

“Revolutionizing the beauty industry” - brand image creation through customer engagement in the new media

A case study research of a crowdsourcing beauty company Volition Beauty

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Master's Thesis
June 2019

ABSTRACT

Crowdsourcing, as a strategy to engage customers and leverage on their knowledge and ideas, is a phenomenon relatively new in the beauty industry. Some brands such as Kylie Cosmetics or Charlotte Tilbury have used crowdsourcing solutions before, in form of occasional engagement campaigns, but it is rather unusual for cosmetics companies to rely on crowdsourcing in their regular business activities. Volition Beauty, a start-up cosmetics company from San Francisco, United States, uses crowdsourcing and customer engagement to position itself on the market and build its brand image, which is a strategy previously unknown among the beauty brands. The company claims to develop its beauty products based only on the ideas submitted by the brand's community members and chosen in a process of online voting. By these activities, Volition Beauty creates a unique brand image strategy, and this research seeks to explore the ways it is done. Through qualitative content analysis of data extracted from the company's Instagram posts and blog articles it was possible to identify *direct strategies* the brand implements, consisting of themes *direct co-creation incentives*, *direct engagement incentives*, *insights into the co-creative process* and *the benefits of crowdsourcing*, and *indirect incentives* such as *love for co-creative community/social identity*, *values – brand's symbolic function*, *real solutions for real women* and *revolutionizing the beauty industry*. The research offers the view that, based on the example of Volition Beauty, cosmetics companies wishing to crowdsource can use the approach to position itself as brands that listen to the customers' needs and problems and offer them solutions in the form of personalized, high-quality products. What is more, the solutions, defined by Volition Beauty as "real solutions for real women", refer to the inclusiveness of the process in which the community members are included into the company's business activities and "given a voice". Lastly, based on the Volition's Beauty research, the community is claimed to be the core of the crowdsourcing company's identity and to be given power and influence to create the brand collectively with the brand executives. All of these characteristics are part of a brand image that the case study company, Volition Beauty, tries to create, to finally make a claim that crowdsourcing can "revolutionize the beauty industry".

KEYWORDS: *crowdsourcing, customer engagement, new media, brand image, digital labour*

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1. Introduction

The rise of the Internet, mobile technologies and new media made it nowadays particularly easy for brands to engage their audiences online and benefit from distributed knowledge, skills, and experience of the crowd (Kleemann, Voß & Rieder, 2008). Developing ideas, working on solutions or conducting micro-tasks are now activities that are often taken care of outside of the companies' internal environments. The term "crowdsourcing" was coined by Howe in 2006, who proposed a definition of this phenomenon as "taking a function once performed by employees and outsourcing it to an undefined (and generally large) network of people in the form of an open call" (p. 1). It is a strategy that is currently gaining more and more attention from companies (Prpić, Shukla, Kietzmann & McCarthy, 2015) and because, when crowdsourcing among customers, it entails a high level of customer engagement, it is perceived as a source of competitive advantage (Prpić et al., 2015; Bal, Weidner, Hanna & Mills, 2017). What is more, according to Bal et al. (2017), what makes crowdsourcing a powerful strategy for brands is the way in which it empowers, strengthens and cultivates brand communities. This way, thanks to crowdsourcing, companies can not only win creative ideas and smart solutions sourced from the crowd, but also develop strong and valuable relationships with their customers.

Also according to Kleemann et al. (2008), crowdsourcing is a proof of an important change in the customer-brand relations. In this approach, consumers do not have to remain passive receivers of information and content anymore, but they are given the opportunity to become valuable co-workers. This goes in line with the argument of Bal et al. (2017), who claims that "crowdsourcing opens the door to customer engagement" (p. 224), and customer brand engagement is precisely what companies and marketing professionals are looking for right now (Hollebeek, 2011; Dessart, Veloutsou & Morgan-Thomas, 2015). Hollebeek (2011) defined customer brand engagement as "the level of a customer's cognitive, emotional and behavioral investment in specific brand interactions" (p. 555). Customer engagement encourages interactive and experiential relationships between customers and brands, taking these relations further than simple purchase situations (Dessart et al., 2015) and changing the traditional customer value measurement based on transactions (Kumar et al., 2010). The business professionals and executives claim that nowadays high customer engagement is an essential factor influencing the company's development and growth, with respectively low customer engagement causing loose in sales and opportunities as well as negative word-of-mouth (Kumar et al., 2010).

Companies often include audiences into their business activities in form of occasional events or campaigns, but it is still not common to crowdsource on a regular basis. There might be several reasons for that, including the fact that business owners often do not know how to leverage the usefulness of different types of crowdsourcing, how to identify the appropriate crowd and how to engage it (Prpić et al., 2015). However, there are also a few brands that decided to build their identity based on customer engagement and crowdsourcing. Volition Beauty, a crowd-sourced beauty company based in California, in the United States, is a pioneer on the cosmetics market. The brand was founded in September 2015 as an online crowdsourcing platform and beauty store. The company allows customers to submit their ideas for beauty products and vote for concepts invented by others. In the next steps Volition Beauty reviews products that gain the biggest amount of votes by checking their feasibility, brand fit, and market potential. The chosen products are created by external chemists and labs, and the idea owners, called Volition Beauty Innovators, receive a monetary reward (<https://volitionbeauty.com/>). By incorporating these mechanisms to their brand, Volition Beauty created an innovative business by relying on the practice of idea sourcing and crowd voting. Even though beauty brands have been already using crowdsourcing before to engage the customers (Thomas, 2018), Volition Beauty is the first one on the market that uses it as its positioning statement. No other brand in the nowadays beauty industry distinguishes itself by developing ideas for products based primarily on the customers' input. That is why Volition Beauty can be perceived as an initiator of a new, innovative way of creating a brand identity in the beauty industry. By engaging their online brand community, the company is able to initiate collaborative product innovation and build its core around it.

As already mentioned, crowdsourcing is a strategy that gains increasingly more attention in the business world because it allows the customers to acquire a certain level of power in their relationships with brands. Without engaging the consumers in an innovative and creative way and giving them insights into internal brand activities, companies can miss the opportunity to gain advantage on the market, as customers demand more and more influence and transparency. Therefore, as the trend develops, it is important to research the phenomena of crowdsourcing and customer brand engagement in relation to the brand image, to see how these practices can benefit organizations and their reputation. The customers in the beauty sector are becoming exceptionally eager to try new concepts and formulas, constantly wanting to explore and striving for innovation (Kestenbaum, 2018). It is, nowadays, an industry that is in need for creativity and independent brands. Customers tend to reject more traditional, old beauty companies and demand innovative solutions (Kestenbaum, 2018).

Because Volition Beauty can be seen as a pioneer of utilizing crowdsourcing solutions in the beauty industry, it is therefore important to examine how is the company positioning itself on the market and creating its image through customer engagement in a challenging process of gaining customers' trust and loyalty.

When it comes to the academic relevance, the study of Volition Beauty contributes to the current knowledge about crowdsourcing and customer engagement by providing a case study analysis of a new way of developing communication and engagement strategies based on collaborative innovation. To date, crowdsourcing research has focused mainly on theoretical and conceptual frameworks development (Kleemann et al., 2008; Prpić et al., 2015; Bal et al., 2017), this research, however, aims to test these concepts and theories in practice. What is more, little studies have addressed the beauty brands' usage of new and social media to engage and interact with customers (Shen & Bissel, 2013) as well as the beauty brands' usage of communication and engagement strategies grounded in cooperative product development. The prior research, in addition, lacks relevant studies about crowdsourcing in the beauty sector. The study, besides academic relevance, also brings social relevance by creating implications for companies wishing not only to occasionally benefit from the potential of crowdsourcing, but to incorporate it into their business models, what, according to Prpić et al. (2015), is going to be more and more common as the development of the new technologies proceeds. Open business models based on customer participation and engagement mean that companies are opening up to external ideas and innovations, however, according to Djelassi and Decoopman (2013), little academic sources explain how and why such models work.

In order to fill the gaps in the academic literature, the following research question and supporting sub-questions guiding this study are introduced:

RQ1: How does Volition Beauty use online customer engagement to create its brand image utilizing crowdsourcing solutions?

Sub-question 1: How does Volition Beauty encourage collaborative product innovation?

Sub-question 2: How does Volition Beauty encourage online forms of customer engagement?

Sub-question 3: How does Volition Beauty position itself on the beauty market?

Even though collaborative product innovation is a form of customer engagement, two separate sub-questions have been created in order to allow for a more detailed analysis of the former.

The second sub-question, therefore, concentrates on all other expressions of online customer engagement.

The research question and the following sub-questions are going to be addressed in this research paper by means of qualitative research design. The study, based on the principals of the case study research, aims at exploring and interpreting the company's communication strategies and the ways it builds customer engagement to see how these practices shape its brand image. To do so, the content analysis will focus on online media content, Volition's Beauty Instagram posts and blog articles. The qualitative data gathered will be analyzed to find patterns of meaning across the dataset, following the guidelines of thematic analysis consisting of three steps: initial, axial and selective coding (Boeije, 2010).

The research paper consists of five chapters. The theory section contains a review and critical analysis of relevant theories and prior research related to the topic and it is built out of four subchapters. Firstly, it introduces the ways new media have changed the modern media culture, giving companies such as Volition Beauty new opportunities to reach and interact with customers, as well as how these new forms of production, distribution and communication caused the emergence of participatory culture and digital labour. Important definitions, theories, and criticism connected to these concepts such as the debate about exploitation and empowerment in digital labour are addressed. Subsequently, the idea of crowdsourcing as a form of digital labour and participatory culture is introduced, as well as its typologies relevant for the study. The phenomenon is explained in detail, also touching upon relevant criticism that can be of great importance for the research. The next section of theoretical framework discusses the concept of customer engagement, focusing on its importance for a positive brand image development and growth of online brand communities. The subchapter about brand image addresses factors contributing to the development of brand's reputation and brand equity, as well as presents relevant previous research examining the relationship between brand image and customer engagement as well as brand image and crowdsourcing. The last subchapter of the theoretical framework presents some characteristics and recent industry trends in the beauty sector, as well as previous research concerning beauty brands' usage of communication and engagement strategies in the new media.

In the method chapter, the details regarding research design, data collection, and analysis are presented and justified with the use of methodological literature. First of all, the chapter presents a description of the qualitative method chosen for the study as well as argumentation of the choice. Subsequently, a justification of the chosen case is provided, presenting Volition Beauty as a brand unique and innovative on the cosmetics market. Also,

the principals of the case study research are addressed in this section. Further, details regarding data collection, such as the type of data, time frame, and selection criteria are provided. Furthermore, the use of thematic analysis to analyze the data is justified, as well as described in detail, including important rules and steps. As the last part of the chapter, the aspects of reliability and validity of the study as well as its ethical implications are addressed.

Results and discussion chapter presents and discusses the results of the data analysis and highlights important outcomes – themes created in the process of thematic analysis. It is structured in a logical order, covering the outcomes of selective and axial coding. Also in this part, the analysis and results found in the study are interpreted and confronted with the theoretical framework and prior research. Also, the relevance and meaning of the results are addressed. The conclusion briefly once again presents the results of the study, highlighting the most important and unique findings. It also states possible limitations and future research directions.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1 New media, participation and digital labour

The new media, causing the shift of the modern media culture to computer-mediated forms of production, distribution and communication (Manovich, Malina & Cubitt, 2001), provide the framework for this study. According to Henning-Thurau et al. (2010), "new media are websites and other digital communication and information channels in which active consumers engage in behaviors that can be consumed by others both in real time and long afterward regardless of their spatial location" (p. 2). The new media revolutionized the media industry, affecting all stages of communication and also all kinds of media, including texts, still images, sound and spatial constructions (Manovich et al., 2001). They also threatened the established media companies, as customers moved to the new, digital forms of media consumption. The computer-mediated technologies and communication forms are now common ways of creating, storing and distributing media products, and these have become highly interactive. This, of course, has also changed the way companies communicate with their customers. Especially social media such as Facebook, Twitter or Instagram changed the relationships between customers and brands (Henning-Thurau et al., 2010). Companies began to realize the importance of replacing their one-way communication models based on providing information with the two-way communication models that have a form of a dialogue and are focused on interactions with customers (Kumar et al., 2010). Thanks to the abovementioned platforms and change in the communication patterns, more and more empowered users can now not only communicate with each other online but also express their opinions about products or services (Henning-Thurau et al., 2010), as well as engage in the brands' activities. These changes created numerous threats for companies, as they enabled active customers to express their criticism and monitor corporate behavior, but also provided brands with new opportunities. Companies such as Volition Beauty have been given a fast, cost-effective way to reach and communicate with their customers. They can now not only promote their products and services through channels of digital communication but also receive valuable feedback and become closer to their customers by engaging them in the brand's activities. Without the development of the new media and new technologies, Volition Beauty would not be able to benefit from the customers' input and engagement in the same way the company can do it in the modern online environment.

The abovementioned development of new media and computer technologies caused the emergence of culture which is participatory (Schäfer, 2011). According to Brabham

(2012), people have always been participatory, either in a form of democratic, decision making or survival processes, but only the Internet gave the participation new quality, scale and possibilities. The users' participation on the Internet changed the media environment, as previously passive audiences have been given the power to become active participants in the online cultural production process. Anyone can nowadays produce, modify and distribute globally and at a relatively low cost any kind of online media content. Some media companies perceive this phenomenon as a loss of control over content production, however, others have found ways to benefit from the user-driven innovation (Schäfer, 2011). The media industry is, therefore, changing its business models based on content creation to those focusing on providing platforms for user-generated content (Schäfer, 2011). What is more, because of the shift of control from content producers to audiences, also marketers and advertisers are constantly attempting to retrieve and maintain power and influence over their brands (Turow, 2009). The changes in the advertising and marketing industry caused by the shift in the brand-customer power relations have been predicted by Rust and Oliver already in 1994 in their article "The death of advertising". According to the authors, the emergence of new technologies, fragmentation of the media landscape and growing empowerment of customers have led to a significant transformation from traditional mass media advertising strategies to a new, interactive communication landscape, with new media in its centre. The changes influenced the communication approaches which became less advertising-oriented and more focused on customization and putting the customers in control of their online experiences. Two marketing strategies emerged, *relationship marketing* (Rust & Oliver, 1994) based on the development of relationships between producers and customers, and *mass customization* (Rust & Oliver, 1994) focused on creating individualized products and services. These developments gave customers even more power and control, leading to new, highly individualized and two-way oriented advertising and communication approaches. As the audiences became more independent and resistant to traditional advertising and marketing strategies, the invention of new technologies also allowed them to skip commercials and view only highly personalized content online. To combat this problem, companies such as Volition Beauty came up with new ideas on how to incorporate the user-generated content into their commercial efforts (Turow, 2009). Thanks to the participatory culture, they have been given the opportunity to bring customers closer to their businesses and leverage on their participation, at the same time being in control over the process.

The participatory culture and Internet users' growing willingness to take part in online content creation are also factors that contributed to the emergence of digital labour. The

concept is important in the context of this study, as crowdsourcing and customer engagement are perceived to be forms of digital labour and it is therefore crucial to understand and ground this research in the academic debate about the phenomenon. The controversial discussion about exploitation (Andrejevic, 2009; Caldwell, 2011) and empowerment (Fish & Srinivasan, 2012; Bucher & Fieseler, 2017) in digital labour is especially important when considering brand image and reputation, as a negative attitude towards forms of digital labour such as crowdsourcing can have a significant impact on perceptions towards companies. It is important to point out that customer engagement, even if a source of fun and enjoyment and behavior so usual in the nowadays participatory culture, can be perceived as free labour and form of exploitation. It is, therefore, crucial to be aware of this discussion, especially researching a company such as Volition Beauty, where the engagement of the customers forms the core of the company.

In the context of the discussion mentioned above, it is important to understand that digital labour can have different forms. However, most often the concept is associated with any kind of work done online, whether it is paid or not, with the use of digital labour platforms focused for example on micro-work tasks or in the form of content creation and use of social media (Scholz, 2013). At first, companies started to use the Internet to outsource jobs to different, mainly poor areas in the local economies, however, by the early 1990s, it was already common to outsource work to countries such as India or Philippines (Graham, Hjorth & Lehdonvirta, 2017). Subsequently, digital labour platforms emerged, aiming at connecting employers with workers looking for a job. These platforms allowed many people in the developing countries to get access to employers and buyers in rich countries without the need of physical migration (Horton, 2010), and, based most often on the idea of microwork, allowed employers to access cheap and efficient workforce (Bucher & Fieseler, 2017). However, the emergence of digital labour caused also a heated discussion about the ethical aspects of this solution. According to those scholars who perceive digital labour as a form of exploitation, digital employees (especially in the third world countries), face various concerns, risks and costs such as underpayment (Beerepoot & Lambregts, 2015) and precarity (Fish & Srinivasan, 2012). Some critics also point out that online employers often use digital workers for unethical activities such as generating spam or writing bogus product reviews and do not obey the labour law. What is more, the workers often do not have any opportunity to organize and protest against exploitation in the digital environment (Horton, 2010). Digital labour platforms do not provide any basic employee protections such as minimum wage, insurance or overtime payment and the fragmentation of work present on digital platforms

might be a source of employees' frustration, as it causes them to feel disassociated with the final intellectual product (Scholz 2013, Bucher & Fieseler, 2017). However, interestingly, the research conducted by Horton (2010) also proves that the workers themselves often do not feel exploited. On the contrary, they perceive online employers as more honest and trustworthy than the offline ones (Horton, 2010). Taking part in digital labour is often associated by digital employees with a leisure time activity, something that besides some additional monetary profit and opportunity to build a portfolio provides enjoyment, improvement of certain skills and social advantages such as community membership (Fish & Srinivasan, 2012; Bucher & Fieseler, 2017). Digital labour can be therefore also perceived as a tool to empower workers, give them new opportunities and an alternative to the offline job market. The discussion between digital labour as being a form of exploitation and as being a mean of empowerment to autonomously create is currently a large part of the academic debate (Fish & Srinivasan, 2012; Zhang & Fung, 2014).

Another way of looking at digital labour is the point of view taken by scholars such as Andrejevic (2009) and Caldwell (2011). They also identify digital labour as a way for organizations to gain profit and power at the expense of digital workers but also claim that even various forms of the online user-generated content are in fact forms of the digital workforce. Some also point that online interactions between users and any kind of online participation can be perceived as tools to produce cultural and economic value (Andrejevic 2008, Scholz 2013, Terranova 2000), as with the rise of the new technologies and information economy, the borders between production and consumption have been blurred. According to this approach, any content produced by users online without monetary gain intentions can still benefit brands and other organizations, which creates a workflow providing them with profit they do not necessarily compensate for. Users take part in the activity defined as *immaterial labor* (Hardt & Negri, 2000), which means "the production of services [that] results in no material and durable good... - that is, labor that produces an immaterial good, such as a service, a cultural product, knowledge, or communication" (Hardt & Negri, 2000, p. 290). Consumption and leisure are therefore becoming a kind of amateur work, as every kind of online customer engagement or contribution providing an organization with a benefit can be perceived as labour. Fuchs and Sevignani (2013) introduce also the term *play labour* (*playbour*) (p. 237), referring to the value generated by online users during the creation of content online and use of among other blogs, social media or wikis with the goal of enjoyment. By performing these activities Internet users create data such as social relations, location and browsing data and information about likes and preferences that can be used for

example by advertisers to create personalized offers, which is yet another example of how user online activity can benefit companies (Fuchs & Sevignani, 2013).

2.2 Crowdsourcing

Crowdsourcing, as a form of digital labour, is a relatively new phenomenon. It was first defined in 2006 by Howe, as “taking a function once performed by employees and outsourcing it to an undefined (and generally large) network of people in the form of an open call” (p. 1). Since then, the importance of information technologies and Web 2.0 in creating crowdsourcing initiatives has been frequently emphasized by scholars (Prpić, Shukla, Kietzmann & McCarthy, 2015; Kleemann, Voß & Rieder, 2008; Brabham, 2010). The Internet is crucial for crowdsourcing because of its speed, reach, anonymity, ability to facilitate nonparallel engagement activities and distribute many forms of media content (Brabham, 2012). In 2012, a study conducted by Estellés Arolas and González Ladrón-de-Guevara summarized and merged different academic definitions of crowdsourcing to create a theoretical base for defining the phenomenon. According to this study, crowdsourcing is a form of a participative online activity, in which an individual or organization can propose to a group of various individuals with different knowledge, skills and experience undertaking of a certain task. This process always entails mutual benefit, both for participants and organization (Estellés Arolas & González Ladrón-de-Guevara, 2012). In this activity, the crowd is treated as a single notion – “a general collection of people that can be targeted by firms” (Prpić et al., 2015, p. 78), and the process itself consists of three steps – constructing the crowd, developing crowd capabilities and harnessing crowd capital, that is “organizational resources acquired through crowdsourcing” (Prpić et al., 2015, p. 80).

As mentioned, crowdsourcing is a form of participatory culture, however, it is important to notice that it is a process directed, sponsored and managed by a company (Brabham, 2012). A brand leveraging online community is therefore in control, in opposition to, for example, a collaboratively created online encyclopedia Wikipedia, which operates more as a form of an open space for collaboration (Brabham, 2012). In this view, therefore, the company has control over the whole process and decides on the way its results are going to be utilized. However, crowdsourcing can still have a positive influence on a brand’s image and reputation, as it allows organizations to create relationships with customers by inviting them to be a part of previously internal and confidential processes. This creates a feeling of authenticity and trust, which is nowadays highly appreciated by customers (Brabham, 2012).

In this paper, two approaches to crowdsourcing typology are considered in order to provide framework for the study and identify and describe types of crowdsourcing used by Volition Beauty. Brabham (2012) proposed a typology identifying four main types of crowdsourcing applications: (1) *the knowledge discovery and management approach*, (2) *the broadcast search approach*, (3) *the peer-vetted creative production approach*, and (4) *the distributed human intelligence tasking*. (1) The knowledge discovery and management approach is a crowdsourcing solution aiming at finding and gathering information determined by an organization. (2) The broadcast search approach, on the other hand, is a problem-solving system, where an organization tasks crowd to solve a particular problem it is encountering. With this approach, the crowdsourcing company tries to find an individual who is able to come up with the best solution (Brabham, 2012). An example of a crowdsourcing platform using the broadcast search approach can be InnoCentive, which provides research and development solutions in areas such as computer science or biology, relying on knowledge and ideas sourced from the crowd. Individuals found by the platform are often capable of solving complicated problems the internal company's specialists are not able to (Brabham, 2012).

Another approach, (3) the peer-vetted creative production approach, is a crowdsourcing application the most relatable to the topic of this study, as it involves a process of looking for crowd-sourced ideas. Organizations often perceive crowdsourcing as a tool to find creative, fresh inspiration for, for example, a new product or a process of production. This is a way to engage the customers, but also involve them in a very internal process such as product design and development and as a consequence – to create relationships. What is more, it is a very effective solution, as it also combines the elements of market research – a company crowdsourcing for ideas, simultaneously receives valuable information about customers' tastes and preferences (Brabham, 2012). Besides Volition Beauty, the focus of this case study research, an organization using this kind of crowdsourcing application is Threadless. Threadless is based on a similar concept to the one driving Volition Beauty, however, it has been active in the fashion industry. It is an online clothing company that challenges members of its community to create ideas for T-shirt prints. These are later submitted to the website and gather votes from other members. The highest ranked ideas are selected to go further in the process, and as a final step, the company's staff chooses five best projects to use them in the mass production. The idea developers receive a monetary reward for their submissions, as Threadless gains rights to their intellectual property (Brabham, 2012).

The last type of crowdsourcing Brabham (2012) mentions in his article is (4) the distributed human intelligence tasking. In this approach, the crowd is needed to analyze large amounts of data, as human intelligence makes this kind of tasks more efficient and effective than the computer-mediated analysis. The process of managing large sets of data is distributed to many members of the crowd in the form of short, small tasks. This way, the crowd works collectively in order to produce a coherent outcome. The Amazon Mechanical Turk is probably the most widely known platform for this kind of micro-work. On the website, different kinds of micro-tasks requiring human intelligence can be posted, offering a small monetary reward for the participants (<https://www.mturk.com/>).

A typology of crowdsourcing described by Prpić et al. (2015) is also useful for the development of a lens appropriate for the study. The proposed framework divides crowdsourcing into different kinds of contributions: *objective* and *subjective* contributions as well as *aggregated* and *filtered* contributions. Objective contributions provide unbiased and general outcomes, whereas subjective contributions are based on opinions, judgments and beliefs of the participants (Prpić et al., 2015). What is more, the outcomes have to be processed collectively by an organization to provide value. Aggregated contributions produce value by simply being collected and they do not require any previous validation, such as votes which are supposed to support a decision. Filtered contributions, on the other hand, require a prior selection and have to be validated before the final outcome of the crowdsourcing initiative can be presented. Furthermore, based on these dimensions, the authors present four types of crowdsourcing: (1) *micro-task crowdsourcing*, (2) *solution crowdsourcing*, (3) *crowd-voting* and (4) *idea crowdsourcing*. Each of these types is either objective or subjective and either aggregated or filtered. These types partly go in line with the typology developed by Brabham (2012), however, Prpić et al. (2015) distinguishes also crowd-voting, the process of collecting responses from the crowd to make a certain decision, as a separate category and does not mention the knowledge discovery and management approach as one of the types.

The forms of crowdsourcing used by Volition Beauty are: *idea crowdsourcing* – a subjective and filtered contribution mentioned by both Brabham (2012) and Prpić et al. (2015) as well as *crowd-voting* – the type mentioned by Prpić et al. (2015) which is based on subjective but aggregated contributions. Volition Beauty is, so far, the only company in the beauty industry that uses crowdsourcing to receive two different kinds of contributions, by that maximizing its potential.

To find and maintain a crowd that is active and willing to engage in the brand-related crowdsourcing activities, a big amount of time and effort is needed (Brabham, 2012) as well

as appropriate motivations. Brabham (2010) examined different motivations participants have to take part in crowdsourcing. Empirical research found out that people participate in crowdsourcing activities most often because of the *monetary compensation* offered, *opportunities to develop certain skills*, *potential to begin freelance work* and *emotional connection to a particular brand's website or community*. Even though many common motivators exist, there is not a single one that would apply to all crowdsourcing types and applications. However, it is common for the members of the participatory culture to feel *proud about their contribution* and believe in its meaning, as well as enjoy being a member of a community, which can be perceived as an overarching motivator for taking part in crowdsourcing initiatives (Brabham, 2012).

There are a few critical points that, besides the crowd management, have to be taken into consideration when it comes to crowdsourcing initiatives. First of all, as Brabham (2012) mentions, crowdsourcing requires transparency, trust and agreement for a change of power relations from an organization. A company wishing to successfully leverage the wisdom and skills of the crowd has to be transparent about its current state – inner problems, important data, weaknesses and needs. This happens with a certain level of trust towards the participants, as they are offered a partial responsibility for the company's performance and therefore become important stakeholders. This change in power relations has to be taken into consideration, especially by the brands such as Volition Beauty, who base their communication and business strategies on crowdsourcing, allowing the customers to have a constant influence on the brand's performance. Lastly, the criticism surrounding digital labour that was already mentioned in the previous sub-chapter certainly applies to the crowdsourcing initiatives as well. Brabham (2012) mentions the differences in technology access between developed and undeveloped countries' citizens, which make the crowd in crowdsourcing relatively homogenous. Moreover, taking into consideration the difference between the organizations' and participants' profit, crowdsourcing can be also often seen as exploitative (Brabham, 2012).

2.3 Customer engagement and online brand communities

Customer engagement is an inherent part of crowdsourcing (Prpić et al., 2015; Bal, Weidner, Hanna & Mills, 2017). It has recently gained a lot of interest from both practitioners and researchers, as because of the changing relationships between brands and empowered online users, it becomes more and more advisable for companies to involve customers into their brand's activities. According to Sedley (2010), customer engagement involves “repeated

interactions that strengthen the emotional, psychological or physical investment a customer has in a brand” (p. 7). It focuses thus on creating relationships with customers by their participation in organizational activities and connection to an organization, which extends beyond purchasing behavior and search, evaluation or decision making about a choice of a brand (Vivek, Beatty & Morgan, 2012; Brodie, Hollebeek, Jurić & Ilić, 2011). According to the study conducted by Vivek et al. (2012), there might be several important consequences of high customer engagement for a brand - engaged customers develop trust, loyalty and increased value perceptions for a brand, they tend to display affective commitment and involve in the brand’s community. What is more, customers engaging in the brand’s activities also are more likely to engage in word-of-mouth and play a dominant role in viral marketing by creating referrals and recommendations (Brodie et al., 2011; Vivek et al., 2012). In general, companies putting their effort into customer engagement can benefit from improved corporate performance, sales growth, better competitive advantage and profitability (Brodie et al., 2011).

For companies to benefit from this kind of customer involvement, an effective online brand communities’ management is crucial. According to Wirtz et al. (2013), brand communities stem from the consumption communities, which emerged thanks to the introduction of the mass media and modern marketing. People started to identify themselves with the brands they consumed and began to develop consumer identities. Brand community, defined as "a network of relations between providers and brand consumers who attach a certain value to engaging in the relationship with both the provider and with the brand's other consumers" (Wirtz et al., 2013, p. 224), is nowadays a concept that operates mainly in the online environment, as it allows for a global reach of interactions. Online brand communities are characterized by connection members of the community feel among each other, certain common beliefs and values that are focused on the experience with the brand and also the responsibility they feel towards the community and other members (Wirtz et al., 2013). Positive experiences in the brand community can significantly strengthen the relationship between a customer and a brand, causing also brand-related online engagement. The participation and active engagement create brand loyalty, customer advocacy and willingness to accept new or modified products, at the same time rejecting the competitors (Wirtz et al., 2013).

Online brand community engagement was defined by Wirtz et al. (2013) as an identification with the community that causes interactive participation within it. This participation can entail for example helping other customers, taking part in activities, giving

word-of-mouth recommendations, blogging or writing reviews about the products and services. Wirtz et al. (2013) identified three aspects that encourage members to engage in the online brand communities: *brand-related*, *social* and *functional drivers*. Brand related drivers consist of the *brand identification*, which is the extent to which a customer identifies himself or herself with the brand and the *brand's symbolic function* – the symbolic meaning of values that form the core part of the brand's identity. Social drivers encouraging online community engagement are *social benefits* such as help from other members, discussions and interactions and *social identity* – an identity constructed partly by membership in different social groups. A social identity built in an online brand community is influenced by the brand itself and by opinions and values that the customers share. The last group of factors that have a positive influence on the online brand community engagement are functional drivers. *Functional benefits* are based on the information about products or services that members are willing to obtain by the means of online interactions with other members. *Uncertainty avoidance*, on the other hand, refers to the reassurance about a purchasing decision and product quality a customer can get in the community, which significantly lowers the feeling of uncertainty and discomfort. *Information quality* is a factor related to the flow of the brand-related information. Online brand communities encourage collaborative learning and exchange of relevant knowledge, which can also be seen as a motivator to engage. *Monetary incentives* such as loyalty points or promotions are most likely to encourage short-term participation among members that are in general passive than among the active ones, who in turn tend to be discouraged to participate in long-term when money is offered in exchange. On the other hand, *explicit normative incentives* such as referring to the value of solidarity or common goal tend to increase the feeling of obligation among members, thus encourage them to engage. Active members perceive these incentives as motivators to engage in short-term, however, there is no influence of this kind of techniques on the passive members (Wirtz et al., 2013).

In the previously discussed online brand communities, such as the one created by Volition Beauty, engagement incorporated in crowdsourcing particularly increases because the membership gives users the feeling of empowerment and as a result causes positive associations with the brand (Bal et al., 2017). When it comes to the engagement visible in social media, posts containing entertainment content, not referring to the brand or product itself, are proven by empirical research to cause the highest engagement, measured by the number of shares, likes and comments (Cvijikj & Michahelles, 2013). This kind of content created by a beauty brand may include strategies such as *product assistance*, *community posts*,

likes, photo/video, poll, open question, appreciation and directional posts (Coursaris, Van Osch & Balogh, 2013).

2.4 Brand image

In the increasingly competitive business environment, more and more attention has been given to the brand image development. There has been a significant change in the way customers perceive companies nowadays, from looking only at the physical aspects of products and quality of services to acknowledging their symbolic associations (Meenaghan, 1995; Shen & Bissell, 2013). The brand image, defined as “the set of beliefs held about a particular brand” (Kotler, 1988, p. 197), if developed well can give a brand a positive advantage and distinguish it on the market (Janonis & Virvilaitė, 2007; Park, Jaworski & MacInnis, 1986). A brand image can be studied both from a company's perspective, entailing marketing activities, positioning and different strategies, as well as from a customer's perspective, based on attitudes and perceptions towards a brand and development of loyalty and trust (Janonis & Virvilaitė, 2007). The long-term success of a brand depends greatly on its ability to select, develop and maintain a positive brand image (Park et al., 1986).

It is proven by the previous research that crowdsourcing and customer engagement can help to develop a positive brand image and influence customers' purchasing intentions. Greve (2014) researched the relationship between customer engagement, brand image and brand loyalty. His study showed that both a strong brand image and high customer engagement can have a significant impact on increasing customers' loyalty towards a brand. However, high level of customer engagement is likely to diminish the positive effect of brand image on brand loyalty, which leads to the author's implication that business professionals might benefit more from investing in customer engagement strategies rather than image campaigns. The study, however, does not address any possible impact customer engagement might have on the brand image. On the other hand, according to Wirtz et al. (2013), high customer engagement, especially in the online brand communities, might strengthen the brand, having a significant influence on the brand commitment and overall brand engagement, brand satisfaction and brand loyalty. Customers who are engaged in an online brand community are more committed to the brand, therefore they identify themselves with the company and develop positive attitudes and perceptions towards it.

A positive brand perception, thus brand image, can be also developed through crowdsourcing itself (Kumar, Meng & Kabijar, 2019). Kumar et al. (2019) researched the impact crowdsourcing has on perceptions and behaviors towards brands among the customers

not taking part in the crowdsourcing initiatives. The scholars focused on the co-creative type of crowdsourcing, which is most often used in the form of product development. The study was based on the customer-based brand equity frameworks developed by Aaker (1996) and Keller (1993). Keller (1993) defined customer-based brand equity as “the differential effect of brand knowledge on consumer response to the marketing of the brand” (p. 1). According to the scholar, a brand has positive customer-based brand equity depending on the number of positive reactions it receives to its marketing activities and efforts, being compared to the reactions to the marketing of a product or service that is unnamed, thus has no connotation with any brand. A positive customer-based brand equity occurs therefore when a customer is familiar with a brand and has some positive associations with it, and subsequently reacts in a positive way towards a marketing strategy or a product or service of the particular brand. The researchers used four brand equity dimensions in their study: *brand awareness*, *brand loyalty*, *perceived quality* and *brand associations*. The conducted experiment revealed that crowdsourcing campaigns lead to bigger brand awareness among non-participants, and as a strategy can effectively draw customers’ attention. What is more, crowdsourcing has the ability to increase brand loyalty among non-participants as well as quality perception. When it comes to the perceived quality, co-creation facilitates customer empowerment and products developed in the process of collaborative innovation are more likely to meet customers’ preferences, thus increase the perceived quality (Kumar et al., 2019).

The last dimension of the customer-based brand-equity framework used in the study was the concept of brand associations. Brand associations create a meaning of the brand for consumers and the favorability, strength and uniqueness of these associations play a key role in the customer-based brand equity model. According to Keller (1993), the success of a brand is strongly dependent on the presence of strong, positive and unique associations. The concept was divided by Aaker (1996) into three sub-dimensions: *perceived value*, *brand personality* and *organizational associations*. According to the study conducted by Kumar et al. (2019), the perceived value of the product or service offered by a brand is proven to increase because of crowdsourcing, and brand personality, the perceived characteristics of the brand, become more favorable. When it comes to the brand personality, a company encouraging co-creation is perceived as more customer-oriented and innovative. Crowdsourcing, as a form of engagement, generates more trust in the company as well as is likely to establish transparent relationships between the customers and the organization. Therefore the last sub-dimension, organizational associations, is also proven to become more favorable under the influence of crowdsourcing. *Behavioral intentions* are an aspect that is not a part of the customer-based

brand equity framework, but has been addressed by the authors as “a person’s subjective probability that he will perform some behavior” (Kumar et al., 2019, p. 46). Co-created products are in general perceived more positively by the customers than the products developed only by the company, and it is claimed that such products made in the process of collaborative innovation draw consumers’ attention and curiosity towards the brand. Thus, the results of the study also showed that crowdsourcing initiatives cause more positive behavioral intentions towards the brand among non-participants (Kumar et al., 2019).

2.5 Beauty industry trends

Influencing customers’ purchasing decisions became increasingly important nowadays, as the competition increases and consumers begin to be demanding and critical. The beauty industry of the XXI century is, therefore, constantly growing and expanding, but also constantly faces new challenges. The customers who have more and more income to spend, especially the wealthy baby-boomers and growing middle classes in emerging countries, have been driving the industry (Łopaciuk & Łoboda, 2013). With the changing lifestyle, they began to demand not only better quality premium products, but also often these made of natural ingredients and in a socially, ecologically and ethically responsible production process. This trend, previously being a part of the niche brands’ philosophy, entered the mass market with the customers’ growing willingness to buy responsibly (Łopaciuk & Łoboda, 2013).

The distribution processes in the industry have been changing as well. From a geographical perspective, the beauty market is divided into two main districts – a dominating one in the North and Latin America, Western Europe and Asia-Pacific, with the biggest share in the global revenues, and the marginal ones, which do not provide so much profit, such as Brazil, Russia, India and China. These markets, however, grow very fast and begin to be more and more important and influential (Łopaciuk & Łoboda, 2013). What is more, because of the popularization of the Internet and online retailing, it is now easier for companies to target and reach new customers on a global scale.

There are also recent trends present in the industry’s categorization. The beauty sector is divided into five main parts according to product categories: skincare, haircare, make-up, fragrances and toiletries. The most prominent and fast-growing segment globally is at this moment the skincare sector, with the face-whitening, anti-aging and sun protector products driving the most of the sales (Łopaciuk & Łoboda, 2013). Further, there is also a division between premium and mass production beauty brands depending on the products' price,

prestige and distribution channels. Even though most of the premium brands sales used to be concentrated on the developing countries' markets, recently a new trend emerged, making also customers from other regions perceive beauty products as investments. Therefore, the industry of luxury and personalized beauty products has been receiving more and more of the customers' attention globally (Łopaciuk & Łoboda, 2013). What is more, because of the growing demand for luxury, also cheaper, mass product lines that until now did not strive to be perceived as luxury, developed a trend called *masstige*, that is supposed to make them be seen as prestigious. Within the *masstige* sector, the brands promise that their products can deliver the same quality and results as the more expensive equivalents.

Because of the development of communication technologies and wider access to the Internet mentioned above, beauty brands not only sell, but also take opportunities to interact with and engage customers online (Łopaciuk & Łoboda, 2013). Moreover, integrated marketing strategies and social media accounts have been recently changing the beauty industry (Shen & Bissell, 2013). The beauty companies' usage of social media for marketing and branding purposes has been addressed in 2013 by Shen and Bissell. The study examined which tools were used most often by beauty brands to interact and engage with customers online and also what were the differences between the luxurious and department store beauty brands. The companies taken into consideration were Estee Lauder, MAC Cosmetics, Clinique, L'Oreal, Maybelline and CoverGirl. The results showed the brands' preference to post content that could potentially engage the community on their Facebook pages, such as Q&A's or beauty polls, rather than content solely focused on product information or promotion. The type of posts that turned out to engage Facebook users the most in their feeds were surveys. Another result of the study was that Q&A's, in the form of open-ended questions, were used more frequently than beauty polls, which are tools asking questions with a limited number of answer options. This shows, according to the scholars, the companies' growing willingness to receive more and more detailed and extensive feedback from the customers in order to achieve brand loyalty. Overall, all brands, according to the research, showed unique strategies in managing their Facebook pages, all following particular aspects and rules of effective viral marketing. The study also suggests that the usage of online branding strategies in terms of brand image is one of the most important elements of nowadays beauty brands' corporate strategies. This, according to the research findings, together with a two-way communication model used by the brands can result in better engagement control and better and faster responsiveness to beauty market developments (Shen & Bissell, 2013).

Among all the engagement strategies mentioned, crowdsourcing is not very commonly used in the beauty industry. It is treated by companies more like an occasional engagement activity rather than a business strategy. Brands such as Glossier, Julep, Charlotte Tilbury or Kylie Cosmetics have been developing different crowdsourcing initiatives aimed at including customers into their product-development processes, packaging design or marketing, and these very often proved to be beneficial and successful, however, no brand has made it one step further to actually implement crowdsourcing into its brand identity and depend on it in its business activities. Thus, even though crowdsourcing is not new in the beauty industry in general, Volition Beauty can be seen as a pioneer of the crowdsourcing-based solutions, a brand which not only occasionally engages the customers, but claims to fully rely on them in the development of its beauty products. No other beauty brand creates its beauty products based exclusively on the crowd-sourced ideas and uses crowdsourcing as its positioning statement. Academic literature lacks relevant research about crowdsourcing in the cosmetics sector but also there is limited knowledge about beauty brands using customer engagement in their brand image development process. As Shen and Bissel (2013) noticed, one of the developing research suggestions is also to focus on the customers' motivations to comment and engage on beauty brand's social media pages. This study aims to fill these gaps in the academic literature.

The theories and previous research discussed in this chapter provide a relevant framework for the study and allow to ground it in the present academic debate. The knowledge about important discussions considering digital labour and participation is needed to understand the broader perspective of the crowdsourcing phenomenon, and also the environment in which Volition Beauty operates. The controversial character of the academic dispute considering exploitation of digital workers can have an influence on crowdsourcing brands' reputation, which is important to take into consideration researching the process of brand image creation. Furthermore, the described theories and concepts linked to customer engagement and crowdsourcing itself allowed the researcher to operationalize the research question and provided the framework for the study. Relevant types of engagement posts as well as motivations to engage and take part in crowdsourcing activities are going to be used to code the data material. Finally, previous research regarding brand image creation and trends in the beauty industry presented in the chapter places the research about Volition Beauty within the academic debate and provides a framework to present how the study can complement the current knowledge.

3. Methods

This study used a qualitative research design to answer the research question which is supported by three sub-questions in order to guide the analysis and make the research more feasible. The research question and sub-questions are as follows:

RQ1: How does Volition Beauty use online customer engagement to create its brand image utilizing crowdsourcing solutions?

Sub-question 1: How does Volition Beauty encourage collaborative product innovation?

Sub-question 2: How does Volition Beauty encourage online forms of customer engagement?

Sub-question 3: How does Volition Beauty position itself on the beauty market?

3.1 Qualitative method

The research question in this study was addressed by the means of qualitative content analysis. A qualitative research method was chosen to answer the research question and sub-questions because of its interpretative character and suitability to examine phenomena in their natural surroundings and occurring over time (Snape & Spencer, 2003). Because the theoretical framework of the study focuses on crowdsourcing, customer engagement and brand image creation, a qualitative content analysis study was the best way to research these aspects as they occur, in the "natural environment", which would not be possible with a survey, experiment or interview. What is more, qualitative methods are appropriate to answer research questions that are about exploration, explanation or understanding (Snape & Spencer, 2003), so they suit also the research question that guides this study, which seeks to explore and interpret Volition's Beauty online communication and engagement strategies. Because Volition Beauty is a company primarily based online, the online media content as data was the most appropriate source allowing to answer the research question.

3.2 Case study research

The study was based on the principals of the case study research, in order to go in-depth into the Volition's Beauty ways of interacting with and engaging customers. According to Yin (2003), a case study as a research strategy has a significant advantage over other methods when the research question is a "how" or "why" question, the study examines contemporary events and the researcher has no control over the situation studied. Because the study of Volition Beauty fulfills these conditions, a case study research strategy was appropriate for the project. A case study is a form of empirical inquiry that investigates a

certain, contemporary phenomenon in real life in a holistic way, especially when the borders between this situation and its context are not clear. Depending on the number of cases within a study, single- and multiple-case studies require different research designs (Yin, 2003). A rationale for a single case study is when it represents a critical case in testing a theory, when the case is extreme or unique, representative, revelatory or longitudinal. From the criteria mentioned, the case chosen for this study, through its pioneer and innovative character, fulfills the requirement of being unique. Therefore, this study had a single case study research design, and because it entailed only one unit of analysis, the holistic type of design was used (Yin, 2003). The design of the study was therefore as presented in Figure 1.

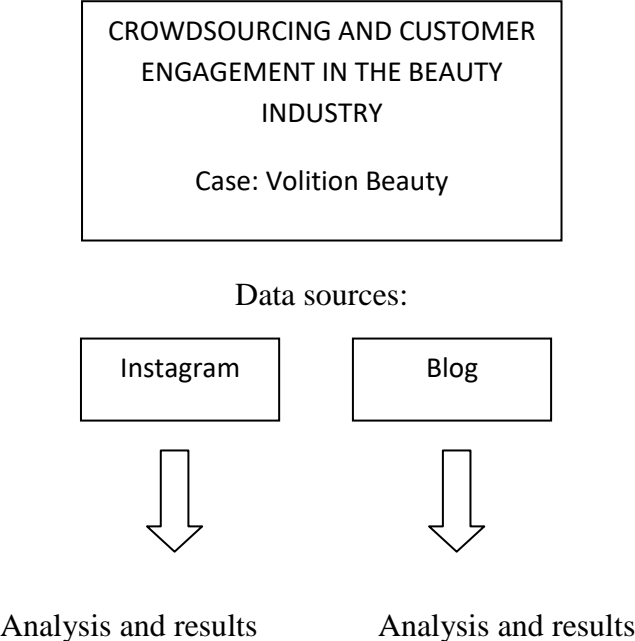


Figure 1

For the purpose of the research, Volition Beauty has been chosen as a case due to the company’s innovative and pioneering character. The brand develops and produces its beauty products based on the crowd-sourced ideas and votes submitted by the members of the brand’s community. Even though crowdsourcing initiatives have been present in the beauty industry before (Thomas, 2018), no other brand has incorporated crowdsourcing into its brand identity yet, to the point that most of the ideas for the manufactured beauty products are said to be provided only by the customers. Volition Beauty uses crowdsourcing as its positioning statement, and therefore does not engage its customers occasionally, but tries to include them into its business activities on a permanent basis. The company can, therefore, be perceived as

an initiator and pioneer of crowdsourcing solutions on the beauty market, and creates a case that is unique and brings relevance to the crowdsourcing, customer engagement and beauty industry research by being innovative. The study, therefore, aimed at filling a few gaps in academic research. Academia lacks relevant studies about crowdsourcing in the beauty sector, as well as the beauty brands' usage of communication and engagement strategies based on collaborative innovation. Little prior research has also addressed the beauty brands' usage of new and social media to engage and communicate with the customers (Shen & Bissel, 2013). What is more, the study of the firm's communication patterns might serve as an example and provide managerial implications for other companies wishing to use crowdsourcing in their marketing strategies.

3.2.1 Sampling

The sample for the study was collected among Volition's Beauty Instagram (@volitionbeauty) posts and blog (<https://www.volitioncollectivity.com/>) articles including hashtags. Both channels are used by the brand to communicate and interact with customers. Even though the initial idea of the researcher was to examine content on all social media accounts that the company has, thus also Twitter, LinkedIn, YouTube and Facebook, Instagram was chosen as the main source, as a social media platform with the highest user engagement rate on brands' profiles among all other channels (Pathak, 2015; Bauerova, 2017). Also, in comparison to other industries, beauty brands score the highest in user interactions on their Instagram profiles (Buryan, 2018). Therefore, Instagram is the most representative platform in the context of the presented research. Moreover, it was taken into consideration that limited sources of posts allowed for a more in-depth and rich analysis of the profile, instead of a fragmented and superficial study. Both channels, Instagram and blog, were examined in two separate analyses using a qualitative analysis software ATLAS.ti.

The Instagram sample consisted of 252 posts, following the rules of the qualitative content analysis of social media data (*Methodological Guidelines Thesis Research*, September 2017-2018). To ensure the credibility of the study and define the sample, 63 posts were collected from every year of the brand's Instagram activity, starting with 63 posts collected in a row from the 1st of May 2015, when the company opened the Instagram account. Subsequently, 63 posts were collected from each of the years 2016, 2017 and 2018, creating a time frame of four years, with the last post dating back to 22nd of June 2018.

The blog sample consisted of 20 blog articles of a minimum 300 words in length, also following the rules of the qualitative content analysis of blog posts (*Methodological*

Guidelines Thesis Research, September 2017-2018). In order to create the sample, 5 first articles in a row published each year of the brand’s blogging activity were collected, the same way the Instagram data has been extracted. With the aim to code the selected fragments of texts, the articles were read and considered several times.

3.2.2 Operationalisation

For the initial coding, the types of engagement posts defined by Coursaris, Van Osch and Balogh (2013) were used to identify strategies implemented by the brand. The types and their descriptions are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Types of engagement posts (Coursaris, Van Osch and Balogh, 2013)

Type of post	Description
<i>product assistance</i>	posts that share an advice connected to the product such as usage tips
<i>community (other platforms)</i>	posts that encourage the audience to follow brand’s other online platforms
<i>likes</i>	posts that directly encourage users to “like”
<i>photo/video</i>	posts that encourage customers to look at a new photo or video posted by the brand
<i>poll</i>	posts that encourage users to give an answer to a multiple-choice question
<i>question (open question)</i>	encouraging users to give answer to a fill-in-the-blank or open-ended question
<i>appreciation</i>	posts that are written in order to thank customers for their support and engagement
<i>directional</i>	posts that are supposed to encourage customers to click in a link in order to be redirected or perform some other activity other than “liking”

To define and code different dimensions of online customer engagement on a more interpretative level, and to see which motivations Volition Beauty uses to encourage it, the theory of Wirtz et al. (2013) about the motivations users have to engage in online brand communities was used. The scholars identified three groups of motivators that encourage

members to engage in the activities in the online brand communities: *brand-related*, *social* and *functional drivers*.

1. Brand-related drivers

- a) *Brand identification* – the possibility for the customer to identify himself or herself with the brand
- b) *Brand's symbolic function* – referring to the brand's identity – the value of collectivity, but also other brand's values and beliefs such as cruelty-free production

2. Social drivers

- a) *Social benefits* – opportunity to receive help and support from other members of the community – for example by sharing product-related experience or advice in a support discussion linked with a social conversation
- b) *Social identity* – referring to the value of belongingness in the brand's community and the possibility to create an identity by a membership in a group - an identity influenced by the brand and by opinions and values that the customers share

3. Functional drivers

- a) *Functional benefits* – a possibility to get basic information about products or services such as recommendations or tips
- b) *Uncertainty avoidance* – getting reassurance about a product quality in order to reduce the discomfort of uncertainty and making oneself more comfortable with a purchase decision
- c) *Information quality* – the value of information credibility - the possibility to receive an up-to-date and credible information about a brand at first hand
- d) *Monetary incentives* – the opportunity to gain loyalty points or price promotions
- e) *Explicit normative incentives* – referring to the value of solidarity or common goal to encourage participation evokes a feeling of obligation among the customers

If the brand used any of the abovementioned motivations to encourage customer engagement, the corresponding fragment of the data was appropriately coded with the name of the factor.

Encouraging crowdsourcing in the form of collaborative product innovation was identified based on motivations to take part in crowdsourcing activities developed by Brabham (2010, 2012). The codes were assigned to the posts and fragments of blog articles based on appearance of incentives such as monetary compensation for collaboration (*payment for collaboration*), opportunity to develop certain skills based on the feedback received from

the company or community (*skills development*), potential to begin freelance work and gain recognition (*job opportunities*), emotional connection to the community and social benefits that encourage collaboration (*love for co-creative community*), message that evokes feelings of pride about one's contribution and faith in its meaning (*proud about collaboration*), joy of co-creation and being a member of a co-creative community (*enjoying collaboration*) and addictive character of taking part in co-creation and being member of the community, which is a result of the desire to take part in crowdsourcing and receive social feedback on one's work (*addictive collaboration*).

The third research sub-question has been planned to be answered based on the first two because answers to the questions about how does the company encourage crowdsourcing activities, as well as how does it build customer engagement, were crucial in making conclusions about the brand image creation based on these activities. Because the aim of the research and the main research question focus on brand image creation through customer engagement, other forms of creating brand reputation were not included into the scope of the research.

3.3 Data collection and analysis

To conduct the research, texts created online by the brand on their Instagram account and also on the brand's blog were collected. The research focused only on the textual part of the posts and articles. Being a member of the brand's community gave the researcher access to all the content that might have been relevant for the study. The data from Instagram was collected by the means of screenshots and subsequently imported into ATLAS.ti, a qualitative data analysis software. The screenshots were chosen as a way of collecting data due to the quickly and frequently changing social media environment in which the data collection took place. The screenshots were made to ensure that the research can be tracked back by anyone interested. The texts of blog articles were copy-pasted into the Microsoft Word documents without images and subsequently uploaded into ATLAS.ti.

3.3.1 Thematic analysis

To explore the ways Volition Beauty creates its brand image as a crowd-sourced brand with the help of online customer engagement, the collected data was analyzed by the means of thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a qualitative analysis approach which identifies, organizes and provides insights into the patterns found in the data in a systematical way (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Its main goal is to explain shared meanings across the data,

previously identifying similar and common ways in which a subject is presented. Themes, the final output of the analysis, are patterns of shared meaning, underpinned by a core concept. They are very often abstract and capture the implied meaning of the data, which Braun and Clarke (2012) identify as "storybook" (latent) themes. "Bucket" (semantic) themes, on the other hand, are more descriptive and focus on the superficial meanings of the text. From the identified themes, those which are useful in answering the research question have to be extracted (Braun & Clarke, 2012).

Thematic analysis was chosen as an appropriate approach for this study because by developing codes and themes it allowed for the identification of patterns in the techniques the company uses to communicate and engage with its customers and therefore also the ways in which it creates its image. This form of qualitative data analysis is flexible and highly interpretive, and that is why it demanded an active contribution from the researcher as well as conscious and responsible choices in the research design. The analysis of the data was therefore conducted following and combining the rules and principles of two approaches – Braun and Clarke (2012) and Boeije (2010). Braun and Clarke (2012) informed the study with the general principles of thematic analysis, good practice rules and important concepts. The approach of Braun and Clarke (2012) is a reflexive approach, using both qualitative techniques of data analysis as well as qualitative philosophy. The coding of the data in this study following their approach was, therefore, an open, flexible process and it reflected a developing understanding of the material. The themes identified were mostly “storybook” themes, following Braun and Clarke’s (2012) assumption that they are more interpretive and provide more in-depth insights into the data than the “bucket” themes, however, the initial process of open coding was mostly based on more descriptive codes. The analysis had a form of a combination of deductive and inductive approaches to analysis, thus a certain amount of concepts regarding customer engagement and crowdsourcing was already established before the analysis and guided the process, identifying implied meanings, but certain codes were also deducted in a more semantic way from the data itself (Braun & Clarke, 2012). A claim made by Braun and Clarke (2012) that common patterns are not necessarily the most important ones was also taken into consideration, to ensure that the analysis is made in a critical way. The work of Boeije (2010) provided a framework for the analysis, consisting of three steps of coding: open coding, axial coding and selective coding.

3.3.2 Open coding

Open coding was an initial process of examining the collected data, dividing it into fragments, comparing it and categorizing into groups (Boeije, 2010). Each group received an appropriate code that summarized and named the content of each category that could be potentially important for answering the research question. The coding process was a combination of latent and semantic approach. Codes were also partly developed taking into account the theoretical assumptions mentioned in the theoretical framework. This process was initial, and therefore less structured than the following ones because the frame of the analysis was not developed yet. The open coding was conducted using the features of ATLAS.ti program, by identifying the name of the code and highlighting the part of the text that was associated with it. This way, each relevant fragment of the text was coded – after inventing the first code, a subsequent part of the text was read, and if the initial code did not apply to it, a new one was invented. Following the rule of coding as a flexible and open process, different codes were adjusted or changed during this part of the analysis, depending on whether there was a need to merge, expand them, narrow down, include a new piece of material or rename. Each fragment of data could be assigned to one or more codes. This phrase ended when all the data was fully coded and 59 codes for Instagram posts and 54 for blog articles formed alphabetical lists in ATLAS.ti. The additional rounds of data collection in every step of the analysis that are recommended by Boeije (2010) were skipped in this study because the scope of the research was clearly defined and the size of the sample did not require more rounds. Throughout the whole process of analysis, the ‘memos’ function in ATLAS.ti was used to keep a research journal and write down important information about the course of the analysis.

3.3.3 Axial coding

The next step, axial coding, rearranged the data in a new way by merging codes, creating categories and defining their dimensions (Boeije, 2010). The purpose was to determine which codes and categories are important for the research and to reduce and reorganize the collected data. The areas of similarity and common features were identified among the codes in order to merge them and develop broader themes around which the codes were gathered. As the final outcome of the axial coding, five themes were created in the Instagram analysis that described relevant patterns in the data (Boeije, 2010):

1. *Direct co-creation incentives*
2. *Direct engagement incentives*
3. *Insights into the co-creative process*

4. *Love for co-creative community/social identity*
5. *Values – brand’s symbolic function.*

For the blog analysis, the seven identified themes were:

1. *Direct co-creation incentives*
2. *Insights into the co-creative process*
3. *Love for co-creative community/social identity*
4. *Real solutions for real women*
5. *Revolutionizing the beauty industry*
6. *The benefits of crowdsourcing*
7. *Values – brand’s symbolic function*

Some of the coded material that referred only to product promotion or sales was considered as not relevant for answering the research question so it was removed from the analysis by not including it in any of the created themes. All the themes were given a name capturing what was unique and distinct about each of them and described summing up the essence and core part of each. The axial coding process was conducted in ATLAS.ti by creating groups of codes. Subsequently, all themes were reviewed for quality and connection to the research question as well as double-checked whether they have a clear relation to the coded data.

3.3.4 Selective coding

The last step of the thematic analysis, selective coding, was conducted to reorganize the themes into larger units and compare and connect different themes in order to identify key concepts and discourses, as well as the core category of the research. The focus was on the relationships between the developed themes. The core category of the research is the main concept that explains the observations of the researcher, is a central outcome of the analysis and appears very often in the analyzed data (Boeije, 2010). The selective themes that were identified in the study and formed the core category were *direct strategies* and *indirect strategies*. In order to choose the themes that were going to be presented in the research findings, the research question and purpose of the study were taken into consideration, as well as connections to the theory, the uniqueness of the findings and their actuality (Boeije, 2010). As the last step of the analysis, the parts of the data supporting produced themes were selected to present in the “Results” section, both to illustrate the data found in relation to the developed themes as well as to discuss it in more detail.

3.4 Reliability, validity and ethical implications

In every research, the credibility of the study, thus the matters of reliability and validity have to be addressed, in order to ensure its rigor and trustworthiness. Even though these aspects are not as clearly defined when it comes to the qualitative research, which has more explorative and interpretative character, as it is in quantitative studies, a big effort was made in this study to ensure the trustworthiness of the results. First of all, because the researcher is of key importance in qualitative studies, treated as an instrument of conducting data collection and analysis, and has a crucial role in making decisions about the data treatment, all the initial assumptions were rejected to ensure the credibility of the study and reduce the possibility of a bias (Silverman, 2011). By a detailed explanation of the theoretical framework, choice of method, research design and data collection and analysis, theoretical and research transparency was provided, which will hopefully satisfy the reliability criteria (Silverman, 2011). The validity of a research according to Silverman (2011) can be ensured by implementation of the steps of analytic induction, the constant comparative method, deviant case analysis, comprehensive data treatment and usage of appropriate tabulations. In this study, the constant comparative method was implemented by the frequent comparison of the data fragments in the case. After the development of the set of codes in the open coding process, the codes were subsequently tested on the expanding dataset (Silverman, 2011). What is more, the data in the study was treated in a comprehensive way, meaning that all parts of the collected data were inspected and analyzed.

Because a study based on qualitative content analysis does not include cooperation with any research participants, it does not raise any significant ethical issues that must be addressed towards them. However, any impact the research might have on the company's reputation was taken into consideration. To mitigate the probability of harming the company's reputation, the research was conducted in an objective and non-judgmental way.

4. Results

The study aimed at exploring and interpreting the ways Volition Beauty, a crowdsourcing beauty brand, encourages customer engagement and collaborative product innovation on their two new media channels, Instagram and blog, and how these practices are used to build the company's brand image. To answer the research question and sub-questions, the themes generated in the data analysis and their interpretation and connection to the theoretical framework are presented in this chapter. The coding tree with all the themes and codes is introduced in Appendix A.

The chapter is structured according to two selective themes that were generated during the analysis. The analyzed data showed that Volition Beauty encourages online engagement and collaborative product innovation in the new media by the usage of *direct strategies* and *indirect strategies*. Each theme consists of four sub-themes presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Selective themes and sub-themes

Direct strategies	Indirect strategies
Direct co-creation incentives	Love for co-creative community/social identity
Insights into the co-creative process	Real solutions for real women
The benefits of crowdsourcing	Revolutionizing the beauty industry
Direct engagement incentives	Values – brand's symbolic function

Each sub-theme is presented, illustrated and interpreted in this chapter. As each fragment of the data could be assigned to one or more codes in the analysis, some of the coded material appears in more than one categories.

4.1 Direct strategies

4.1.1 Direct co-creation incentives

Thematic analysis of the data collected from both Instagram and blog showed that the company uses a strategy of *direct co-creation incentives* to encourage online users to submit product ideas and vote for already developed campaigns. Incentives, in this view, refer to all strategies, techniques and motivations the company uses to encourage community members to take part in collaborative product innovation. Some of the motivations that emerged during the analysis go in line with what Brabham (2010, 2012) defined as the strongest factors

influencing participants' willingness to take part in crowdsourcing: *payment for collaboration, job opportunities* and *being proud about collaboration*, however, also new concepts emerged. The theme overarching these categories, direct co-creation incentives, appeared in both data sources.

Calls to action: Volition Beauty uses direct 'calls to action', in the forms of 'call to collaborate' and 'call to vote', in few cases followed by the direct URL link to the platform, to create an explicit and relatively simple encouragement for community members to visit the company's website and take part in the co-creation process. The company also emphasizes the encouragement to co-create or vote by the usage of hashtags such as #CoCreate and #vote, or redirection phrase "Vote link in bio!".

Examples from Instagram:

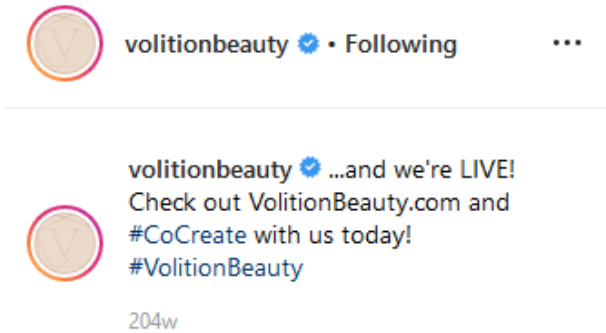


Figure 1

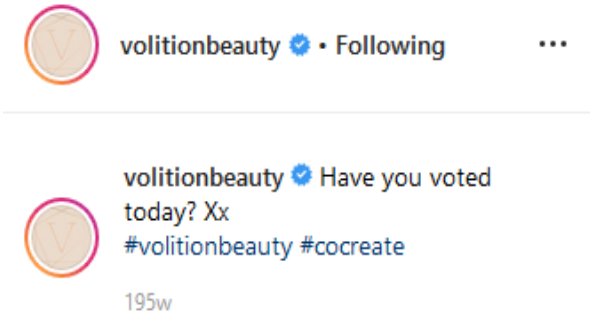


Figure 2

Examples from blog:

“We’re the first online collaboration platform that lets you take charge and create your own beauty products. (Note: *You* can create your own product! Submit an idea here).”

“In order to find the most innovative, problem-solving products, we need people like you to submit your ideas!”

However, interestingly, direct calls to collaborate and submit product ideas appeared both in Instagram posts and blog articles content, but direct calls to vote were present only in Instagram posts. This implies that the blog content is more focused on encouraging community members to submit ideas and take part in the co-creative process, whereas the Instagram profile focuses more on encouraging online users to vote. The reason for that might be that the blog is more oriented towards already established community members, who are more willing to devote a greater amount of time and energy to engage with the brand in the form of idea development, while Instagram account has a broader target group and its goal is to encourage less engaging voting activity. What is more, the nature and characteristics of the medium have to be also taken into consideration – while the blog is an online medium that allows for a long-term connection, the form of Instagram posts encourages rather short-term and fragmented interactions, such as voting.

Collaborate to get perfect products: By submitting ideas and voting on the platform, the community members are able to collaborate with Volition Beauty in the process of product development. Many posts and article fragments express the possibility to get a perfect, “dream” product by taking part in the Volition’s Beauty crowdsourcing initiative. By pointing out the personalized and solution-oriented character of the product development on the platform, Volition Beauty convinces the customers that the company has the power to enable them to create their own, custom-made products that have the potential to answer their skin’s specific needs. The product developed in the process is “perfect”, it is thus not necessary to look for solutions in the other brands’ offers – Volition Beauty is able to deliver everything a client needs.

Examples from Instagram:

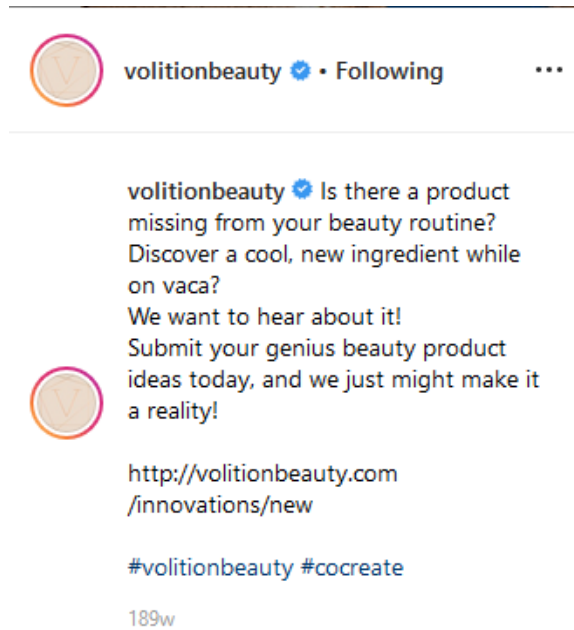


Figure 3



Figure 4

Also, by using hashtags such as #custommade, #madebyme, and #myownvolition on Instagram, the brand frequently points out the individual character of the process. The blog content focuses on the aspect of creating “dream” products even more. With statements, slogans and community members testimonials the company implies that with their service, customers are able to receive both highly personalized experience and product perfect for their individual needs.

Examples from blog:

“Who better to tell us what they want than the consumer?”

“The Only Brand That Helps You Create Your Dream Products.”

“This was the only platform that would allow me to have a say and control in what I thought the perfect cleanser was! I was never forced into making a decision I didn't fully agree with and I was never forced into a product I didn't stand by.”

“All I could think was ‘finally, a company that gets it, who better to create products than the people who really know what the beauty industry needs!’ “

This incentive goes in line with the claim of Łopaciuk and Łoboda (2013) that personalized products have been receiving more and more attention in the beauty industry in recent years. *Mass customization*, referring to the growing popularity of custom-made products and services, is also one of the marketing strategies identified by Rust and Oliver (1994) as a consequence of customers becoming more and more empowered.

Collaborate to get job & recognition: The analysis of the blog content also showed that the company emphasizes the possibility to develop one's career possibilities by taking part in crowdsourcing – a motivation that Brabham (2010, 2012) mentioned in his studies. In order to pass this message down to the community members, the company made use of one of the innovators' personal story.

Example from blog:

“The culmination of Jen's entrepreneurial journey came when QVC¹ selected the product for Volition's one hour show in August! In just six months, Jen had gone from frustrated consumer to a successful innovator with her amazing product featured on QVC!”

Jen's way to success is described in a simple way: she was frustrated and unhappy as a consumer because she was not able to find on the beauty market the product that would be suitable for her skin's needs. But once she became a Volition's Beauty innovator, not only has she received the perfect product, but also got recognized and made it one step further towards becoming an entrepreneur. Gaining recognition is a motivation that Volition presents also on the brand's Instagram account. The company implies that, by becoming visible on the brand's online pages, innovators are able to gain recognition and at the same time start their own journey of becoming entrepreneurs.

¹ QVC – an American television network and shopping channel specialized in televised home shopping (<https://www.qvc.com/>)

Example from Instagram:



Figure 5

Payment for collaboration: As can be seen in Figure 5, not only gaining recognition, but also monetary incentives are prominent in both blog and Instagram content. Opportunity to earn commission on a product developed in the process is a compensation the company offers, in line with the fact that Brabham (2010, 2012) identified it as one of the most important motivations for users to take part in crowdsourcing.

However, it is important to notice that Volition Beauty does not reveal the amount of money an innovator can earn by developing a product, nor does it inform about the details linked to its own revenues. The brand thus acts not transparently enough to make it clear for all community members how does the share of the income look like. This fact can be linked to the criticism surrounding crowdsourcing and digital labour. The lack of transparency can be a source of precarity for the innovators, as mentioned already by Fish and Srinivasan (2012), and there is no guarantee made for the public that the innovators are not underpaid. Therefore, following the opinion of scholars such as Andrejevic (2009), Caldwell (2011) and Brabham (2012), there is a possibility that the whole process has an exploitative character.

Nevertheless, Volition Beauty offers monetary incentives to the innovators but also the customers who take part in crowdsourcing by voting on already existing campaigns are said to be rewarded – they are offered purchase discounts for engaging in the process. In this case, even though the company reveals concrete numbers on its Instagram, as can be seen in Figure 6 and 7, the discount offer is not always the same. What is more, even though the company claims that discounts are a form of compensation for taking part in crowdsourcing, they can be identified as a sales strategy as well, because the “reward” still requires a product purchase.

Examples from Instagram:



Figure 6

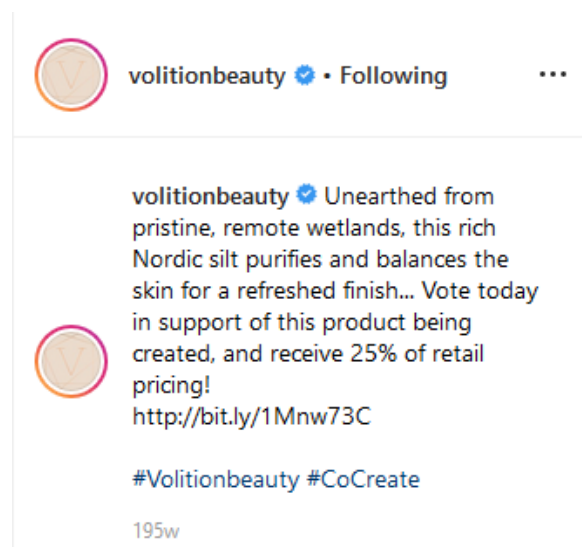


Figure 7

Example from blog:

“Volition Innovators earn commission on their products! So not only are you helping other women out there, you're making some money.”

Helping other women with innovation: In the data example above, taken from a blog article, the company also claims that by developing products in a co-creative process, innovators help other women to receive products that are unique and have been absent on the

market before. The focus is on all the women a developed product might help - other customers and community members who share the same skin problems and needs. So the innovators are not only creating “dream” cosmetics for themselves, but also have an impact on the beauty routine of other customers. The company refers to the value of community and implies that by creating products, community members help each other and generate benefits for the whole group of brand supporters.

It is important to note, however, that the brand, although claiming to be inclusive, addresses only women in their statement about helping others with innovation. Even though Volition’s Beauty products are said to be dedicated for everyone, including all genders, still the company approaches only women. This creates a feeling of inconsistency, taking into consideration how often the brand emphasizes the values of tolerance and diversity in their business.

Supporting entrepreneurs: By the activities of voting and purchasing, in turn, the community members are supporting and helping the innovators who collaborate with Volition Beauty. The claim made by the company that by voting community members enable entrepreneurs, who are “fellow beauty lovers”, launch their products and earn a commission, refers to the value of solidarity and support among the members. This causes the feeling of obligation to help each other and can be a strong incentive to be active within the community (Wirtz et al., 2013). The support in the brand’s community, therefore, referring also to the previous category, works both ways and creates a strong relationship of reliance – the innovators help other community members, and other community members help the innovators.

However, the company uses this incentive and value of solidarity within the community also to encourage online users to buy. It is, therefore, not only a motivation to collaborate and participate, but also a sales strategy. This idea is implied by the company in the Instagram post presented in Figure 8.

Example from Instagram:



Figure 8

Proud about collaboration: Innovator Emily claims (Figure 8) that appreciation of the community related to the product she came up with was “the COOLEST thing”, which can indicate a sort of fulfillment and satisfaction related to the product development. Her testimonial indicates that innovators, the way the company presents it, feel proud with their products and the collaboration with the brand – Volition Beauty presents satisfied and happy innovators and customers, indicating that anyone who decides to participate will feel the same.

Also in the example mentioned in Figure 9, the company points out to its community members that “the Ultimate AntiAging Trio is your product and your solution” implying that the community can be proud about the product it developed. The incentive of being proud about collaboration is one of the factors Brabham (2010) described as motivators to take part in crowdsourcing activities.

Example from Instagram:



Figure 9

However, not all of the incentives researched by Brabham (2010, 2012) appeared in the outcome of the analysis. In his study of Threadless (2010) and the motivations online users have to participate in crowdsourcing, the researcher highlighted one of the most important findings – the notion of *addiction*. This category, defined as a constant need to contribute, be active in the community and give and receive feedback, is also the most prominent that lacks in the Volition’s Beauty analysis. The members of the Threadless community in the interviews conducted very often stated that being active on the website and taking part in crowdsourcing had an addictive character for them primarily because of the community, and the possibility to interact with other members on the forum, where they can discuss their ideas and artistic vision. The lack of this incentive in the outcome of the analysis in the research of Volition Beauty might be due to the fact that it did not include any qualitative data sourced from the crowdsourcing participants. In order to research whether this motivation is present also among the Volition’s Beauty innovators, a series of qualitative in-depth interviews would have to be conducted.

4.1.2 Insights into the co-creative process

Innovators’ ideas and inspirations: Volition Beauty tries to motivate its customers to participate by posting activity imitating the “behind the scenes” of the product development process. The company tries to give an impression that it makes explicit the way collaboration works and let online users follow the process so that they can become more convinced about its benefits and encouraged to engage. However, in fact, there is a lack of posts and blog articles that show a step-by-step guide to the process, with detailed information about the selection criteria or the amount of money innovators receive. Again, the lack of transparency is prominent in the company’s activity. The Instagram account focuses mainly on the

presentation of the innovators, their ideas and inspirations behind them in the form of a brief storytelling.

Examples from Instagram:



Figure 10



Figure 11

The blog content, besides focusing on the innovators' stories and products, also provides some technical information about the crowdsourcing process, but it is not very detailed. In the article “Your Step-by-Step Guide to Become our Next Beauty Innovator!” the company guides the customers in a step-by-step handbook about how to collaborate with Volition Beauty but does not provide any in-depth information. Presenting innovators and their stories

remains the main strategy to get the customers closer to the process, however, it has to be noticed, that it is also very product-oriented, thus probably aims to encourage not only collaboration but also sales.

Examples from blog:

“To incorporate this wet, rich Silt into a mask, Volition’s innovator – Takako – a brilliant cosmetic chemist – had to create a unique gel suspension technology. She used vegetable-based oils like jojoba and avocado to coat the insoluble, precious silt and suspend it into a water-based gel. That is why this Gelee has such a wet, buoyant texture that does not dry, cake or strip the skin like other masks.”

“Betsy has been a makeup artist for thirty years. She wanted to create a product that would easily allow her to fix eyeliner imperfections without messing with the rest of her makeup.”

Meet the innovator: The innovators are presented on the company’s online pages in a way that is meant to be interesting and approachable. An attempt is made to convince community members and other online users that every developed product hides a unique story of a certain need and solution that has been created in the process. The company also uses the hashtag #KnowYourInnovator that might give an impression that it wants its customers to be closer to the company and to the product, not only passively receive information but be active in the innovation process. This goes in line with the theory of Brabham (2012) that online audiences are not passive anymore, but they want to be involved in the brand’s activities.

4.1.3 The benefits of crowdsourcing

Smart & inclusive process: The way that the crowdsourcing process is described on the company’s blog, which, as already mentioned before, has a more co-creation oriented character than Instagram, is meant to convince community members that it is an initiative worth investing time and effort in. First of all, crowdsourcing is described as an innovative and smart solution. According to the company, crowdsourcing enables to produce cosmetics that are precisely tailored to the customers’ needs, which lowers the possibility of product failure and therefore prevents unexpected costs, at the same time allowing for lower prices. Crowdsourcing in form of idea sourcing or crowd voting is unique in this way, because besides being a creative engagement strategy, it is also a good way of conducting market research (Brabham, 2012).

Examples from blog:

“Our smarter process makes for low costs. You get luxury products at better prices.”

“If you can dream it, you can make it,” comments Refinery29 on our completely unique process.”

What is more, crowdsourcing is, according to the company, a product development strategy that is inclusive – Volition Beauty points out that the products should be, and are in this case, coming from the customers’ needs and ideas. Besides that, everyone is welcomed to submit an idea and vote for the products – regardless of gender, profession or level of entrepreneurial experience.

Examples from blog:

“We’re making beauty more democratic - and more fun, to be honest - by letting beauty junkies and regular people bring their ideas to store shelves.”

“I also want to see beauty products open up more to all genders. I want them to be more than just a "girl's" thing. Beauty products are self-care, they should be totally acceptable for men, women and all genders in between to use.”

According to the brand crowdsourcing, as a smart and inclusive solution, changes the beauty industry into the more “democratic” environment. However, even though the company claims to conduct product development process in an inclusive way, it has to be taken into consideration that not everyone might have an opportunity to take part in it. This, according to Brabham (2012), can be a consequence of the differences in access to technology between developed and undeveloped countries. Not everyone, therefore, has access to the online platform and is able to devote time and energy into a process that, as a form of a voting contest, can turn out to be unpaid.

Better products: The consequence of this crowdsourcing process are, according to the company – better, more accessible and cheaper products. The perceived quality of the products developed in a co-creative process can therefore increase, because the cosmetics are more likely to meet the customers’ preferences, in the same way as described by Kumar et al. (2019). It is therefore worth investing time in product co-creation and voting.

Examples from blog:

“Real women to co-create and innovate better beauty products - and that’s awesome!”

“Our process allows us to make *better* products at a *better* price.”

4.1.4 Direct engagement incentives

On the Instagram profile, Volition Beauty makes use of few strategies to encourage not only product innovation, but also other forms of online customer engagement. Incentives, in this view, refer to all strategies, techniques and motivations the company uses to encourage online users to engage in various activities connected to the brand. Engaging customers on the new media channels allows brands to develop trust, loyalty and higher involvement in the brand’s community (Vivek et al., 2012) which can result in higher willingness to take part in crowdsourcing. What is more, this kind of engagement encouragement has a big impact on the word-of-mouth and viral marketing of a brand (Brodie et al., 2011; Vivek et al., 2012).

Ask, share & let us know what you think: In engagement strategies such as “Ask us a question”, “Let us know what you think” or “Share a story”, the company directly encourages customers to engage into the conversation with the brand in an open and constructive way, not only trying to show willingness to answer to all the doubts online users might have, but also to hear about their feedback and experience. This also implies an attempt to show that the company wants to act transparently and be in dialogue with its customers.

Examples from Instagram:

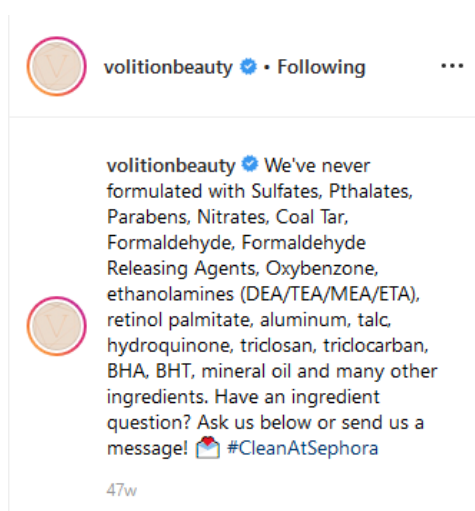


Figure 12

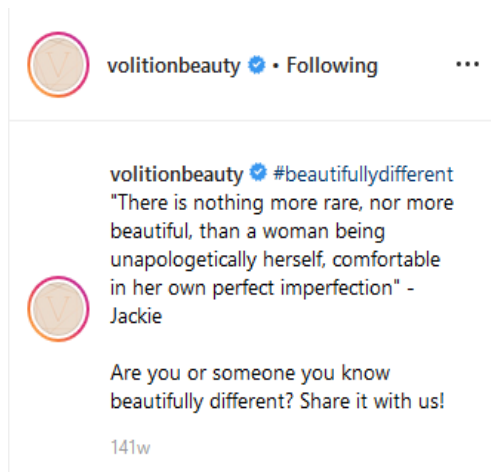


Figure 13

This proves the claim made by Kumar et al. (2010) that nowadays companies are more often trying to change their one-way communication models based on providing information with the two-way communication models that are more focused on interactions and a dialogue with the customers rather than a simple delivery of information. However, in order to successfully establish a valuable relationship with customers, a great level of trust and transparency is needed (Brabham, 2012), which is not always the case taking into consideration Volition's Beauty communication patterns.

Hashtag usage: One of the hashtags the company uses, #beautifullydifferent, which can be noticed in Figure 13, is a campaign to encourage online users to share stories and feature people they admire. This way the company lets its customers know that their experiences and perspectives are important to the brand, and encourages them to engage in a form of sharing their personal story. What is more, this kind of language implies a goal the company has to influence the self-esteem of the customers by highlighting the value of diversity. The message Volition Beauty tries to send across is that everyone is beautiful in a different way, which implies that beauty is universal and as a result makes every customer feel good.

Polls & open questions: The usage of polls and open-ended questions by Volition Beauty goes in line with what Shen and Bissel (2013) identified as one of the most frequent engagement techniques used by the beauty brands online. Posts containing polls and open questions have potentially the same goal of hearing what the customers have to say, as described in the Coursaris et al. (2013) theory, but Volition Beauty uses them more often as an entertainment content than a tool to hear the customers' feedback.

Examples from Instagram:



Figure 14



Figure 15

Giveaway & contest: The company also uses strategies such as “Giveaway” or contests to engage the customers, with a motivational factor of winning a prize. This kind of monetary incentive has been also described by Wirtz et al. (2013) as one of the functional drivers of customer engagement. Motivated by an opportunity to win prizes or receive price discounts, the customers are more likely to engage in the project proposed by the company. However, again, the activities also contain elements of sales and product promotion strategies, as prizes include most often only the brand’s products.

Examples from Instagram:



Figure 16



Figure 17

Tag a friend & likes: As shown in the example posts in Figure 16 and 17, the brand also makes use of a “Tag a friend” strategy to engage the online users but also gain more potential followers. This way the brand becomes more visible and the brand awareness might increase. The customers often get the chance to be featured on the brand’s Instagram account, and the “Likes” strategy identified by Coursaris et al. (2013), in a form of a direct request to “like” a post, also appears on the Volition's Beauty feed.

Examples from Instagram:



Figure 18

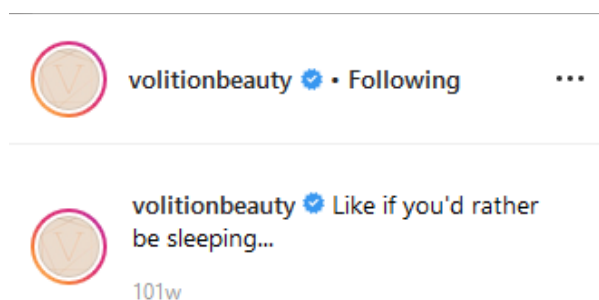


Figure 19

4.2 Indirect strategies

The theme *indirect strategies* consists of categories that refer to more implicit, subconsciously created incentives and motivations which can convince the customers that engaging with Volition Beauty, both in more regular online activities as well as product innovation, is a unique and profitable experience. To engage its customers on a more subconscious level, the company refers frequently to the importance of community, common values and beliefs, the "down-to-earth" approach of including non-professional entrepreneurs into its business activities and the opportunity to take part in the so-called "revolution" in the beauty industry.

4.2.1 Love for co-creative community/social identity

The theme *love for co-creative community/social identity* is a group of categories referring to the collective character of the brand and the possibility for the customer to be a part of a powerful community. The notion of community applies to both product development and other forms of online customer engagement, as both, according to the theory, can be

encouraged by the possibility for a customer to identify with a brand and other community members. According to Wirtz et al. (2013), one of the brand-related drivers of online customer engagement is the possibility to create a social identity by membership in the community group. When customers feel the belongingness and emotional attachment to the brand community, they are given the opportunity to create a new sort of identity that is influenced by the brand and common interests that the community members share. This feeling of identification and membership can be a strong motivational driver to engage more in the brand's activities because it strengthens the relationship between the customer and the brand. Brabham (2010, 2012) on the other hand, identified a similar factor connected to the community when researching motivations online users have to take part in crowdsourcing. He defined *love for co-creative community* as an emotional connection to the community and social benefits that one can receive by being a part of the group of brand supporters. According to the author, the strength of the community is directly linked to the success or failure of a crowdsourcing initiative. Both theories go in line with the research of Volition's Beauty new media content – the brand refers to the importance and meaning of the community and collective innovation on a regular basis.

Common passion for beauty: By the usage of hashtags on Instagram such as #beautylover, #beautyjunkie, #beautyaddict, #skincarejunkie, #skincareaddict and #skincareobsessed, the company points out to its customers that there is a thing all community members have in common – a passion for cosmetics and beauty. This can build a higher sense of community and feeling that there is something that unites all the customers. The same kind of message the company includes in the blog articles.

Examples from blog:

“At Volition, we set out with the goal of *revolutionizing the beauty industry together* with our customers. Let us share what that means to us, and ultimately to you, our awesome
Community of beauty enthusiasts.”

“Unless you live under a rock, you're probably familiar with Vitamin C. It's most popularly known as a powerful antioxidant found in common fruits like oranges, strawberries and even papaya. But if you're a skincare enthusiast like us, you already know how beneficial it is for
your skin.”

Personal story: As already mentioned before, the company uses personal stories of innovators and other community members in their feed, which can strengthen the feeling of an intimate, close community. By including this kind of posts on the Instagram account and blog, Volition Beauty convinces online users that the brand's customers are in fact a one big family, a community of cosmetics enthusiasts who can share insights and intimate stories among each other and talk about their values and beliefs. This kind of relationship that is presented by the brand also allows the community members to identify with the company and the community.

Examples from Instagram:

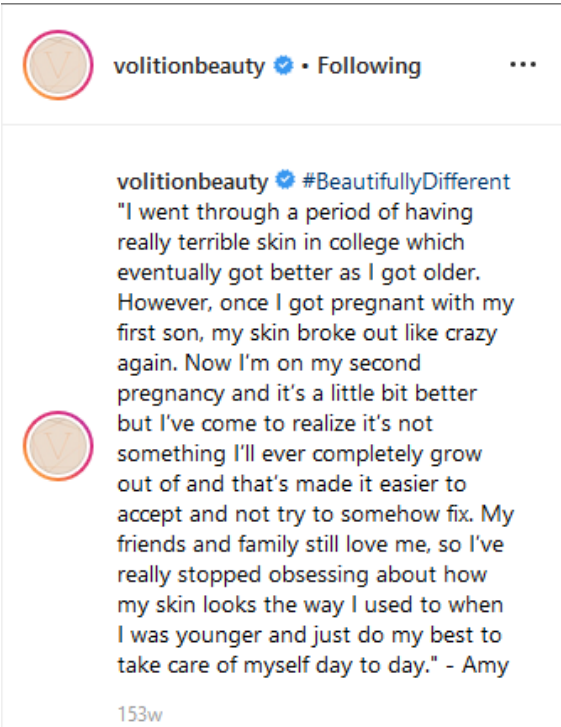


Figure 20



Figure 21

Example from blog:

“I discovered Volition Beauty when I saw an article about a cancer survivor who created an eyebrow replacement product. I was immediately intrigued by the company that supported her idea. As I read more about Volition Beauty, I knew I had to be a part of it.”

However, it has to be taken into consideration that all the stories and members' insights are posted by the brand itself, either on Instagram account or blog. Volition Beauty does not enable the community members to share anything without the acceptance of the company – there is no space on the blog such as forum or chat which would enable this kind of communication. Therefore, one could question the brand's customer-oriented approach and claim of empowering the customers. When the stories are carefully selected by the brand, and maybe even adjusted, the credibility of this strategy thus also its effectiveness is doubtful.

Brand identification: With expressions such as "Who's with us?", "We've all been there" and "If you're like us", the brand makes an effort to enable its customers' identification with the community and with the brand itself. Once again, the collective character of the community is emphasized, making it easier for the members to feel they are a part of a group and they are not alone having certain experiences or observations. The *brand identification* is

one of the customer engagement drivers Wirtz et al. (2013) already described as important factor influencing the customers behavior.

Example from Instagram:



Figure 22

Example from blog:

“You know when you’re doing your makeup and it’s 80 degrees out and you’re hoping your makeup doesn’t melt off your face by the time you step outside? We’ve all been there.”

“If you’re like us, you can never go a day without a serum.”

Building the brand collectively: Volition Beauty emphasizes on its online pages the collective way in which the brand and the community are built. The company claims that Volition Beauty is a brand created together by business executives and customers, referring to the process of collaborative product innovation and crowd voting. The community members, therefore, are said to be empowered by the brand to have an influence on its business activities and the way it operates. The brand development is therefore implied to be a collective effort, and this creates a possibility for customers to identify themselves with the process even stronger.

Example from Instagram:



Figure 23

Example from blog:

“We wanted Ashley to capture our real Innovators and Community Members since they're the ones who drive our brand.”

However, even though the company positions itself as a brand built collectively, it is not entirely clear how much influence the customers and community members actually have on the decision-making process. The procedure after winning a product development campaign is not made transparent to the online users, and there is no established way of finding out whether all the products which win the campaign are actually produced and how many adjustments can be made to the initial innovator’s idea.

Power of community: The discussion around the community seems to focus mainly on its capabilities and power of changing, creating and influencing. The community is said to be the real force driving the brand and being a part of it is gaining a bit of this power for oneself. “You asked, we delivered!” claims Volition Beauty pointing out at the same time the control the community of customers has over the company. This shift of control has been previously identified by Brabham (2012) in his study about crowdsourcing, where he noted that crowdsourcing requires transparency and trust, but the most important condition that has to be met in order for the initiative to be successful is the agreement from a company for a change of power relation between the brand and customer.

Examples from Instagram:



Figure 24



Figure 25

Example from blog:

“If a product doesn’t get enough community support, we don’t make it. This helps us save on failed product launch costs. Every product we make is a winner.”

Appreciation: The brand at the same time expresses its appreciation towards the customers in posts that aim to thank them for the support and following of the Instagram page. However, even though Volition Beauty refers to the collective character of the brand in the appreciation post presented in figure 26, it does not show that it is aware of the fact how important the community is for a company that claims to build its unique character on user engagement. It is important to notice that the brand thanks its customers for following the Instagram page and not for their involvement in the crowdsourcing process.

Example from Instagram:

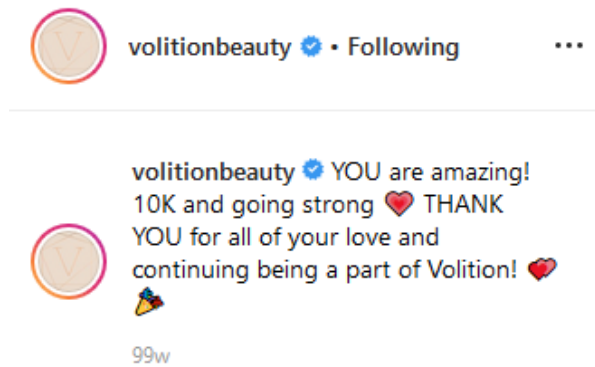


Figure 26

4.2.2 Real solutions for real women

Referring to the notion of identification and creation of social identity by membership in the brand community and taking part in crowdsourcing, Volition Beauty also makes an attempt to convince the audience that crowdsourcing is a solution made by and for “regular people” and “people just like you”. The concept of “real women” appears on the blog frequently, referring to two aspects.

Real women’s beauty problems and needs: First of all, according to the company, crowdsourcing and collaborative product innovation process are undertakings intended not for professional brand executives, but regular customers who want to solve their skin’s “real” problems. The type of regular customer is the type of innovator the company claims to be most willing to work with because of the actuality and urgency of the specific problems and needs.

Examples from blog:

“We took Jen's problem to one of the industry's leading anti-aging labs. They were up for the challenge because it was coming from a real woman's need.”

“Volition and our community of *real women*, like *you* and *me*, are revolutionizing beauty together.”

“It's the power of community. Volition gives a voice to women just like me and lets us be a part of changing how beauty brands work. We are revolutionizing beauty together. Real women to co-create and innovate better beauty products - and that’s awesome!”

“We believe that real women (not execs in a board room!) are the best source of real solutions!”

Solution needed by many women: The second dimension of “reality” in the crowdsourcing process according to Volition Beauty is the products’ applicability to many “real” women beauty problems. In their product promotion, the company points out that “thousands of real women” have appreciated the working of a certain product or that “tens of thousands of women” asked Volition Beauty to find a solution for a specific beauty problem. Describing a product developed by Jen, an innovator, the brand emphasizes the universality of problems “real women” have.

Example from blog:

“It skyrocketed to best seller status immediately - proving that there were so many women who could relate to Jen's problems.”

She couldn't find anything like it: The uniqueness and better fit of Volition's Beauty products results also from the fact that the ideas of the innovators are said to emerge based on everyday's problems and searches for good beauty products that are not always successful. Volition Beauty, therefore, is said to close the gap on the market and provide customers with solutions previously unavailable to them.

Examples from the blog:

“Lindsey was looking for a multi-tasking product that was powerful enough to treat her lines, wrinkles and crepiness but that wasn't greasy and thick like a lot of the eye creams on the market that made her eye makeup run. Since she couldn't find anything like it out there, she really had no other choice but to create it herself.”

“Born from a passion project by a talented Japanese chemist, our Detoxifying Silt Gelee was originally formulated for Takako to use for herself. She loved purifying mud masks, but they stripped her dry skin like a harsh cleanser. Being a chemist, she dared to ask the question,

"Can a purifying mask actually soften skin at the same time?" “

The message the company seems to communicate to its customers is therefore that if they cannot find a product that would fit their needs, with Volition Beauty they can and should create one on their own – it is something anyone can do.

4.2.3 Revolutionizing the beauty industry

Volition Beauty offers members of the brand community a possibility to be a part not only of collaborative product development process, but, as the company claims, a much bigger phenomenon – “revolutionizing the beauty industry”. By a set of strategies and slogans, the brand emphasizes that the collective character of Volition Beauty has an alleged potential to change the way beauty industry works, and the customers have a chance to work on this change together with the brand.

A new kind of beauty brand: The brand encourages online users on the blog to submit their product ideas and vote for campaigns by emphasizing the uniqueness and innovative character of the brand itself – according to the brand owners, the first one and the only one in the beauty industry that gives so much power to its customers. The company is defined as revolutionary and new, first one to introduce a crowdsourcing product development process to the beauty industry.

Examples from the blog:

“We founded Volition last year to build a *new kind of beauty company* - a company where technology lets our customers control our brand.”

“Volition's revolutionary product development process, partnerships with industry-leading labs and online voting system allows us to harnesses our customers' collective wisdom and leads to smarter, better products - we all win here.”

“We're the first online collaboration platform that lets you take charge and create your own beauty products.”

Empowering and giving voice to the customer: One of the facts Volition Beauty frequently emphasizes is the control and power the customer has in the relation with the brand. Volition Beauty claims to be giving “voice” to women, who never before had a chance to have a say in the product development process, and listens carefully to their problems and needs. This customer-oriented approach is said to empower community members and to pass them the control over the brand. The claim made by the company that crowdsourcing empowers the community members goes in line with the opinion mentioned already by Fish and Srinivasan (2012) and Bucher and Fieseler, (2017) in the debate about digital labour, that work done online can empower digital workers. Also according to Kumar et al. (2019) and

Bal et al. (2017) taking part in crowdsourcing causes the feeling of empowerment among the community members and subsequently also increases to overall engagement.

Examples from the blog:

“It’s a chance for me to tell the world about this revolutionary new beauty brand, and I couldn’t be more honored. I have the privilege of introducing Volition to millions of beauty enthusiasts out there who have been hoping for a chance to have their voices heard.”

“Other Brands Tell You What You Should Want. Not us. We Listen.”

In reality, however, as already mentioned before, little is known to online users about the real division of control and power in the company. The details of the production and development processes are not clear, therefore, it is difficult to judge whether customers have a real influence on the company’s business activities. The incentive of becoming “empowered” and in control might therefore work in short-term, but is also possible not to convince more inquisitive or experienced with crowdsourcing users.

Volition helps: Volition Beauty assures the community members of the company’s support and advice during the product development process. The innovators are said to be assisted on every step of the crowdsourcing initiative, which can be a very important incentive to participate, especially for less experienced entrepreneurs that the company claims to be targeting. However, this claim also poses a question of whether the company’s “assistance” lets the innovators develop personalized products individually and the way they want it, which is a promise made by the brand.

Examples from the blog:

“To solve Lindsey's quest, Volition found an ancient, time-tested ingredient in its arsenal - escargot mucin.”

“I picked out things I felt were missing in my daily routine and Volition helped me pinpoint what was lacking the most in my beauty regime.”

“Don't worry if you haven't thought of a name or considered the chemistry behind it. We're here to help! (along with the industry's top labs).”

Unique products: The results of the distinctive process Volition Beauty encourages are said to be exceptional and superior products. The company claims that they are “on a mission to create truly unique products” and that they “only make products that have never before been seen in the market”. The unique character of the developed products, in light of their capability to solve “real” women problems and being created based on ideas of “regular people”, is very often emphasized by the company. Volition Beauty claims to never copy or repeat other brands’ ideas, in comparison to other companies that frequently do.

Example from the blog:

“No more “creative teams” trying to decide the next beauty trend or which product to copy. Goodbye closed door conference rooms and time spent brainstorming the best way to copy other companies' products.”

A customer, therefore, by collaboration with Volition Beauty has a chance to take part in co-creation of something exceptional and innovative and receives the reassurance that it is unique and first on the market. However, the lack of transparency from the company when it comes to the development process can have a significant impact on this claim. Even though the company is said to “open the door of conference rooms”, they do not provide much more transparency than other brands they claim to be superior to.

Example from the blog:

“*The sky's the limit!* A cool ingredient you read about, something that's missing from your beauty routine, or a dream product you've always wanted created! Our only requirement: it must be completely unique (think: something you can't buy anywhere else).”

Revolutionizing the beauty industry: With this set of strategies, the company encourages community members to take part in a unique and innovative process and “*Join the revolution!*”. Volition Beauty describes the company as revolutionary and claims to be making a change in the beauty industry by encouraging a more customer-oriented and personalized approach to the beauty business.

Examples from the blog:

“At Volition, we set out with the goal of *revolutionizing the beauty industry together* with our customers.”

“Volition and our community of *real women*, like *you* and *me*, are revolutionizing beauty together.”

4.2.4 Values – brand’s symbolic function

Emphasizing the brand’s values and beliefs as well as referring to the core concepts of Volition’s Beauty identity is a big part of both Instagram and blog branded content. By highlighting what the company stands for, what are the principles it supports and what is important for both the firm and the community, Volition Beauty can allow its customers to identify themselves even more with the brand and group of brand supporters, as well as encourage them to take part in an initiative that is said to stand for real values and goals.

Brand’s symbolic function is one of the factors Wirtz et al. (2013) identified as motivating for online users to engage in the brand’s activities. It entails referring to the core concepts of the brand’s identity, and, according to the authors, customers may feel encouraged to engage in a brand community because of the strong brand’s symbolic function and identity consisting of values they want to live up to.

Collective creation & customer-oriented approach: First of all, the brand often refers to the values and beliefs connected to crowdsourcing and the product development process. Collectivity and customer-oriented service are at the core of the brand’s focus. By expressions such as “We only make products you love” (see Figure 27) or “Your satisfaction is, and always will be, worth it” (see Figure 28) the company claims that customers and their opinions are of great importance and influence the company’s business activities. The brand also uses hashtags such as #CoCreation, #Collectivity and #Crowdsource to remind online users about its core objective.

Examples from Instagram:



Figure 27



Figure 28

Not blindly following the trends: Volition Beauty, as a customer-oriented brand, also claims not to follow the beauty trends blindly, but to listen primarily to the customers and what they might need and appreciate. This way, it distinguishes itself from other beauty brands which are said to base their business decisions only on marketing guidelines.

Examples from the blog:

“She told us that these prototypes had been turned down by brands or retailers, not because of their efficacy or how incredible the product was, but because they weren't "trendy" or "in season" or "hot".”

“The *Detoxifying Silt Gelée* is an excellent example. Although a great formula, at the time she presented it, specialty retailers only wanted to feature two kinds of masks – clay and paper. They didn't know about this new kind of ingredient and it wasn't “hot now” or what all the other brands were featuring. So, they were not interested. As a result, the consumer was

robbed of a really fantastic product! That's when Brandy and I first said to ourselves, *This has got to change.*"

Creativity and innovation: Instead of following the market fashion, the company emphasizes the values of creativity and innovation in their business activities, allegedly not influenced by sales indicators. By the crowdsourcing process, Volition Beauty gives the customers the opportunity to show their creative ideas, at the same time supporting their innovations.

Examples from the blog:

"The industry is in need of innovation and variety, and who better to provide it than you?"

"The Volition community is made up of amazing individuals with ingenious ideas."

"We formulate for the sole purpose of truthful, real product benefits and not for marketing stories."

High quality natural products: The company claims to be proud of all the manufactured products to be vegan, natural, non-toxic, cruelty-free and of the highest quality which can be values and beliefs many community members identify with. According to Łopaciuk and Łoboda (2013), the lifestyle of beauty consumers has changed significantly in the recent years, as they began to demand high-quality products, but also started to pay attention to the product characteristics such as natural, organic ingredients and a socially, ecologically and ethically responsible production process.

Examples from Instagram:



Figure 29



Figure 30

Example from the blog:

“Our vast network of top, industry-leading beauty labs brings undiscovered or coveted ingredients and cutting edge technologies to our Community all the time.”

Social issues: Lastly, the company also takes a stand when it comes to the more widely known social discussions, such as body positivity, tolerance or women empowerment. By presenting itself as a brand that cares about the community and social problems it might encounter, the company again allows for a deeper identification of the customers with the firm and convinces community members about the value of the crowdsourcing process and the company’s business strategy. By supporting social movements, Volition Beauty sends a message to the community that its members can also be a part of a socially responsible brand, and not only create products, but also take a stand.

Examples from Instagram:

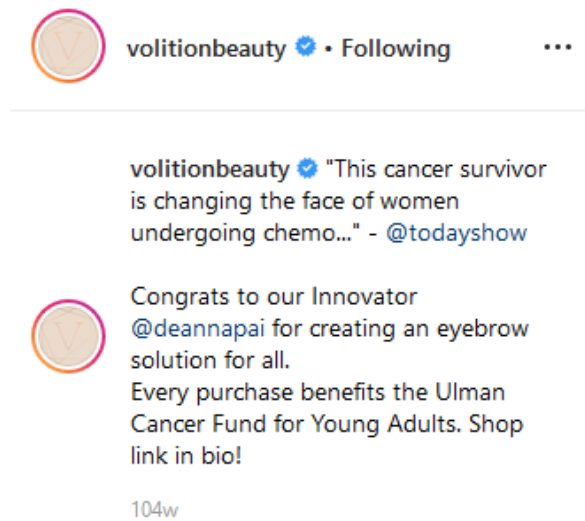


Figure 31



Figure 32

Examples from the blog:

“We had the pleasure of working with photographer Ashley Armitage for our most recent photoshoot. Her work defies traditional beauty standards and encourages body positivity.”

“For those products that aren’t expired yet but aren’t useful to you, we suggest either donating to a local women’s shelter or giving them away to your friends and family (I mean, who doesn’t like free, non-expired skincare?)”

5. Conclusion

This case study research investigated the ways Volition Beauty, a crowdsourcing beauty company, encourages collaborative product innovation and online customer engagement in the new media and how these practices shape its brand image. To answer the research question, an analysis of qualitative data sourced from the company's Instagram account and blog was conducted. This chapter aims to answer the research question, provide theoretical and societal implications of the findings, limitations of the study and possible future research directions.

5.1 Brand image

In order to research how Volition Beauty builds its brand image based on customer engagement and collaborative product innovation, first, the ways the company encourages these activities had to be researched. The results of the data analysis showed *direct strategies* and *indirect strategies* the company uses, implying that both have a significant impact on the brand image. Every action or strategy implemented in order to communicate with the customers and encourage their participation has an influence on their perceptions of the brand, and according to Keller (1993), the strength, emotion, and uniqueness of these associations heavily influence the corporate success. Some of the most important aspects influencing Volition's Beauty brand image are discussed below.

Volition Beauty positions itself on the beauty market as a company that listens to the consumers' needs and wishes. The customer-oriented approach is a strategy the brand promotes in order to be perceived differently from other, more mainstream beauty brands – this can be seen directly in their motto, “Other brands tell you what you should want. Not us. We listen”. Volition Beauty claims to pay attention to every community member, encouraging them to create highly personalized products. According to Kumar, Meng, and Kabijar (2019), the co-creation empowers the customers, giving them the possibility to design their own products, which are more likely to meet one's preferences and as a result increase the perceived quality of the service. What is more, products developed in a co-creative process are in general perceived in a more positive way than those designed only by a company, and this kind of product innovation facilitates customers' curiosity and attention towards a brand (Kumar, Meng & Kabijar, 2019). This way, Volition Beauty creates its image as a brand able to give its customers something that no other company can – perfect products developed in the process of co-creation, which are personalized to meet the customer's specific needs. What

is more, the brand claims that everyone can take part in the process, highlighting the inclusive character of crowdsourcing, which democratizes and makes high-quality personalized premium products widely accessible.

The products the company develops in this process of co-creation are said to provide “real solutions for real women”. Volition Beauty builds its brand image on the notion of “reality, and this “reality” refers to regular people, customers, as the brand claims to be seeking solutions focused on their needs, rather than to follow marketing strategies developed in the company’s headquarters. This way, it positions itself as a company “down to earth”, inclusive and aiming at supporting entrepreneurs who have not so much experience in product development as professionals. The company “gives them the voice”, implying that they were unable to speak for themselves and their needs before. However, this inclusivity the brand promotes does not go in line with the fact that, even though claiming that beauty products are suitable for everybody, also regardless of gender, Volition Beauty addresses mainly women in its communication efforts.

Nevertheless, Volition Beauty creates its image based on the importance of its customers and the community as a whole – the company emphasizes the control the community of brand supporters has over the firm and claims that it is willing to accept that because the satisfaction of the customer is a core of its business. Volition Beauty, therefore, positions itself as based on the "power of community" and claims even that the brand as an organization is built collectively - the customers have an influence on the business activities of Volition Beauty. Thus, it does not only use crowdsourcing to promote the brand – it claims to build the whole business on the aspects of collectivity and engagement. However, even though the brand claims to be passing on the control over the company to its customers, little is known to what extent it actually happens, and what is the division of power and influence within the firm.

Not only the scope of control the community members have within the brand but also other aspects of the crowdsourcing process are not made fully clear to the customers. Volition Beauty presents itself as transparent and claims to build the brand collectively. However, even though claiming transparency and close relationship with the community, the company does not provide any in-depth and detailed information about the co-creation aspects. New media channels lack factual, step-by-step explanations of the process, information such as the share of revenues from the products or selection criteria are also not provided. This might discourage both more experienced and amateur crowdsourcing participants to take part in the initiative, as they may feel anxious to collaborate with a company that is not fully honest

about its business practices. It can also affect the company's brand image in a negative way, implying that not everything that Volition Beauty presents as ideal and full of advantages is in reality true.

Impact on the company's transparency and reputation can have also the fact that some of the Volition's Beauty communication strategies, on the pretext of engaging the customers, are in fact sales encouragements. This can be seen in approaches that include product promotion, such as contests or posts with innovators' stories, or implied sales strategies such as product discounts as a form of compensation for crowd-voting or posts claiming that by purchases community members support their fellow colleagues, Volition's Beauty innovators. In the last case, the company, under false pretences of encouraging solidarity and support among the community members, in facts tries to drive sales. This finding contradicts one of the main results of the research conducted by Shen and Bissel (2013), who concluded that beauty brand's online activities are nowadays more focused on engagement than sales and product related.

The values the company stands for and presents on its new media channels are also of great influence on the image it creates. The principles such as body positivity, tolerance or cruelty-free production are aspects customers can identify with, supporting the same good cause or campaign. Volition Beauty, at the same time, claims to be socially responsible and to conduct its business in an ethical way. All these aspects are part of a brand image the company creates, to finally make a claim that its business is "revolutionizing the beauty industry". Volition Beauty encourages the customers to engage, motivating them by the possibility to be part of the so-called "revolution" on the beauty market. At the same time, it positions itself as an innovative, unique company which, thanks to the community, is able to make a change in the industry. A change that is customer-oriented and benefits the "real people".

5.2 Theoretical and societal implications

The study of Volition Beauty and its communication patterns goes partly in line with the previous research about customer engagement and brand image development but delivers also a few new insights into the academic literature. From the axial themes that were developed, few have been already described by the academic literature, and two provide new implications for the research about crowdsourcing and brand image creation. The concepts of *social identity* and *brand's symbolic function* developed by Wirtz et al. (2013) as well as *love for the co-creative community* described by Brabham (2010, 2012) became useful to describe

patterns found in the data. Also, most of the *direct co-creation incentives* and *direct engagement incentives* have been already identified by Coursaris, Van Osch and Balogh (2013) and Brabham (2010, 1012) in their previous research. However, *real solutions for real women* is a theme extracted from the data in an inductive way. The notion of "reality" the company emphasizes is an aspect of idea crowdsourcing that has not been described by the academic literature yet. It, therefore, contributes to the crowdsourcing research and provides a valuable strategy implication for companies wishing to benefit from crowdsourcing in the form of idea development by promoting it as a "down-to-earth" and customer oriented approach. The incentive of "joining the revolution" in a form of the theme *revolutionizing the beauty industry* is also a category developed inductively. Presenting crowdsourcing solution as "revolutionary" in order to motivate customers to take part in it and building a brand image based on the notion of innovation is also a new finding within the crowdsourcing and brand image research. This study, therefore, presents a few new insights into the brands' engagement building strategies and crowdsourcing motivations, which can complement the current academic knowledge. The findings of this research, together with the previous studies conducted by Wirtz et al. (2013) and Brabham (2010, 2012), can introduce a new categorization of engagement and crowdsourcing encouraging strategies, which will hopefully provide valuable implications for companies wishing to benefit from their potential.

5.3. Limitations and future research directions

This study managed to answer the research question with the use of a qualitative content analysis approach. Even though the method proved to be suitable to provide the results of the study, it did not enable the researcher to identify certain aspects that might motivate online users to engage, which would require a qualitative method focused on interactions with participants. Therefore, the research is only able to deliver outcomes based on the researcher's interpretation of the content studied, not including the customers' or the company's in-depth point of view.

Moreover, the phenomenon of brand image development based on customer engagement and crowdsourcing was studied in this research paper based on a case study of one company – Volition Beauty. The results of the analysis refer therefore only to this one case and cannot be generalizable to all crowdsourcing start-ups.

An important limitation of this research can be also the fact that the analysis was based on the content sourced from two new media channels – Instagram and blog, in order to make the research more feasible. The results, therefore, apply only to these two sources and do not

include communication patterns from other media, such as Twitter, YouTube, LinkedIn or Facebook, that might be different and deliver new insights.

The study, however, provides a good basis for future research that could, next to a qualitative content analysis method, examine the phenomenon by the use of other qualitative approaches, such as in-depth interviews. This method would enable to research the way customer engagement and collaborative product innovation encouraged by Volition Beauty are perceived by the community members, and also if the image building strategies used by the company are effective. Also, a series of qualitative in-depth interviews with the company board members could be a valuable source of information about the way Volition Beauty aims to encourage engagement and product innovation and position the brand on the market. To provide some new insights, research based on qualitative in-depth interviews could, therefore, enable to examine both, the participants' and companies' motivations to engage in crowdsourcing.

Next to a qualitative study, a valuable addition to the current knowledge in the matter could be a quantitative approach to the research problem, focusing on finding the most effective engagement techniques considering the customers' responses. This approach could certainly deliver some new insights into the company's communication strategies and also show which of them are used the most frequently. What is more, a moderating effect of a media platform could be researched in a quantitative study. Further, as already mentioned, not all of the new media the company uses to communicate with its customers have been researched in this paper. Therefore, research examining media such as Twitter, Facebook, YouTube or LinkedIn would be a good complement to the current case study research. Finally, in order to make the study results more generalizable, future research might examine crowdsourcing start-ups in other industries, and possibly compare them with the current Volition's Beauty research.

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Appendix A – Coding trees

1. Selective, axial and open codes - Instagram

Selective codes	Axial codes	Open codes
Direct incentives	<p>Direct co-creation incentives</p> <p>Direct engagement incentives</p> <p>Insights into the co-creative process</p>	<p>#Madebyme</p> <p>Call to collaborate</p> <p>Call to vote</p> <p>Collaborate to get perfect product</p> <p>Collaborate to get recognition</p> <p>Payment for collaboration</p> <p>Proud about collaboration</p> <p>Supporting entrepreneurs</p> <p>Ask us a question</p> <p>Chance to be featured</p> <p>Contest</p> <p>Directional</p> <p>Giveaway</p> <p>Hashtag usage</p> <p>Let us know what you think</p> <p>Likes</p> <p>Open question</p> <p>Other platforms</p> <p>Poll</p> <p>Share a story</p> <p>Tag a friend</p> <p>Crowdsourcing explained</p> <p>Idea presentation</p> <p>Innovator's inspiration</p> <p>Meet the innovator</p>
Indirect incentives	<p>Love for co-creative community/social identity</p> <p>Values – brand's symbolic function</p>	<p>Appreciation</p> <p>Brand identification</p> <p>Building the brand collectively</p> <p>Common passion for beauty</p> <p>Personal story</p> <p>Power of community</p> <p>Sharing insights</p> <p>Body positivity</p> <p>Collective creation</p> <p>Creativity and innovation</p> <p>Cruelty-free</p> <p>Customer-oriented</p> <p>Empowering women</p> <p>Good cause</p>

		High quality Inspired by traveling Natural products Non-toxic products Tolerance and diversity Transparency Vegan products
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2. Selective, axial and open codes - blog

Selective codes	Axial codes	Open codes
Direct incentives	Direct co-creation incentives Insights into the co-creative process The benefits of crowdsourcing	#Madebyme Call to collaborate Collaborate to get perfect product Enjoying collaboration Helping other women with innovation Job opportunity Payment for collaboration Crowdsourcing explained Idea presentation Innovator's inspiration Meet the innovator A process without middleman Accessible and cost-effective solution Better products Inclusive process Smart process
Indirect incentives	Love for co-creative community/social identity Real solutions for real women Revolutionizing the beauty industry	Appreciation Brand identification Building the brand collectively Common passion for beauty Personal story Power of community Real women's beauty problems and needs She couldn't find anything like it Solution needed by many women A new kind of beauty brand Empowering the customer Revolutionizing the beauty industry

	<p>Values – brand’s symbolic function</p>	<p>The only platform like that on the market Unique products Volition gives a voice to women Volition helps We listen</p> <p>Body positivity Collective creation Creativity and innovation Customer-oriented Empowering women Good cause High quality Natural products Not blindly following the trends Tolerance and diversity Transparency</p>
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Appendix B – Blog articles list

1. “Goodbye Winter, Hello Summer Skin!”
2. “An Unforgettable Trip to the Lab”
3. “Get Real: Behind the Scenes with Ashley Armitage”
4. “13 Things I've Learned From Living in San Francisco”
5. “Revolutionary Product Development”
6. “The Only Body Product You Need (Seriously): Moringa Silk Body Spray”
7. “How This Startup Is Revolutionizing the Beauty Industry”
8. “The Perfect Eye Product”
9. “A Frustrated Consumer's Beauty Quest”
10. “Guest Blog: Sophia Storer X Vanishing Cleansing Oil”
11. “Your Step-by-Step Guide to Become our Next Beauty Innovator!”
12. “Spring Clean Your (Skin) Routine”
13. “Team Member Spotlight - Meet Lindsey Ashworth!”
14. “Let’s Talk About Vitamin C”
15. “How to Find the Right Serum For Your Skin”

16. “6 Winter Skincare Tips That Will Save Your Skin”
17. “What Are People Saying about This Unexpected Ingredient?”
18. “Clay Masks No More”
19. “The Only Anti-Aging Product You Need”
20. “How You Can Master Applying Liquid Liner”

Appendix C – Evidence of the analysis procedure - Instagram

The following screenshots show the codes and code groups created during the analysis of Instagram content in Atlas.ti.

Code Groups				
	Direct co-creation incentives (8)			
	Direct engagement incentives (13)			
	Insights into the co-creation process (4)			
	Love for co-creative community/social identity (7)			
	Values - brand's symbolic function (14)			

Name	Grounded	Density	Groups
# Collective creation		13	0 [Values - brand's symbolic function]
# Common passion for beauty		61	0 [Love for co-creative community/social identity]
# Made by me		8	0 [Direct co-creation incentives]
Appreciation		1	0 [Love for co-creative community/social identity]
Ask us a question		1	0 [Direct engagement incentives]
Beauty tip		6	0
Body positivity		1	0 [Values - brand's symbolic function]
Brand identification		5	0 [Love for co-creative community/social identity]
Building the brand collectively		3	0 [Love for co-creative community/social identity]
Business information		16	0
Call to collaborate		22	0 [Direct co-creation incentives]
Call to order/buy		8	0
Call to vote		14	0 [Direct co-creation incentives]
Chance to be featured		2	0 [Direct engagement incentives]
Collaborate to get perfect pr...		7	0 [Direct co-creation incentives]
Collaborate to get recognition		2	0 [Direct co-creation incentives]
Contest		2	0 [Direct engagement incentives]
Creativity and innovation		1	0 [Values - brand's symbolic function]

Name	▲	Grounded	Density	Groups
◇ Crowdsourcing explained		2	0	[Insights into the co-creation process]
◇ Cruelty-free		15	0	[Values - brand's symbolic function]
◇ Customer-oriented		7	0	[Values - brand's symbolic function]
◇ Directional		41	0	[Direct engagement incentives]
◇ Empowering women		4	0	[Values - brand's symbolic function]
◇ Entertainment		54	0	
◇ Giveaway		7	0	[Direct engagement incentives]
◇ Good cause		7	0	[Values - brand's symbolic function]
◇ Hashtag usage		3	0	[Direct engagement incentives]
◇ High quality		3	0	[Values - brand's symbolic function]
◇ Idea presentation		5	0	[Insights into the co-creation process]
◇ Influencer marketing		12	0	
◇ Ingredient information		16	0	
◇ Innovator's inspiration		3	0	[Insights into the co-creation process]
◇ Inspired by traveling		14	0	[Values - brand's symbolic function]
◇ Join the waitlist		1	0	
◇ Let us know what you think		1	0	[Direct engagement incentives]
◇ Likes		2	0	[Direct engagement incentives]

Name	▲	Grounded	Density	Groups
◇ Meet the innovator		4	0	[Insights into the co-creation process]
◇ Natural products		4	0	[Values - brand's symbolic function]
◇ Non-toxic products		15	0	[Values - brand's symbolic function]
◇ Occasional		3	0	
◇ Open question		16	0	[Direct engagement incentives]
◇ Other brand's advertisement		9	0	
◇ Other platforms		3	0	[Direct engagement incentives]
◇ Payment for collaboration		8	0	[Direct co-creation incentives]
◇ Personal story		7	0	[Love for co-creative community/social identity]
◇ Photo/video		1	0	
◇ Poll		8	0	[Direct engagement incentives]
◇ Power of community		7	0	[Love for co-creative community/social identity]
◇ Product advertisement		62	0	
◇ Product assistance		15	0	
◇ Product information		8	0	
◇ Proud about collaboration		2	0	[Direct co-creation incentives]
◇ Share a story		2	0	[Direct engagement incentives]
◇ Sharing insights		1	0	[Love for co-creative community/social identity]

Name	▲	Grounded	Density	Groups
◇ Other brand's advertisement		9	0	
◇ Other platforms		3	0	[Direct engagement incentives]
◇ Payment for collaboration		8	0	[Direct co-creation incentives]
◇ Personal story		7	0	[Love for co-creative community/social identity]
◇ Photo/video		1	0	
◇ Poll		8	0	[Direct engagement incentives]
◇ Power of community		7	0	[Love for co-creative community/social identity]
◇ Product advertisement		62	0	
◇ Product assistance		15	0	
◇ Product information		8	0	
◇ Proud about collaboration		2	0	[Direct co-creation incentives]
◇ Share a story		2	0	[Direct engagement incentives]
◇ Sharing insights		1	0	[Love for co-creative community/social identity]
◇ Supporting entrepreneurs		1	0	[Direct co-creation incentives]
◇ Tag a friend		2	0	[Direct engagement incentives]
◇ Tolerance and diversity		5	0	[Values - brand's symbolic function]
◇ Transparency		5	0	[Values - brand's symbolic function]
◇ Vegan products		6	0	[Values - brand's symbolic function]

Appendix D – Evidence of the analysis procedure - blog

The following screenshots show the codes and code groups created during the analysis of blog content in Atlas.ti.

Code Groups				
	Direct co-creation incentives (7)			
	Insights into the co-creative process (4)			
	Love for co-creative community/social identity (6)			
	Real solutions for real women (3)			
	Revolutionizing the beauty industry (8)			
	The benefits of crowdsourcing (5)			
	Values - brand's symbolic function (11)			

Name	▲	Grounded	Density	Groups
# Made by me			8	0 [Direct co-creation incentives]
A new kind of beauty brand			9	0 [Revolutionizing the beauty industry]
A process without middlemen			1	0 [The benefits of crowdsourcing]
Accessible and cost-effective solution			4	0 [The benefits of crowdsourcing]
Appreciation			1	0 [Love for co-creative community/social identity]
Beauty tip			11	0
Better products			2	0 [The benefits of crowdsourcing]
Body positivity			2	0 [Values - brand's symbolic function]
Brand identification			9	0 [Love for co-creative community/social identity]
Building the brand collectively			7	0 [Love for co-creative community/social identity]
Business information			2	0
Call to collaborate			4	0 [Direct co-creation incentives]
Call to order/buy			1	0
Collaborate to get perfect product			11	0 [Direct co-creation incentives]
Collective creation			9	0 [Values - brand's symbolic function]
Common passion for beauty			5	0 [Love for co-creative community/social identity]
Creativity and innovation			8	0 [Values - brand's symbolic function]
Crowdsourcing explained			1	0 [Insights into the co-creative process]

Name	▲	Grounded	Density	Groups
Customer-oriented			8	0 [Values - brand's symbolic function]
Directional			3	0
Empowering the customer			10	0 [Revolutionizing the beauty industry]
Empowering women			2	0 [Values - brand's symbolic function]
Enjoying collaboration			2	0 [Direct co-creation incentives]
Entertainment			1	0
Good cause			2	0 [Values - brand's symbolic function]
Helping other women with innovati...			1	0 [Direct co-creation incentives]
High quality			6	0 [Values - brand's symbolic function]
Idea presentation			1	0 [Insights into the co-creative process]
Inclusive process			4	0 [The benefits of crowdsourcing]
Ingredient information			16	0
Innovator's inspiration			4	0 [Insights into the co-creative process]
Job opportunity			2	0 [Direct co-creation incentives]
Meet the innovator			6	0 [Insights into the co-creative process]
Natural products			1	0 [Values - brand's symbolic function]
Not blindly following the trends			3	0 [Values - brand's symbolic function]
Other platforms			1	0

	Name	▲	Grounded	Density	Groups
●	◇ Payment for collaboration		2	0	[Direct co-creation incentives]
●	◇ Personal story		3	0	[Love for co-creative community/social identity]
●	◇ Power of community		8	0	[Love for co-creative community/social identity]
●	◇ Product advertisement		21	0	
●	◇ Product assistance		5	0	
●	◇ Product information		7	0	
●	◇ Real women's beauty problems and...		14	0	[Real solutions for real women]
●	◇ Revolutionizing the beauty industry		14	0	[Revolutionizing the beauty industry]
●	◇ She couldn't find anything like it		6	0	[Real solutions for real women]
●	◇ Smart process		2	0	[The benefits of crowdsourcing]
●	◇ Sulation needed by many women		2	0	[Real solutions for real women]
●	◇ The only platform like that on the...		5	0	[Revolutionizing the beauty industry]
●	◇ Tolerance and diversity		10	0	[Values - brand's symbolic function]
●	◇ Transparency		2	0	[Values - brand's symbolic function]
●	◇ Unique products		10	0	[Revolutionizing the beauty industry]
●	◇ Volition gives a voice to women		2	0	[Revolutionizing the beauty industry]
●	◇ Volition helps		12	0	[Revolutionizing the beauty industry]
●	◇ We listen		1	0	[Revolutionizing the beauty industry]