportunities to inform and participate in public life, or if it disengages users from society because it distracts them from public live (Boulianne, 2009; Gil de Zúñiga, Jung & Valenzuela, 2012; Hargittai & Shaw, 2013; Kim, Hsu & Gil de Zúñiga, 2013; Pasek, More & Romer, 2009). However, not all researchers are convinced by the causality of their findings (Gil de Zúñiga, Jung, & Valenzuela, 2012; Kim, Hsu, & Gil de Zúñiga, 2013), which implies that this effect could also be a relationship where offline events could stimulate online engagement. As seen in this thesis, the sharing platforms who organize events for their members can expect a more engaged online community that not only shares products and services, but relevant information and knowledge as well. In this way, the internet contributes to the online society. An important addition that was not found in the literature, but appeared from the analysis of this thesis, is that this is a two-way relationship in the case of the sharing economy. This includes that the members bring the supply and demand to the online sharing platform and the sharing platform makes it possible for the members to meet like-minded in real-life.

Although the results of this thesis are relevant for sharing organizations, it should also be recognized that the interviewees in this thesis are active and engaged members of the platforms. This is because they already go to events and therefore they can be seen as more active members than members who never went to an event. Moreover, it is plausible that the interviewees are also more engaged in the online community than other members who do not visit meet-ups. This is a limitation of this research and therefore it cannot be concluded that organizing events will lead to more online community engagement for every member in the community. The task for sharing platforms would be to convince a broad group of members to visit an event. Future research could focus on less active members in an online sharing community and how these members can be involved in the community of engaged members on the platform.

Furthermore, Home Exchange and MyWheels do not really have an online functionality to interact with the online community. The conclusion of this thesis is derived from the cases of 3D Hubs and the BioBased Economy Linkedin group. Conceivably, the conclusion is not as grounded as it would when it was built upon four cases. However, as mentioned in the introduction, this thesis can be seen as an exploratory study in this research topic. Future research on online community engagement can use these results in the selection of their units of analysis. Yet, in this thesis the choice was made to investigate several platforms from different disciplines in order to find how the interaction between offline events and online community engagement could work. The distinction between online sharing platforms, as 3D Hubs, and offline sharing platforms, as MyWheels, is a results that was not found beforehand and is therefore valuable to take into account in future research.

When more cases would be studied in future research, the outcomes will be applicable to a broader group of sharing communities. However, this exploratory study showed, again, that offline meetings, and with that face-to-face communication, are still important in forming a more closely tightened network structure (Lee & Lee, 2010; Matzat, 2010; Shen & Cage, 2014; Tillema, Dijst, & Schwanen, 2010; Urry, 2007). This is both applicable for offline and online communities. The underlying processes for this are found in the theory of social capital, namely generalized norms and trust are encouraged by offline meeting (Putnam, 2000; Lee & Lee, 2010). Moreover, members also get more life contentment by visiting events, as their knowledge grows and they enjoy the social contact with like-minded members.

In addition, this thesis found two elements that stimulate more online community engagement that were not present in the literature about this topic. These elements are trust in the organization and the relevance of the platform. Shortly, these two concepts are both encouraged during an event because members can meet the organization behind the platform which increases trust and because information and experiences are shared offline among members, the online platform also becomes more relevant to visit. These two concepts, together with the results that match with the literature about this topic, can be taken along in the theory concerning how offline meetings stimulate online community engagement.

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Appendix A: Topic list of the interview

Topic	Sub-topic	Elements	Questions like
Organization	Meet/encounter		What do you think of X?
	Motivation		Why did you registered? Can you give more reasons?
	Evaluation		What do you think of the organization?
			What do like most about the organization?
The following question all relate to the online community of X. Thus, all the members on the platform.			
Online community engagement	Introduction		What do think of the online community of X?
	Expectations		What did you expected of the members on the platform? For example, how they would behave of what kind of persons it would be?
	External charachteristics	Participation	What kind of activities do you undertake on the platform? What is your role in the community?
			On a scale from 1 to 10, how active are you on the platform? 1 is not active and 10 is very active. Can you explain the number?
		Contribution	What do you bring into the community? Is it more than just the products or services you share?
		Support	Do you help other members in the community? Yes → in what way? No → why not?
		Evaluation	How would you grade the community on a scale of 1 to 10? Can you explain that number?
			Did this changed during the time you registered? Yes? → in what way? No? → how did it stay the same?
			Would you recommend this community to family and friends? Yes → Why? No → Why not?
	Bonding/bridging		On a scale from 1 to 10, how connected do you feel to the community? Can you explain this?
	Inner processes	Generalized norms	You said/imagine you help other members in the community. Would you expect them to do anything back?
			Do you feel there are common norms in the community? Can you give examples?
		Trust	On a scale from 1 to 10, how much do you trust the other members in the group? Can you explain this?
		Life contentment	What do you get out of the community? What does it bring you?
You told me you visit events of the platform. The following questions will cover these events and meetings			
Offline event	Introduction		To which events did you go? What was the goal of this events/of these events

	Motivations-expectation	Events	Why did you go to the event?
			What where your expectations of the event?
		Community	What where your expectations of the other members that would visit the event?
	Evaluation	Event	On a scale of 1 to 10, how much did you appreciate the event? Can you explain?
		Community	Did you met other members? Yes → how did that go? What did you think of those members? Where they as you expected? No → Why not do you think? What is the reason for that?
The following question will cover the event and the community on the platform. Thus, offline and online together.			
Offline events & online community engagement	Relation between those two	platform	Can you compare the use of the platform before and after you went to the event? Does it differ, for example do you use it more or less? Why?
			Can you describe if and how your relation with the members of the community changed after you visited the event?
		members	How is your online contact with the members you met on the event?
			How is your contact with members on the platform? That you not specifically met on an event.
			We already talked about engagement. Do you feel more or less connected with the members that you met? In what way does it differ, or not differ?
			Do you trust the members of the platform more or less, since you joined the event? Can you explain that?
That was the last question, thanks. Do you have any additions to what you have said? Or are there things that you still would like to stay, things that you think will be relevant for me to know?			