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Building brand loyalty through customer engagement practices

A case study on Djerf Avenue's online brand community

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ABSTRACT :

As a result of recent technological advancements and the launch and significance of new social media platforms companies' online customer engagement has become increasingly important. The emergence of online brand communities pose a significant asset for companies if utilized successfully. Brand loyal customers are important to a company in terms of long-term profitability, positive word-of-mouth and value co-creation. It is therefore in the interest of brands to understand how to engage with their customers to nurture a loyal and interactive relationship with their customers.

The purpose of this study is to examine how customer engagement practices can be used to build brand loyalty in a virtual brand community. The study is a qualitative research, and it is done as a case study from the point of view of the online community of Djerf Avenue. The literature review of the study defines the main themes of *brand loyalty, customer engagement and online brand communities*. A typology created by Hollebeek et al. (2017) identifies eight virtual brand community engagement practices, which are *greeting, regulating, assisting, appreciating, empathizing, mingling, celebrating and ranking*. The theoretical framework for the study is built based on the eight virtual brand community practices and their impact on brand loyalty. The empirical data for this study is collected through a combination of observations in the case community over a four-month period and thematic interviews on ten community members. The themes for the thematic interviews were based on the theoretical framework and the observations in the community.

The observations in the case community identified five virtual brand community engagement practices, which were *assisting, appreciating, empathizing, mingling and celebrating*. These five engagement practices were analyzed from the point of view of *behavioral and attitudinal brand loyalty*. In correlation to the engagement practices both attitudinal loyalty and behavioral loyalty could clearly be identified in the findings because as a result of the engagement practices the community members felt more connected to the brand and were more likely to purchase their products even at a premium price. Thus, the findings indicate that in the case community these five engagement practices made the most significant difference in terms of creating true brand loyalty towards the brand and the other community members. Similarly, it was found that the benefits characterized in the theoretical framework relating to brand loyal online brand community members were identified in connection to the five engagement practices. These were a *sense of belonging, a stronger relationship with the company, a stronger relationship with other customers and insight into brand related information*. It was therefore found that the systematic use of engagement practices that felt authentic to the community and added value for the members made the community members more loyal to the brand in terms of both behavioral and attitudinal loyalty.

KEYWORDS: Brand loyalty, customer engagement, online brand community, virtual brand community engagement practices, behavioral loyalty, attitudinal loyalty

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1 Introduction

In marketing research, the topic of customer involvement has been studied for a long time. However, the more recent topic of customer engagement goes beyond involvement through building an interactive relationship with the customer (Mollen & Wilson, 2010). In addition, customer engagement has recently gained interesting new dimensions through the emergence of social media and online brand communities (Bowden et al., 2018). Hollebeek et al. (2021) state that customer engagement does not have one specific definition, however customer's brand interactions are the common dominator in all customer engagement research. Online customer engagement has become increasingly significant to companies as the continuous technological advancements and launch of new social media platforms have made online interactions more accessible and significant than ever.

Dessart et al. (2015) argue that it is in the interest of brands to understand how their customers engage with the brand in online environments, as the relationships customers form with one another as well as with the brand are vital for a brand's success. In addition, according to Villanueva et al. (2008) successfully leveraging online customer engagement has the possibility to foster brand loyal customers who spread positive word of mouth, which has a more significant effect on customer behavior compared to traditional marketing.

Having brand loyal customers is an important asset to a company in terms of long-term profitability as they buy more in value and frequency, they are easier to reach, and they promote the brand to new customers through positive word of mouth (Harris & Goode, 2004). A loyal customer is defined by having a strong connection to the brand and being committed to buying and engaging with the brand (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001). In addition, Jacoby and Chestnut (1978) define brand loyalty as a non-random behavioral response, such as a purchase, which is repeatedly expressed over a period and that stems from a psychological decision-making process.

However, more recently brand loyalty is often examined *through attitudinal and behavioral loyalty*, which Russell-Bennett et al. (2007) argue, are both needed to achieve true brand loyalty. Behavioral loyalty is defined as purchasing frequency as well as the intention to repurchase or increase purchases in the future (Romaniuk & Nenycz-Thiel, 2013; Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001; Hem & Iversen, 2002). In comparison, attitudinal loyalty is seen as an emotional commitment to a brand, which shows itself through, for example positive word of mouth (Russell-Bennett et al., 2007). Having loyal customers is an effective way to minimize business risks during less stable periods and therefore understanding how true brand loyalty is achieved and maintained is an important advantage to a company.

Traditionally research on brand loyalty has placed emphasis on behavioral loyalty, which focuses more on purchase amounts and frequency (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001). However, Russell-Bennett et al. (2007) state that attitudinal loyalty highly influences behavioral loyalty and thus both should be studied to gain true and long-lasting brand loyalty. Similarly, Brodie et al. (2013) argue, that research regarding the types of participation and involvement in brand engagement is limited.

The emergence and growth of social media presents an opportunity but simultaneously a possible risk to companies. Social media platforms have allowed customers to interact with each other in new dimensions and it has given a new sense of visibility and belonging to customers. This can be seen through the increased formation and importance of *online brand communities* (OBCs). OBCs are a meaningful engagement platform that encourages interaction between the focal brand and a customer as well as among customers. OBCs have a positive influence and a source of value to both customers and companies. However, Cova and White (2010) remind of the risk of commentary in online brand communities developing a negative connotation towards the brand. Therefore, it is vital for brands to understand how and what tools help to ensure loyal customers and positive online brand communities (Bowden et al., 2018).

Hollebeek et al. (2017) have studied OBCs engagement practices and through their research they have identified eight *virtual brand community engagement practices* (VBCEP), which highlight the different types and phases of customer engagement in an online brand community all the way to becoming an active and loyal member. Hence, this study focuses especially on virtual brand communities and what types of engagement practices are typical to them. The eight VBCEP's identified by Hollebeek et al. (2017) are: *greeting, regulating, assisting, appreciating, empathizing, mingling, celebrating and ranking*. In this study the terms *online* and *virtual* are used as synonyms for each other.

According to Hollebeek and Belk (2021) research on the effectiveness of brand engagement in specific online platforms remains insufficient and therefore forms a significant gap in research. In addition, Hollebeek et al. (2021) argue that as technology and social media platforms evolve, online customer engagement is an essential theme to study as it can result in innovative opportunities for customer engagement and brand engagement. Hollebeek et al. (2017) research on virtual brand community engagement practices states that a deeper understanding of the key outcomes of VBCEPs in different industries is still limited and should be researched. The focus of this study is therefore on customer engagement and what types of customer engagement practices are employed in the online brand community around the clothing company Djerf Avenue.

1.1 Introduction to the case community

This research studies the research objectives from the point of view of a case community in Instagram, which has been built around the company Djerf Avenue and its founder Matilda Djerf. Djerf Avenue (2022) is a Swedish fashion brand, founded in 2019 by a fashion influencer Matilda Djerf and her partner Rasmus Johansson. The company has been growing quickly and in 2021, the company achieved \$8 million in sales revenue and the revenue is expected to rise to \$22 million in 2022 (Paton, 2022). In addition to their head office in Stockholm, Sweden, the company has grown its business in 2022 by hiring local employees and opening a new warehouse into their biggest market area, the US

(Lundberg Toresson, 2022). Djerf Avenue operates completely online and therefore all sales, marketing and customer engagement is done online through different social media platforms. The company has recently extended their business by launching their own re-sell platform as a step towards more circular consumption.

Djerf Avenue describes themselves as a non-seasonal, ready-to-wear brand that delivers timeless pieces that are meant to last and stand the test of time (Lundberg Toresson, 2022). In addition to clothing items, the company has expanded their products to swimwear, accessories, and homeware such as robes, bedding, and towels. All their pieces are ethically produced in Portugal or Italy, and they aim to make their products as sustainable as possible by using sustainable materials and designing timeless pieces that all work together and can be worn for years to come. The company aims to be inclusive to all body types therefore has a size range extending from XXS to 3XL. For every piece of clothing on their website Djerf Avenue aims to feature models for each clothing size, to create a more inclusive shopping experience. As the clothes are only sold online and you are not therefore able to try them on before the purchase, therefore the practice of portraying each size online aims to help consumers to view what the piece would look like in their size. The company has also committed to never retouching any photos of their models or clothing items that are seen on their website or social media, which further emphasized the feeling of authenticity (Djerf Avenue, 2022).

The company appeals to customers through their authenticity, sustainable and inclusive values. However, another significant factor for the success of the brand is the image and following of the brands creator Matilda Djerf. On social media, Matilda Djerf has currently over 2.9 million Instagram followers and 1.2 million TikTok followers and she is often referred to as the “it-girl” of Scandinavian fashion as well as a trendsetter for Gen-Z fashion (Grimes, 2022). In addition, videos under the hashtag matildadjerf have collectively over 236,2 million views on TikTok. On her platform Matilda talks about fashion but also emphasizes the importance mental health and self-acceptance, which are values that also translate to the brands image. Djerf Avenue is also highly visible on her personal

social media accounts which allows the brand to also gain visibility through her personal popularity and social media community. Matilda Djerf is therefore visible on multiple online platforms which together with Djerf Avenue's social media accounts create a lively brand community.

The empirical part of this study is however focusing on the Instagram community of Djerf Avenue because it is where the brand has the most followers and where they are most active on a daily basis. In April 2023 the Instagram page of Djerf Avenue has over 530 000 followers.

As Djerf Avenue was founded only four years ago, is still a relatively new company that has been able to quickly create great success since its launch in 2019. The company is operating entirely online, and all the company's marketing is done on social media. It is therefore an excellent company to use as a case community for this study to examine how customer engagement practices can be utilized by brands to create brand loyal customers.

1.2 Research questions and objectives

The purpose of this study is to examine how customer engagement practices can be used to build brand loyalty in a virtual brand community. This is studied in the context of a clothing company's online community and thus customer engagement is looked at specifically from an online engagement point of view. The study aims to answer the question: *How can virtual brand community engagement practices increase brand loyalty among customers?*

The main objective of the research is examined through three sub-objectives.

1. The first sub-objective is to define brand loyalty, customer engagement and online brand communities and discuss them in the framework of virtual brand community engagement practices.

2. The second sub-objective is to identify which kinds of virtual brand community engagement practices can be found in the Djerf Avenue brand community.
3. The third sub-objective is to analyze how the brand community members experience the engagement practices from the viewpoint of behavioral and attitudinal brand loyalty.

1.3 Research methods

The research method of this study is qualitative research. A qualitative research method was selected as it best supports the purpose of this study which is to better understand the kinds of virtual brand community practices that can be found in the Djerf Avenue brand community. According to Eriksson and Kovalainen (2015, p. 4) a qualitative research approach focuses on interpreting and understanding the subject that is studied. As the theory of *virtual brand communities' engagement practices* by Hollebeek et al. (2017) is fairly new, a qualitative research method is a good fit for the study to gather a deeper understanding of the topic. The study is done from a phenomenological hermeneutical perspective. In addition, the study is done as a case study of the online brand community of Djerf Avenue's Instagram. The empirical materials are collected through observations made in the online brand community and through thematic personal interviews with selected members from the online brand community.

According to Puusa et al. (2020), the importance of understanding the subject in order to be able to choose the right themes for the thematic interview is vital. Therefore, the themes of the thematic interviews are designed based on the theoretical framework of the literature review as well as the main findings of the observations. Altogether ten individuals from the case company's online brand community are interviewed on the engagement practices observed in Djerf Avenue's Instagram community. The combination of thematic interviews and observations is the appropriate approach for this interview due to its flexibility, which allows individuals' personal experiences to be highlighted.

The analysis of the collected data is done through a content analysis, where the data is characterized into categories based on the discussed themes. Eriksson and Kovalainen (2016, p. 122) state, that analysis through categorization is most efficient when the aim of the study is to create a thorough understanding of the subject, as it is in this research.

1.4 Structure of the study

This study consists of five chapters. The first chapter is the introduction, where the background of the study, the research question, main objectives and research methods are explained. The second chapter creates the theoretical framework for the study. Through a literature review, it examines the main themes of the thesis, *brand loyalty, customer engagement and virtual brand community engagement practices*. In addition, the chapter discusses online brand communities from the point of view of both customers and the company. The second chapter answers to *the first sub-objective* of the study and creates the theoretical framework for the empirical research.

The third chapter is the methodology chapter where the choices for the methodological approach, research method, data collection and data analysis are explained. In addition, the reliability and validity of the study are discussed in this chapter. The fourth chapter presents and analyses the findings of the empirical research. This chapter aims to answer to the *second and third sub-objectives* of the study. The fifth and last chapter is the conclusion, where the main findings of the study are presented. In addition, limitations of the study and future research suggestions are given. Figure 1 below summarizes the structure of the study.

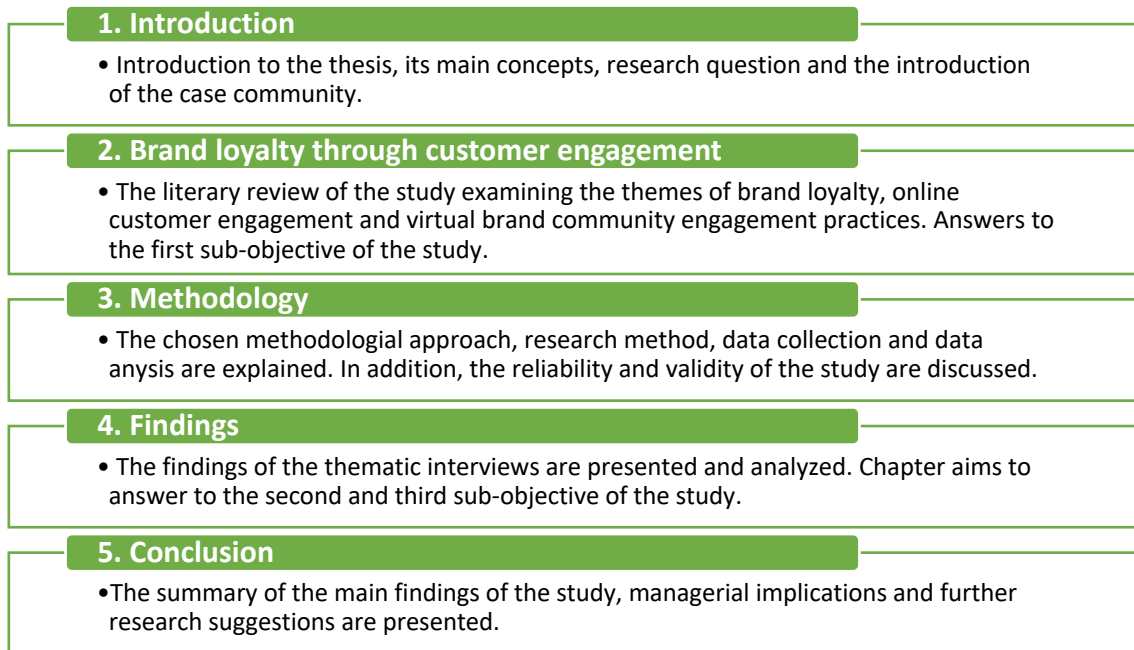


Figure 1. Structure of the study.

2 Brand loyalty through customer engagement

This chapter aims to answer the *first sub-objective* of the study by defining and developing an understanding of *customer engagement, brand loyalty and virtual brand community and their engagement practices*. The chapter begins by defining and discussing brand loyalty and customer engagement based on previous research. After this, sub-chapter 2.3 introduces and builds an understanding of online customer engagement and sub-chapter 2.4 examines how OBCs can benefit both the company and the customer. In sub-chapter 2.5 the eight *virtual brand community engagement practices* are introduced and examined. Finally, the sub-chapter 2.6 summarizes the findings of the chapter and creates a theoretical framework for the empirical part of the study.

2.1 Brand loyalty

Brand loyalty refers to the degree of attachment a customer has developed for a brand (Liu et al., 2012). If a customer develops a strong connection and commitment towards a specific brand, they become loyal to it (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001). According to Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001) brand loyalty stems from brand trust, which refers to the trust a customer has in the quality of the product or service. In addition, positive emotions and thoughts towards a brand are similarly necessary in creating brand loyal customers.

Brand loyalty can typically be divided into and measured in terms of two types of loyalty, *attitudinal and behavioral loyalty* (Russell-Bennett et al., 2007). True brand loyalty consists of a combination of both attitudinal and behavioral loyalty. *Behavioral* loyalty, also referred to as purchase loyalty, is defined through buying frequency, willingness for re-purchases and the intention to increase purchases in the future (Romaniuk & Nenycz-Thiel, 2013; Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001; Hem & Iversen, 2002). In comparison, Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001) and Russell-Bennett et al. (2007) define *attitudinal* loyalty as the emotional commitment a customer has to a brand. This can be seen through

intention to repurchase over other brands due to a unique value that the customer associates with the brand. Attitudinal loyalty can also be seen as the support of a brand through positive word-of-mouth. Positive word-of-mouth creates new customers, which makes brand loyal customers valuable assets to a company.

Analysis on brand loyalty often places emphasis on behavioral loyalty and number of purchases. Russell-Bennett et al. (2007) however state that attitudinal loyalty leads to behavioral loyalty and vice versa, a decrease in attitudinal loyalty may affect purchase frequency and therefore attitudinal loyalty is equally as important to pay attention to. Customer satisfaction from previous purchases together with customer involvement plays a central role in building attitudinal loyalty.

Brand loyal customers are important to a brand not only in terms of current purchasing power, but also in long term profitability. According to Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001) a loyal customer is willing to pay premium price for a brand they believe offers unique value compared to its competitors. In addition to paying a higher price, Harris and Goode (2004) state that loyal customers also buy more and are easier to reach. They therefore have the potential be valuable to a company in terms of profitability. Ganesh et al. (2000) and Harris and Goode (2004) also explain that brand loyalty translates into reduced marketing costs as loyal customers enthusiastically act as advocates to a brand through word-of-mouth and value co-creation through customer created content. Positive word-of-mouth around a brand is a source for new customers in the future (Oliver, 2014). This highlights the importance of having both behaviorally and attitudinally loyal customers.

2.2 Customer engagement

In marketing, the concept of customer engagement does not have one universal definition, rather it is described as a multidimensional concept (Hollebeek et al., 2021; Vivek et al., 2012). Research often places focus on either the *psychological* components or *behavioral* components of customer engagement. Brodie et al. (2011, p. 259) for example

define customer engagement as a “psychological state that occurs by virtue of interactive, co-creative experiences with a focal agent/ object (i.e., a brand) in a focal service relationship”. Similarly, Hollebeek (2011) describes customer engagement as a “state of mind” in relation to a brand. However, in comparison Van Doorn et al. (2010, p. 254) define it as “behavioral manifestations that have a brand or firm focus, beyond purchase, resulting from motivational drivers”. Nevertheless, most definitions of customer engagement share a focus on customer’s brand *interactions* (Hollebeek et al., 2021). A comprehensive definition regarding both psychological and behavioral components is given by Sedley (2010) “repeated interactions that strengthen the emotional, psychological or physical investment a customer has in a brand”. Table 1 presents the prior academic definitions of customer engagement.

Table 1. Definitions of customer engagement.

Definition	Author(s)	Focus of the definition
<i>“A psychological state that occurs by virtue of interactive, co-creative experiences with a focal agent/ object (i.e., a brand) in a focal service relationship”</i>	Brodie et al. (2011)	Psychological components
<i>“The level of a customer’s motivational, brand-related and context-dependent state of mind characterized by specific levels of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral activity in brand interactions.”</i>	Hollebeek (2011)	Psychological and behavioral components
<i>“Behavioral manifestations that have a brand or firm focus, beyond purchase, resulting from motivational drivers”</i>	Van Doorn et al. (2010)	Behavioral components

<i>"Repeated interactions that strengthen the emotional, psychological or physical investment a customer has in a brand"</i>	Sedley (2010)	Psychological and behavioral components
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According to Dessart et al. (2015) and Vivek et al. (2012) customer engagement offers additional value to traditional customer brand relationships by creating an interactive relationship that has the ability to deepen the relationship between a company and the customer beyond a more surface level purchasing relationship. Having an engaged relationships with customers is according to Brodie et al. (2011) an essential part of a successful marketing strategy.

Villanueva et al. (2008) have found that customers engagement, such as word-of-mouth, has a significantly greater effect on customer behavior compared to traditional marketing activities. In comparison to traditional marketing activities, Vivek et al. (2012) and Loureiro et al. (2017) emphasize the significance of direct interaction and relationship building between the customer and the brand. Brodie et al. (2011) describe customer engagement as being simultaneously both a strategic imperative to create and sustain competitive advantage and an important predictor for future business performance.

Hollebeek et al. (2017) state that as engaged customers tend to show higher levels of brand-related activity and spread positive word-of-mouth they are an important asset to managers in terms of spreading brand awareness and brand loyalty. Similarly, Dessart et al. (2015) highlight the strong relationship between customer engagement and brand loyalty. Brodie et al. (2011) also argue that there is a clear correlation between engagement and positive word-of-mouth as well as increased profitability.

Bowden et al. (2018) state that positive online brand engagement can be leveraged to create brand loyalty and thus increase the number of loyal customers, which in turns

ultimately benefits the brands financial performance. According to Bowden et al. (2018) customers experience brand engagement through not only the brand's marketing activities and interactions but also through user generated content on social media platforms. *Online customer engagement* therefore plays a crucial role in effective brand engagement. However, even though online engagement offers a possibility to increase brand awareness and positive word-of-mouth, it similarly creates a platform for the spread of negative word-of-mouth. Therefore, understanding how to achieve brand loyal customers through positive virtual brand engagement is a vital for companies.

2.3 Online customer engagement

The importance of building interactive relationships with customers on social media has increased significantly within the last decade and as Khan et al. (2017) describe, online environments have allowed for the growth of more dynamic and real-time brand interactions. Casaló et al. (2008) and Bowden et al. (2018) state, that through digital innovation, the ways in which consumers interact and connect with brands has transformed significantly. Customers are no longer simply passive receivers of brand related marketing but instead, they have acquired an active role of participating in brand related content and co-creating value and brand image. According to Yoshida et al. (2018) the possibility for personal communication between customers and with the company itself builds strong customer relationships, which in turn increases brand loyalty.

Brodie et al. (2011) define that online consumer engagement as interactive experiences between either the customer and the brand or between customers within the brand community. They also add that consumer engagement consists of *cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions*. Rather than focusing directly on increasing sales, online customer engagement emphasizes building collaborative relationships with customers and engaging them in brand related social media activities such as sharing feelings and thoughts, connecting, socializing, contributing, and co-creating with the brand and other customers (Apenes Solem, 2016; Malkan & Klaus, 2011; Muntinga et al., 2011).

Online engagement creates both an opportunity and risk for companies as both positive and negative word of mouth spreads faster than ever before and therefore being able to manage the brands online narrative is extremely vital (Bowden et al., 2018; Breidbach et al., 2014). Dessart et al. (2016) therefore highlight the importance of managers understanding how consumers engage with brands in online environments as these brand customer relationships can impact the overall success of the brand. Loureiro et al. (2017) similarly emphasize this by stating that online brand engagement leads to positive e-word of mouth.

Loureiro et al. (2017) state that online brand engagement should aim to create opportunities for meaningful interactions to exchange information with both the brand and among other customers. For successful customer engagement, it should be the priority of managers to enable purposeful contacts with customers. This includes rapid answers to questions, encouragement of reviews and listening to customers inputs on products and improvements.

Muntinga et al. (2011) emphasize that in order to effectively engage customers, it is first vital to understand customer's motives for engaging with the brand's content. They categorize customers' brand-related activities into three categories, *consuming, contributing and creating*. Consuming refers to viewing, reading or watching brand related content such as photos, videos and music, following brand community forums as well as reading comments and reviews. Contributing takes brand engagement one step further and consists of sharing your experiences by rating products, being a part of a brand related social community or group, interacting in conversations on social groups or forums and commenting on brand content such as videos or videos. Creating is when a customer produces user-generated brand related content such as videos, photos, blogs, articles or writes product reviews. Creating can thus be seen as co-creation of content for a brand. The creating stage of customer engagement is often related to a high level of brand loyalty.

2.4 Engagement in online brand communities

While brand communities have been present for already a long time, the emergence of social media platforms has allowed the development of online brand communities (OBCs) that act as meaningful engagement platforms encouraging interaction between a focal brand and a customer as well as among customers. Online brand community is defined by Muniz and O'guinn (2001) as "a specialized, non-geographically bound online community, based on social communications and relationships among a brand's consumers". OBCs allow customers to communicate on brand related and personal matters as well as form relationships with other likeminded customers. According to de Valck et al. (2009) the technological development of social media has shifted the role of customers from being more passive recipients of company information, to now being significant messengers of brand related knowledge and opinions. Through social media customers are able to directly communicate with each other as well as create friendships between one-another on the basis of their shared values and interests towards a specific brand.

Wirtz et al. (2013) describe OBC engagement as both an attitude, thus an interest to participate as well as the action to actually act and participate in the community. Muniz and O'guinn (2001) outline the three main characteristics of a brand community to be a shared connection and feeling of "we-ness" between members, community specific traditions or rituals and a sense of moral responsibility towards the community and its members. Similarly, Algesheimer et al. (2005) have found, that in OBCs community members are actively eager to participate and help each other out, which increases the perception of togetherness.

Online brand community engagement can be divided into two categories: interactions between community members within a OBC as well as interactions between the community and the brand itself (Dessart et al., 2015). However, in some cases the brand itself is not active in the online brand communities and engagements in these communities are rather initiated by different individuals within the brand community. Nevertheless, Dessart et al. (2015) state that engagement with both the brand and the community are

highly connected to each other. According to Wirtz et al. (2013) companies benefit from engaged OBCs through increased levels of brand commitment, brand satisfaction and brand loyalty.

According to Bowden et al. (2018) customers interactions with brands have transformed as a result of online brand communities. Dessart et al. (2015) have found that engagement in OBCs originates as result of existing brand knowledge, satisfaction, and trust. In addition, Brodie et al. (2011) state, that the more satisfied customers are with the brand, the more likely they are to engage with them. Schau et al. (2009) add, that a virtuous cycle develops when customers are engaged with a brand and spread positive word of mouth, which attracts new customers to the brand community. Through OBCs, customers have become significant co-creators of brand value and meaning and OBCs have become an important part of customers' overall brand experiences. In addition, Wirtz et al. (2013) highlight the numerous positive consequences of OBC's such as brand commitment, satisfaction and loyalty as well as co-creation and eagerness for idea generation for future products. According to de Valck et al. (2009) the growth of online brand communities has also transformed the scope, speed and the importance of word-of-mouth.

Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) argue, that a strong brand community can be utilized as an effective marketing asset. According to Wirtz et al. (2013) and Bowden et al. (2018) passionate and active customers in OBCs can strengthen a brands business performance as customers communicate through activities such as engaging in brand related discussions, sharing information and helping others in the community, spreading positive experiences as well as integrating new members into the community. Engaged customers thus create value for community members through brand related discussions.

2.4.1 Online brand community from the customer's point of view

From the point of view of the customer, OBCs are an important social network for customers throughout their customer experience. De Valck et al. (2009) argue, that OBCs

provide consumers with knowledge and companionship, which has significant implications on their consumer behavior. In addition, they found that engaging in OBCs by retrieving product or service-related information has a positive influence on the purchase decision process. In pre-purchase scenarios customers trust OBCs to discuss and attain information, advice and reviews regarding a product or a service. Similarly, in post-purchases scenarios customers discuss their opinions and experiences together with the community. Sharing experiences with likeminded customers in OBCs creates trusting relationships between community members as well as a sense of belonging. In addition, Bowden et al. (2018) argue that these interactions are mutually beneficial to both, the members of the community and the brand itself, as the positive OBC experiences brings customers closer to the brand and therefore create stronger brand loyalty.

OBCs generate value for customers in multiple ways, which motivates customers to be and stay engaged in their brand communities. Through their research Wirtz et al. (2013) have found the three most significant motivations for customers' OBC engagement. The first of these is *brand-related drivers*, which includes brand identification and the brand's symbolic function. Brand identification refers to the way in which customers integrate parts of the brands identity to their own self-identity. According to the authors, customers who identify with the brand are more likely to seek out and engage with like-minded customers in brand communities.

The second driver identified by Wirtz et al. (2013) is *social drivers*, more specifically social benefits and social identity. The authors identify social benefits from OBCs as being activities such as bonding through discussing and seeking help from members of the community. Similarly, Hollebeek et al. (2017) and Muntinga et al. (2011) have found that engagement in OBCs generates value in the form of interpersonal connectivity and a sense of belonging through meeting like-minded individuals and connecting with society. In addition, OBCs create value in the form of entertainment value through engaging in the community and the social enhancement from being accepted within the community. These community engagement practices result in members to identify stronger with the

community. According to Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) members are not only more connected to the brand through OBCs but they also feel a strong connection towards other community members even if they have never met them before. This sense of social belonging and interaction is an important motivation and benefit of being a part of an OBC. In addition, for some members being a part of a brand community is a way for them to strengthen their personal identity as well as their consumer identity (Wirtz et al., 2013).

The third driver Wirtz et al. (2013) identified is *functional drivers*, which is composed of functional benefits, uncertainty avoidance and information quality. OBCs offer members with functional benefits such as assistance on purchase decision, community recommended products and tips for possible issues with products. The authors argue that in a trusting online brand community, members are able to retrieve brand-related information that is highly valuable for them and allows members to be more confident with making purchase decisions. Dessart et al. (2015) similarly found OBC members to be eager to participate, support and share information with their community. In addition, according to Wirtz et al. (2013) companies might benefit from encouraging customers to engage through incentives such as loyalty points or price promotions, which benefit active customers.

Dessart et al. (2015) similarly argue that members engage in OBCs due to the benefits or value they gain from the community. The value can for example be seen as the entertaining value of the content and discussion in the community, the information shared about the products or services or special incentives, such as deals or coupons. According to the findings of their research engaging with OBC members is seen as an essential part of a complex purchase process. Members gain important knowledge of the products or services through the discussions and reviews of other community members, which is highly valuable in their purchase decision process. This reinforces the argument, that it is beneficial for companies to be present or at least aware of the discussions going on in their OBC's as they are an important factor for customers in their purchase process.

Dessart et al. (2015) and Hollebeek et al. (2017) have found that the development of strong bonds between community members is common in an OBC environment. These bonds between members create a sense of belonging, which in turn can similarly deepen their relationship with the brand itself. Hollebeek et al. (2017) add that engaging in brand communities often leaves members feeling empowered and connected to the OBC.

2.4.2 Online brand community from the company's point of view

From the point of view of the company OBCs are a great way to strengthen the company's relationship with its customers and to gain a deeper insight into their thoughts, browsing habits and other purchase related behaviors (Henning-Thurau et al., 2010). OBCs provide highly valuable knowledge to companies in terms of having a better understanding of their customers wants and needs when planning future brand products, content and strategy. According to Wirtz et al. (2013) OBCs are an opportunity through which companies can effectively influence and increase customers' brand engagement, satisfaction and loyalty.

The findings of Algesheimer et al. (2005) indicate, that it is highly beneficial for companies to engage customers to participate in their OBC, as a higher levels of engagement in the OBC have a positive correlation on the community members' brand loyalty and overall brand satisfaction. Wirtz et al. (2013) argue, that to maintain committed long-term members in the OBC regular engagement practices are necessary. Bowden et al. (2018) and Schau et al. (2009) both advice managers to actively build interactive engagement practices that aim to enhance trust, social bonds and create shared rituals. Similarly, to build a sense of belonging company community members ought to be encouraged to share their experiences and communicate within the OBC. This positive engagement simultaneously builds relationships between members and with the company and therefore is mutually beneficial.

According to Algesheimer et al. (2005) positive engagements such as giving and receiving recommendations in an OBC significantly strengthen customer's brand loyalty. To the brand this is especially important during new product or service launches, as according to Thompson and Sinha (2008) customers with higher levels of participation and long-term brand loyalty are more likely to adapt new products from the brand. In addition, these customers are less likely to try similar products from competitors. These brand loyal customers therefore tend to create sustainable value for companies.

Wirtz et al. (2013) summarize the benefits OBCs offer to companies to four main objectives. Firstly, OBC members are a significant resource for ideas and inputs for improved products and the creation of new products as they openly discuss their opinions within the community. Open discussion in an OBC allows companies to understand their products or services strengths and weaknesses, which can then be used as a significant insight when creating new products. Secondly, OBCs are a tool to enhance company culture. Thirdly, the authors highlight that OBCs improve companies' relationships with customers and therefore strengthen brand image and brand commitment. Finally, customers that are actively engaged are more satisfied, committed and loyal to the brand, which results in an increase of sales.

According to Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) a strong brand community creates important value to a company. It is important to acknowledge that attitudes in OBCs are not necessarily always constant and they might fluctuate over time. In addition, discussion in these communities can be positive towards the brand but negative conversation can also simultaneously be present. The strong community can, however, also turn into a threat in a scenario where community members, for example reject or do not align with the company's new products or services and use the OBCs platform to spread negative word of mouth. Therefore, even though brands themselves cannot always directly influence the discussions going on in OBCs it is still essential to recognize the tone of voice in the discussion going on. It is valuable for companies to gather feedback and input from loyal

brand community members and to strive to keep the community positively engaged. Positive discussion can be leveraged in product, communication, and marketing strategies, while being aware of the negative discussion can help conquer the issues discussed through future company strategies (Bowden et al., 2018).

2.5 Virtual brand community engagement practices

Hollebeek et al. (2017) have studied *virtual brand community engagement practices* to build an in-depth understanding of the practices taking place in online brand communities. The authors describe virtual brand community engagement practices or in short, VBCEPs, to be specific brand-related practices or behaviors which are repeated and routinized and create a “shared meaning among community members, generate consumption-related opportunities or (co-)create value with/for other members.” (Hollebeek et al., 2017, p. 205) VBCEPs are thus, repeated engagement practices that create value within the online brand community.

According to Hollebeek et al. (2017) VBCEPs help managers with identifying the engagement practices that are relevant in their virtual brand community to further engage with members. The knowledge and understanding of virtual brand community’s engagement practices is a significant asset to managers in terms of managing and building discussions with customers as well as building customers relationships and trust in the OBC. The authors indicate that VBCEPs are an important factor in the development of the online community’s purpose and vision. In addition, the engagement practices significantly influence to the community members’ commitment and sense of belonging to the community. According to Schau et al. (2009) engagement practices create value to both consumers and the company.

The engagement practices identified by Hollebeek et al. (2017) are a continuation from the four-component model of community engagement practices created by Schau et al.

(2009). Based on their findings Hollebeek et al. (2017) created an eight-component typology describing the engagement practices found in online brand communities. Building on Schau et al.'s (2009) model, the authors place emphasis on the members' sense of belonging in OBCs. The eight VBCEPs identified by Hollebeek et al. (2017) are: *greeting*, *regulating*, *assisting*, *appreciating*, *empathizing*, *mingling*, *celebrating* and *ranking*. The engagement practices are arranged in the order in which they usually occur when joining a virtual brand community and the flow between the eight VBCEP's is visualized in Figure 2.

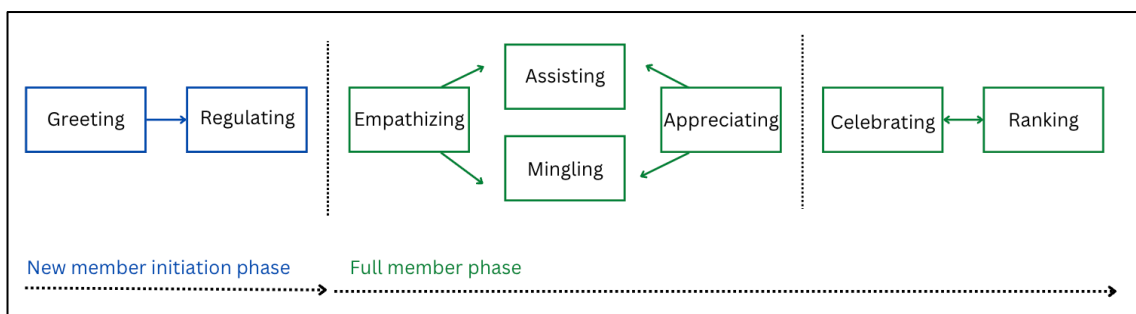


Figure 2. VBCEP process model. (Adapted from Hollebeek et al., 2017)

The first engagement practice *greeting* is seen when new members join an online community and refers to the activity of welcoming the members in a positive and warm manner to make them feel welcomed and a part of the community. Greeting is an essential engagement practice in encouraging the new member to become a frequent participator of the community. The second VBCEP *regulating* usually occurs similarly as greeting once a new member joins the community. During regulating existing members' share important information regarding the common rules and guidelines of the community. This helps new members to understand the norms and customs of the community and thus engage aligned to them.

Together the first and second VBCEPs compose a *new member's community integration phase*, which Hollebeek et al. (2017) refer to as an VBCEP sub-process. According to the

authors, both greeting and regulating reflect the members behavioral and emotional engagement towards the community and this can be seen through common guidelines to be kind and respectful towards other community members. The first sub-process is described as being a short phase after which members are familiar with the expected guidelines and are ready to fully emerge into the community. This first sub-process is influential in terms of integrating new members into active and engaged members of the OBC.

The third VBCEP Hollebeek et al. (2017) have identified is *assisting* which is the action of OBC members helping each other with specific brand related questions. Assisting is often done by more established and confident community members and the practice also includes actions of helping others navigate the company's products or services in a similar way that the company usually would. Assisting is an engagement practice that is highly valuable to both the company and the consumers, as according to Dessart et al. (2015) consumers rely on and trust OBCs for brand related information and reviews, which in turn also has an influence on their purchase decisions.

The fourth engagement practice *appreciating* includes the actions of expressing thankfulness and gratitude to either specific members of the community or the community as a whole. This can either be seen as a result of being assisted by another member or as a separate appreciation post. Appreciating demonstrates the appreciation members have for the OBC. Displaying appreciation for the community can be linked to feelings of satisfaction and loyalty towards the community and enforces the feeling of togetherness (Hollebeek et al., 2017).

The fifth engagement practice is *empathizing* which is seen through acts of empathy and emotional support in discussions. These discussions may be community or brand-related, however they might also extend outside of brand related discussions to more personal discussions or issues. According to Hollebeek et al. (2017) empathizing has a significant effect on building and reinforcing the bonds between members in the OBC as well as

their connection with the community as a whole. Dessart et al. (2016) argue that the relationships between customers and with the brand are significant for brand success. Similarly, Yoshida et al. (2018) highlight how the strength of the bond between a community member and the company translates into increased brand loyalty.

Similarly, to empathizing, the sixth component *mingling* extends the relationship between members beyond discussing simply brand or community related topics. Hollebeek et al. (2017) characterize mingling as socializing and forming personal friendships with members in the community. These practices can extend beyond discussions in the OBC through for example online or in person meet ups or events.

Assisting, appreciating, empathizing and mingling are identified to form the second VBCEP sub-process. Hollebeek et al. (2017) have named it *the social sub-process* and its practices are characterized as actions done by fully integrated community members. Therefore, the practices in the second sub-process are moving one step further from the first sub-process, new member community integration phase, into practices of more committed and engaged OBC members. According to Hollebeek et al. (2017) all of this sub-process' components are essential in creating and sustaining engaged OBC's and therefore they should specifically be paid attention to. The authors state, that this can for example be done through interactive marketing activities such as personalized products or involving the community in new product creation processes, which in turn encourages OBC members to mingle and share the brand's products on their own social media.

The seventh VBCEP identified by Hollebeek et al. (2017) is *celebrating*, which is seen in online brand communities relating to specific accomplishments, events or milestones. The subject of celebration can for example be the brand and its achievements such as new product launches, milestones or brand anniversary's. The subject of celebration can however also be individual community members achievements or the online brand community as a whole. These celebrations often revolve around milestones such as reaching

a specific amount of community members or posts. Celebrating can also be seen as OBC members excitement and celebration of purchasing items or services from the focal brand.

The final and eighth engagement practice is *ranking* refers to OBC members different social ranks in the community and the intent on increasing one's rank. The different ranks in most online communities may for example be moderators, who are in charge of monitoring many of the VBCEPs discussed. Moderator's welcome new members to the community, make sure that everyone is behaving according to the community's guidelines and demonstrate their leadership through the use of multiple VBCEPs such as regulating, celebrating and organizing community mingling activities. The eighth VBCEP thus brings the previous seven engagement practices together (Hollebeek et al., 2017).

Together, celebrating and ranking form the third VBCEP sub-process, *achievement-based engagement practices*. According to Hollebeek et al. (2017) this group of engaged members take responsibility and charge in the community over common guidelines, welcoming new members and celebrating common accomplishments. This is vital for the community's atmosphere, attractiveness to new members as well as the feeling of togetherness, which all in turn create more engaged members. According to the authors achievement-based engagement practices can also be utilized in the co-creation of value due to for example sharing brand related achievements also outside of the OBC in personal social media. This sharing of OBC related information helps to build awareness of the OBC to non-members as well (Hollebeek et al., 2017; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001).

Hollebeek et al. (2017) state, that to companies, the insight of understanding the OBC member's engagement practices and the ability to successfully utilize and encourage them is beneficial in growing, sustaining and managing their online brand community. The eight VBCEP's gives managers a framework into understanding and managing engagement in OBC's and thus enables them to systematically gain more of the potential and brand value offered by OBC's. The identification of the different VBCEP's in a brand

community is vital for the creation of brand image, meaning and loyalty (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). Hollebeek et al.'s (2017) framework of eight virtual brand community practices provides a framework through which we can assess the specific engagement practices present in a specific online brand community and thus estimate how these engagement practices translate into brand loyalty.

2.6 Theoretical framework

The theory discussed in this sub-chapter answers to the first sub-objective of this study, which was to *define and create an understanding of brand loyalty and customer engagement and to examine the different customer engagement practices are present in online brand communities*. This sub-chapter aims to bring together the most relevant theoretical concepts discussed earlier in this chapter to create a theoretical framework for answering the second and third sub-objective of this study.

The theoretical framework created based on the literature review (Figure 3) illustrates *the eight virtual brand community engagement practices* and their relation to a member's timeline and journey as an online brand community member, starting from the *new member initiation phase* leading up to a *full member phase*. In addition, the framework illustrates the increase in *customer engagement* and *brand loyalty* through the members journey through the framework as a result of the engagement practices. It can be expected that once a customer moves into the full member phase of the VBCEP framework, they become a more engaged and loyal community member. As a result, a more engaged and loyal community member develops true brand loyalty, which according to Russell-Bennett et al. (2007) consist of a combination of *behavioral* and *attitudinal brand loyalty*. Finally, the Figure 3 illustrates the gained benefits of being an engaged and loyal online brand community member from the point of view of the company and the customer.

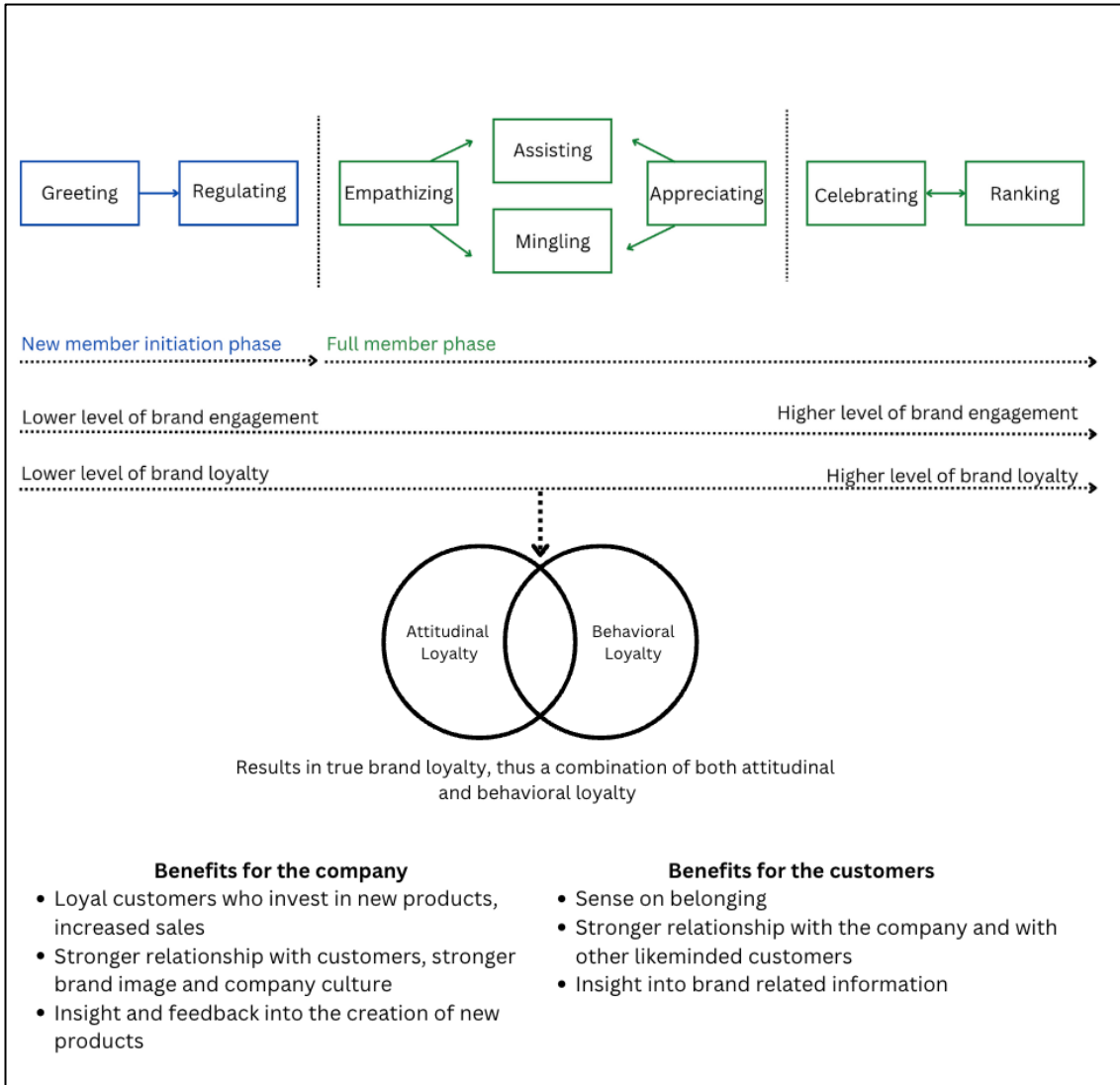


Figure 3. Theoretical framework.

The theoretical framework is used in the next chapters to define the themes for the thematic interviews. These themes will be used in the empirical part of the research in order to answer to the second and third sub-objectives of the study. The second sub-objective of this study is to through empirical research identify which kinds of virtual brand community engagement practices (VBCEPs) can be found in the Djerf Avenue brand community, while the third sub-objective is to analyze how the brand community members experience the engagement practices from the viewpoint of behavioral and attitudinal brand loyalty.

3 Methodology

This chapter outlines the methodology of the study and explains the reasoning for the chosen empirical research method. The chapter begins with an introduction to the methodological approach followed by the research method of the study. The chapter also presents the data collection methods and the data analysis methods. In addition, the reliability and validity of the chosen methodology are discussed.

3.1 Methodological approach

This study is constructed as a case study of a chosen online case community. The chosen case is of the clothing brand Djerf Avenue's online brand community operating in Instagram. The study is based on a qualitative research design and the first part of the data is collected through observations in the online brand community. This observational data is used to supplement the interview data, which is collected through semi-structured thematic interviews. A qualitative research approach was chosen for this research as according to Hirsjärvi et al. (2009, p. 161) qualitative research aims to examine people's personal and real experiences with the object of the study. This is therefore a good fit for this study as it aims to observe and understand the real-life experiences of the individuals within the case community.

The study is done from a phenomenological hermeneutical perspective. A phenomenological hermeneutical research method is used to research and understand the real-life meanings and lived experiences of the research participants (Lindseth & Norberg, 2022). This research is a phenomenological hermeneutical study due to its nature of creating understanding of the lived experiences of the research participants from the case community of Djerf Avenue.

The study is done from the perspective of the case community of Djerf Avenue. The case community is used as a way to examine the studied phenomena and to test or extend a

theory in a real-life business environment (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2015, p. 136). The case study is done as an intensive case study, which aims to gain a deep understanding of the studied subject, while simultaneously testing existing theory. In this research, the case community is studied as a means to examine the theory of Hollebeek et al. (2017) and test its impact on brand loyalty in the context of the case community.

Table 2 below shows the purpose of the study, its sub-objectives and illustrates the tools and research methods through which the objectives are answered. The first objective was answered in the first part of the study, the literary review, from which the theoretical framework for this research was created. The empirical part of the study aims to answer to the purpose of the study with the support of the second and third sub-objective through the observations and the thematic interviews. The purpose of Table 2 is to illustrate the structure of the study and thus help the reader better understand how the different parts of the study correspond to answering the research question.

Table 2. Research question and sub-objectives.

Research question	Sub-objectives	Indicators
	<i>Define brand loyalty, customer engagement and online brand communities and discuss them in the framework of virtual brand community engagement practices.</i>	Literary review
<i>How can virtual brand community engagement practices increase brand loyalty among customers</i>	<i>Identify which kinds of virtual brand community engagement practices can be found in the Djerf Avenue brand community.</i>	Literary review Observations Thematic interviews

	<p><i>Analyse how the brand community members experience the engagement practices from the viewpoint of behavioral and attitudinal brand loyalty</i></p>	<p>In-depth analysis of the interview data</p>
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Through the combination of interviews and observations the aim is to gather a real life understanding of the virtual brand community engagement practices that are visible in the community as well as understand the feelings and emotions those create in community members. According to Moisander and Valtonen (2006) as a part of an ethnographic research method, observations are used as a way to closely monitor and collect data from the daily activities of the studied subject. Instead of looking at individual experiences, observations focus on the activities and practices within the community as a whole. Therefore, the combination of observations and individual interviews allows this research to gather a thorough understanding of the case community as a whole combined with the experiences of individuals within the community.

3.2 Research method

The empirical data for this study was collected through both observations and interviews. The observations made in Djerf Avenue's Instagram community were done through non-participant observation where the observer is not participating or becoming a member of the community that is being studied but is rather observing the activities from the community from the outside. In addition, the aspects that were going to be observed were already known and defined through the theoretical framework of the study (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2016, p. 99-100). The advantage of collecting data through observations is that it obtains the engagement practices as they take place. Observations however do not provide deeper understandings of the thoughts and feelings of the people in the community, which is why interviews were also used to collect empirical data.

The method of thematic interviews was chosen for this study as it allows more flexibility during the interview. The flexibility is an important factor as it allows each of the participants to discuss their own individual experiences within the brand community. According to Galletta and William (2013, p. 2) semi-structured interviews leave space to examine the interviewees genuine experiences and allows them to bring new interpretations to the subject. In thematic interviews the studied subject, thus in this study online customer engagement, is examined through different themes which aim to increase the knowledge of the subject from various point of views. According to Puusa et al. (2020) the themes of thematic interviews are typically based on the theoretical framework of the study.

By nature, semi structure interviews include open-ended as well as more theoretically based question. A semi structured interview procedure assures that all the interviews to go through all the same sets of defined themes, while simultaneously giving the opportunity to focus on specific topics based on the individuals' experiences (Puusa et al., 2020). According to Puusa et al. (2020) thematic interviews enable the researcher to discover information on the initially decided themes as well as any personal additions or observations that the interviewee presents.

The interviews for this study were done as individual interviews to allow the personal experiences of the interviewee to come across without influence of biases from the other interviewees. As, according to Puusa et al. (2020), qualitative research aims to research the individual experiences of the person being interviewed and thus it is important to individually interview each person instead of using a group interview.

According to Puusa et al. (2020) it is important that the researcher has a good understanding of the subject before defining the themes in the thematic interview. This understanding of Hollebeek et al. (2017) VBCEP's was built through the literary review part of this research. In addition, knowledge on the case company and its community was

known through personal experiences within the community. The themes for the interview were however build based upon the observations made in the brand community in the first part of this empirical research.

3.3 Data collection

This part of the methodology chapter goes into depth on the processes of how the data for the research is collected. As the empirical research is divided into two parts, first the observations are discussed and then the thematic interviews. Finally, the last sub-chapter 3.3.2 looks at the individuals that were chosen to be interviewed for the study.

3.3.1 Observations

The research process started with observations of the online brand community environment. These observations aimed to lay out a foundation into the understanding of which types of virtual brand community engagement practices are visible in the brand community of the case company Djerf Avenue's Instagram community. The community operates on a public Instagram page and therefore it is open for everyone to follow and observe. The observations were made during a 4-month period (13.11.2022-13.3.2023). As the community is very active daily, a four-month period was seen as a suitable period to get enough individual observations.

The Instagram community of Djerf Avenue is a public platform and to collect the observations, the page was visited periodically within the observation period to collect relevant observations. The observations were collected into an excel sheet where they were coded based on the type of engagement practice they represented. During the 4-month observational period Djerf Avenue posted a total of 333 pictures with a caption to their Instagram page. All of these photos were observed and the posts with virtual brand community engagement practices visible were noted down to the excel. In addition to posts

and captions, the observational data included Instagram stories, which the brand posted daily. Also, comments made by the brand and comments made by community members were observed. Similarly, the data included engagements in community members' own posts in which they had tagged Djerf Avenue. Since Djerf Avenue is tagged, these posts are also visible on their Instagram page and thus the comments made by the brand and community members on these posts were also used as observations.

3.3.2 Thematic interviews

The thematic interviews were done after collecting the observational data. This enabled using the observations as an empirical grounding for formulating the interview questionnaire. Overall, the interview questionnaire included three different themes that were identified on the basis of the theoretical framework and the observational data. The interview questionnaire is presented in the Appendix 2.

The first section of the interview questionnaire included background questions covering the socio-demographic variables, the individual's relationship with the brand community and a few more general questions on how the informant views the brand community's engagement practices. The second section of the questionnaire focused on engagement practices. Based on the observations, six engagement practices out of eight (Hollebeek et al. 2017) were chosen to the interviews, due to their relevance in the online brand community. These engagement practices were *assisting*, *empathizing*, *mingling*, *appreciating*, *celebrating* and *ranking*. The final section focused on brand loyalty. All of themes and questions were discussed in each of the interviews, however the emphasis on different themes varied based on the experiences of the individual.

The interview informants were carefully chosen based on their involvement and knowledge of the online brand community. All of the 10 individuals interviewed for this study had been a part of the online community for at least two years. The chosen individuals were either previously known by the researcher as active community members

or active members found within the online brand community. The ten individuals were interviewed between the 14th of March and 21st of March 2023. Out of the ten interviews, three of the interviews were conducted face to face and the rest, seven were done online in Zoom. All of the interviews were transcribed into text, which resulted to a total of 64 pages.

Below, Table 3 summarizes some background information on the interviewees. In addition, it should be noted that nine interviewees were from Europe, eight from Finland, one from France and the 10th was from Australia. All of the individuals that were interviewed identified as females. As the company of the case community, Djerf Avenue produces clothing directed primarily to women this homogeneity in the sample could be expected.

Table 3. Summary of interviews.

Interview	Age	Gender	Occupation	Duration	Date	Execution
Int1	25	Female	Student	34min	14.3.2023	Face to face
Int2	25	Female	Student	41min	14.3.2023	Zoom
Int3	20	Female	Student	31min	15.3.2023	Zoom
Int4	26	Female	Student	35min	15.3.2023	Zoom
Int5	26	Female	Working	26min	15.3.2023	Zoom
Int6	24	Female	Working	24min	15.3.2023	Zoom
Int7	23	Female	Student	31min	16.3.2023	Face to face
Int8	22	Female	Student	28min	16.3.2023	Zoom
Int9	24	Female	Working	1h10min	18.3.2023	Face to Face
Int10	24	Female	Studying	44min	21.3.2023	Zoom

3.4 Data Analysis

The objective of the analysis is to transform the vast amount of empirical data collected through the observations and interviews into an understandable and summarized set of information, which can then be used interpret the subject and to draw conclusions (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2016, p. 120; Puusa et al., 2020). The analysis of the data from the interviews was done through a content analysis.

The data of the empirical research is in the form of transcribed interviews and therefore a content analysis is a good fit for analyzing it (Puusa et al. 2020). More specifically, a categorization approach was used to analyze the data. According to Eriksson and Kovalainen (2016, p.122) categorization works best when the aim of the research is to form a comprehensive understanding of the subject. In categorization the data is coded into categories according to different themes. Analysis of the data proceeded through categorization of the different themes. According to Puusa et al. (2020) these themes can for example be the different topics that were similar in multiple interviews. The aim of this method is to find similarities or patterns between the interviews. The identified themes can either be already defined themes based on the theoretical framework of the study or completely new themes that were identified in the interviews. In this study, the themes were primarily based on the themes created for the thematic interviews, which were *the relationship with the brand community, the virtual brand community engagement practices and the connection to brand loyalty*. Puusa et al. (2020) highlight that the identification of the different categories is one of the most important steps in the analysis.

3.5 Reliability and validity of the study

Assessment of the *reliability* of the study is vital and should be done continuously throughout the process of the study (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2016, p. 303). According to Puusa et al. (2020), the main concepts that are used to evaluate this are reliability and

validity and ethics. However, Eriksson and Kovalainen (2016, p.308) point out that in the case of qualitative research, also other aspects of *dependability*, *transferability*, *credibility* and *conformability* should be considered.

To ensure a trustworthy research it is important that the research provides the reader with evidence of a logical, traceable and clearly documented research. This is also referred to as the *dependability* of the study. The dependability of the study can for example be portrayed through clear indicators of the different steps of the research (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2016, p. 308). The dependability of this study was ensured through a clear and coherent description of the structure and objectives of the study, which were presented to the reader both in the text and visually through figures and tables and which stayed consistent throughout the study. In addition, the dependability of the study can be seen in the coherence of the themes discussed in the literary review, the theoretical framework that was created based on the findings of the literary review as well as the themes defined for the interviews based on the theoretical framework. In addition, all of the 10 interviews are saved as recordings and as transcribed text, which also adds to the dependability of the research.

Transferability indicates how the connection between this study and previous research on the subject is shown through the study (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2016, p. 308). The transferability of this study can be indicated in the fact that the thematic interviews are based on the theoretical framework which was created on the findings of previous research on the literary review part of the study. Therefore, previous research such as Hollebeek et al.'s (2017) virtual brand community engagement practices was clearly visible both in the literary review as well as the thematic interviews and findings of this study.

The *credibility* of a research is according to Eriksson and Kovalainen (2016, p. 308) based on the notion of whether the researcher is familiar enough with the topic and whether there is enough sufficient data to back the claims made in the research. In addition, it

takes to account the question of whether another researcher could come to similar conclusions based on the same data and material. The credibility of this research was reached through an extensive literary review on the topic, which assured that the researcher was familiar with the topic. An extensive literary review was made through using multiple and good sources of previous research. In the empirical part of the research credibility was added also through the two research methods used, observations and thematic interviews, which together formed a well-rounded sample of data. Similarly, the semi-structured nature of the thematic interviews assured that all of the same themes were discussed in all of the interviews, which further enhanced the credibility of the research. Finally, direct quotes were used in the findings chapter of the thesis, which adds to the transparency and credibility of the study.

Conformability of the study is based on the notion that the findings of the study are authentic and can clearly be backed by data from the research. It is therefore important that the findings of the research are clearly linked to the data in a way that is easily understandable to the reader (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2016, p. 308). The conformability of this study is communicated through the usage of direct quotes from all of the interviews as well as direct quotes from the online brand community found through the observations. Additionally, the brand community that was studied is an open brand community and therefore anyone can access it to see the observations, which adds to the conformability of the study.

To ensure the reliability of the study a combination of thematic interviews and observations was chosen as the research method. Similarly, to ensure an ethical research, the identities of the people interviewed was kept anonymous. Having an anonymous study can contribute to more honest and realistic interview answers. In addition, the interview was voluntary for all participants and therefore not motivated by any external factors.

4 Findings

This chapter presents the findings of the empirical research. The objective of this chapter is to answer to the second and third sub-objective of the study, which are *to identify which kinds of virtual brand community engagement practices can be found in the Djerf Avenue brand community* and *to analyze how the brand community members experience the engagement practices from the viewpoint of behavioral and attitudinal brand loyalty*.

4.1 An overview of the virtual brand community engagement practices

In the literature review chapter of this thesis, eight virtual brand community engagement practices by Hollebeek et al. (2017) were explored. These eight were *greeting, regulating, assisting, appreciating, empathizing, mingling, celebrating and ranking*. With these and the study's theoretical framework in mind the observations in the online community were done with the aim to identify which kinds of engagement practices could be found in Djerf Avenue's brand community.

As a result of the observation, five engagement practices were identified that were clearly visible within the Djerf Avenue online brand community. These were: *assisting, empathizing, mingling, appreciating and celebrating*. Examples of some of the observations on each customer engagement practice is presented in Table 4 below.

Table 4. Summary of observation findings.

VBCEP	Example	Ranking the appearance from most common to least common
Assisting	"Need last minute sizing help? DM us or Chat with us via our website if you have any last-	Most common engagement practice

	minute questions about sizing for the drop tomorrow and we will happily help you!"	
Empathizing	Djerf Avenue: "What did you get from today's drop ? ❤️ OBC Member 1: "Nothing because I'm so broke :(" Djerf Avenue: "❤️ next time love, your support means the everything still! Also make sure to check out the resell page for the future where the price point is a bit lower too! Xx"	Fourth most common engagement practice
Mingling	Djerf Avenue: "What did you get from today's drop ? ❤️" OBC Member 2: "Grey sweater! A staple I will wear for YEARS" Djerf Avenue: "yesss! So gorgeous ❤️"	Third most common engagement practice
Appreciating	"So thankful for all our angels 🤍"	Second most common engagement practice
Celebrating	"PSA! Last chance to register for tonight's Djerf-mas Zoom Party 🤔🤍 Link in our story! X"	Least common engagement practice

Table 4 shows the most common customer engagement practices found in the Djerf Avenue Instagram community. Each of the engagement practices will be further discussed in the next chapters.

Three out of the eight VBCEP's from Hollebeek et al.'s (2017) typology were not specifically identified as being relevant within the case online brand community. These were *greeting, regulating and ranking*. According to Hollebeek et al. (2017) greeting and regulating form a sub-process called the *new member's community integration phase*. It is a short phase during which the member is welcomed to the community and introduced to their guidelines in order to become fully merged community members. The phase was

not visible in the brand community of Djerf Avenue as there was no visible engagement practice of introducing new members into the community or instructing them on guidelines. This could be due to the fact that the community is an open community and therefore the tracking of new members can be difficult. In addition, not having the new member integration phase could also indicate, that once a member joins the community they are already treated and ranked as an equal member of the community.

Similarly, the absence of the engagement practice of ranking indicates that there are no specific or evident rankings of members in the community. The interview data also supported the notion that ranking between community members is not visible in the community:

“In my eyes everyone’s equal, I think it’s just something that seems to me that everyone’s equal.” - Int1

“I have a feeling, in my opinion everyone is equal, I don’t think that someone’s better or anything.”- Int2

“I very much feel that equality is a big theme for them [Djerf Avenue] that everyone has the feeling that they are equal as the way that they are and what they are represent as an individual.” - Int4

These findings indicate that the engagement practices in the online brand community of Djerf Avenue are directed towards members already in the full member phase of the VBCEP framework. Below, each of the engagement practices are discussed more in-depth based on the observational and the interview data.

4.1.1 Assisting

Hollebeek et al. (2017) define assisting as the action of helping with specific brand related questions. As one of the most evident engagement practices found in the observations of the online brand community, assisting was similarly heavily highlighted in many

of the thematic interviews as one of the most prominent engagement practices of Djerf Avenue. According to Wirtz et al. (2013) customers trust and turn to online brand communities to receive valuable brand related information, help with purchase decisions, get insight into community recommended products as well as tips for solving possible issues with products. Similarly, Dessart et al. (2015) state, that providing customers with brand related information has an overall positive influence on their purchase decisions.

During the observations, assisting was found across the online brand community on Instagram stories, posts, captions and in the comments, thus in various forms of communication. Assisting in the community is demonstrated for example by the following observation quotes.

"Stuck between sizes? Here's what you need to know ❤️"

- *Djerf Avenue on the caption of a post*

Size comparisons of our Demin Midi Skirt Washed Gray"

Customer1: "I have no idea if I should get size S or M. All I know is that I definitely need this skirt"

Djerf Avenue: "Yay!! We are so excited 🥰 if you're in between two sizes we recommend going for the smaller size, as the material is super nice and stretchy 💕"

Customer1: "Thank you, that's very helpful! 🥰🥰"

Djerf Avenue: "Glad to help!! Let us know if you have any further questions xx"

- *A dialogue between Djerf Avenue and a consumer in the comment section of a post*

"Need last minute sizing help? DM us or Chat with us via our website if you have any last-minute questions about sizing for the drop tomorrow and we will happily help you!"

-*Djerf Avenue on their Instagram story*

Assisting in the community is largely focused on helping the customers with product related information such as finding the right size or assisting them with any questions related to the pieces they are selling. In the case community assistance to finding the right size is provided through comparison photos, videos, personal comments to customer

and through videos giving the specific measurements of each item. Therefore, the assistance of customers is highly visible in the community. Below image 1 illustrates how Djerf Avenue showcases different body types on their Instagram posts to assist the customers on how the piece could look on them.



Image 1. Illustration of assistance through showcasing different body types in Djerf Avenue’s Instagram page. (@djerfavenue, 2022, December, 1.)

As demonstrated above, providing assistance to customers to help them find the right size is an engagement practice that is highly visible in the Djerf Avenue online community. In addition, in many of the observed interactions the incentive to help the customers is coming from the direction of the company itself, which makes it easier for customers to find the information. This observation and the positive impact it has on their customers is clearly supported by the interview data. The informants said that the easy access to assistance on Djerf Avenue’s Instagram has aided them in their purchase journey as well as differentiated them from their competitors with the extent to which assistance is provided.

“I think that on their Instagram their sizes are communicated in a good way. This maybe makes me more likely to purchase something, because often when I’m online shopping it’s hard to know if the size is right, and I think they [Djerf Avenue] have a lot of pictures of different body types and that at least could help me to make a purchase decision.” - Int1

“In my opinion all of the information related to sizes is super useful, which I don't think, or I haven't experienced that with other brands. The fact that they're not even just pictures, but that there are also videos, so I think it's such a user-friendly and informative way.” – Int5

“They answer quickly and very well in a personal way and then they often post these question boxes on their Instagram to ask if there are any extra questions, which shows that they are not necessarily waiting for the customer to come to them and ask questions, but they are already doing it for them and making it very easy to approach them to ask any questions.” - Int8

Among the interviewees, the engagement practice of assisting in the community has evoked feelings of being cared for, feeling like you are talking to a friend and thus created a feeling of togetherness and connection towards the brand.

“I always see in their stories like “DM us if you need help with sizing or any questions” or that sort of stuff so I do feel like they do well to assist in purchasing and I do appreciate the added help, I guess it does make me feel that they do want customers get something that works for them, to make sure it's the right size for them and so that it's something they'll keep and actually use.”- Int3

“I have asked them last summer, about sizing, because I bought this tube top and I was between sizes and I wanted to ask which one would be better for me and they responded to me almost immediately [...] I felt very like I was cared about, and they added some emojis, which was nice, just like a friend would answer to me.” – Int2

In addition, in the interviews it became evident that through the engagement practice of assisting, the customers felt more comfortable and confident in asking for assistance directly from the brand.

“On Instagram I think it's really easy to reach out because they are being so they are so actively promoting that they are here to help you can just send them a DM or then answer to their story or post or comment on their post so I think there are many ways to reach out to them and they are being like active in responding.” - Int10

Assisting in the community also branched out further than simply assisting with purchase decisions. Assisting was also observed in for example guiding the customers in styling the pieces for different occasions.

"5 ways to style our Pinstripe suit 🎀"
 - Djerf Avenue on the caption of a post

This type of assistance was also reinforced by the interviews through highlighting the types of assistance Djerf Avenue does outside of their assistance on purchase related actions. Assistance was thus also given on subjects that were not directly connected to the sale of items.

"I feel like they have connected many themes and giving information about like styling and about cosmetics or like makeup and beauty things and also like about mental health." - Int4

According to De Valck et al. (2009) assistance given by the company on their products has a significant impact on a customer's behavior and can be linked to for example an increased willingness for purchases. To illustrate the importance of assisting, in the interviews, it was named as the most impactful and important engagement practice by many of the interviewees.

"Mingling and assisting stand out to me the most because when the brand is assisting the customer and really hearing what their saying and trying to help them and talking with the customers it helps the brand to see what the customers re-ally want, makes the customer feel closer to the brand." – Int1

"Assisting is for sure one of the best things for me, I love that they put like different types of bodies, actual people, normal looking people wearing their items of their websites so it's easier to imagine what it would fit you. I think that all of them are very important, but probably assisting and empathizing. " – Int2

4.1.2 Appreciating

The engagement practice of appreciating is focused on expressions of thankfulness and gratitude within the community and towards individuals or the community as a whole. According to Hollebeek et al. (2017) appreciation is often connected to a feeling of togetherness, satisfaction and loyalty for the community.

In the Djerf Avenue community appreciation was very evident especially in longer posts focusing on specific milestones. In addition, smaller phrases of gratitude were also detected in day-to-day interactions in the community. The following observations highlight practices of appreciation which Djerf Avenue is showing to their customers. The first observation is in relation to a new social feature on their website called *Angels Avenue*, and its launch post below highlights the appreciation the company has for its community members.

"Welcome to Angels Avenue! We have always wanted to create a space for all of you to be even closer to each other and to us. Somewhere safe and fun that could be dedicated to inspiring one another and connecting to the rest of the Djerf Avenue family. And today our team is finally reality!! You are all so special, so of course we needed to create an equally special place for all of us to hang out - and we think we've done it! We are so happy you're here ❤️" – Djerf Avenue

Similarly, appreciation was felt by the customers in the interviews. This interview quote is supported by the observation below it:

"I've noticed that on social media they comment on people's posts and I remember them specifically saying stuff like "appreciate you"." – Int8

"So thankful for all our angels 💖" – Djerf Avenue

The third observation is from the end of the year 2022 recap post, where Djerf Avenue reflects on the past year and simultaneously shows its appreciation to their customers. What stands out from this observation is the fact that Djerf Avenue is not only showing appreciation to its customers who have purchased their products in the past year, but in

addition they are also thanking the community members who support the brand in non-financial ways. Thus, showing appreciation also to the community members who come to the community to find inspiration or to socialize and help the community grow.

“Looking back on 2022 fills me with gratitude and butterflies in my stomach. It has been a year of growth, surprises, and most importantly - challenges. I truly believe that we wouldn’t be able to evolve as a community and brand without a few bumps on the road. I am grateful to everyone who has supported me, my team and my dream to create a safe space online. Whether you come to Djerf Avenue to shop, to find inspiration or connect with new friends - thank you. I appreciate you more than words can express. I can’t wait to continue growing together, exploring new fields together and nurturing our community.” – Djerf Avenue

However, appreciation can also be shown in on OBC in ways that are not as direct as simply saying “I appreciate you”. There are different engagement practices which can be used to indicate appreciation without directly saying it. An example of indirectly showing appreciation came up in a few of the interviews.

“I remember them directly saying that they appreciate their customers [...] and how this would not be possible without the customers and so I think they give these individual dedicated posts of appreciating their customer where they actually say it out loud, but in addition to that I think they do it also in other ways not maybe as directly saying “we appreciate you” but by embedding customers on their feed and presenting their posts on their stories, that gives the message that they are really appreciating the customers and wanting them to be an essential part of their story as a company.” – Int10

“Yeah...I mean they’re [Djerf Avenue] constantly posting their customers wearing their clothes and saying something like “you look so good.”... I don’t see a lot of other companies doing that, and I mean, again it makes the customer feel closer to the brand.” -Int1

These interview quotes indicate that appreciation to customers is also shown by Djerf Avenue through using a lot of user generated content, thus photos and videos of their customers wearing their clothes on their Instagram feed and stories. The fact that the customers are so integrated into their marketing and the online brand community shows a sense of appreciation to the customers. This engagement practice thus creates a sense

of togetherness and belonging, as customers are so heavily included in the company's story.

In addition, appreciation to each individual customer was felt in the form of inclusivity. Djerf Avenue aims to make their brand as inclusive as possible through for example having models from different ethnic backgrounds, different sizes and including people with disabilities. Image 2 illustrates how the representation and appreciation for different types of bodies and disabilities is communicated through Djerf Avenue's Instagram community. Showcasing the brand's products on different people makes the everyday customer feel more appreciated, seen and as a part of the brand.

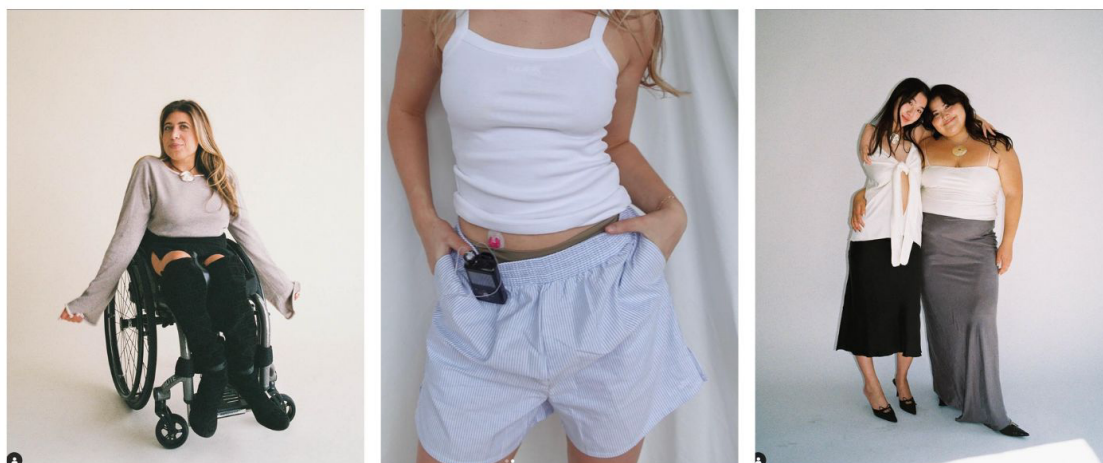


Image 2. Examples of the appreciation shown to different disabilities on Djerf Avenue's Instagram. (@djerfavenue, 2023, January, 21.; @djerfavenue, February, 7,; @djerfavenue, 2022, December, 30.)

As showcased in image 2, the models for Djerf Avenue are regular people and often actual customers of the brand. Therefore, the company aims to show representation of the everyday consumer and make the brand as inclusive to everyone as possible. Through the interviews, this inclusivity was also viewed as a form of appreciating for all different types of customers.

"I think that they're really appreciative of little things in life and they appreciate people from different backgrounds, sizes, body types like anything, they're kind of

like inclusive about it and an inclusive brand. Everyone is welcome and they appreciate everyone no matter your background and I think that's great and one of the reasons why people love the brand so much because it's not just this one specific type of body that they photograph on their page." – Int2

"They're using all kinds of models and they're using their customers as models, so I feel like it's very important that they have different body shapes and different kind of individuals and also like there like where they are from and their backup stories are also represented" – Int4

"They absolutely try to be very inclusive they try to bring many races [...] they always have people of different sizes, they have people with a wheelchair, diabetes. Honestly, I think that they're doing a great job with this." – Int9

In conclusion, the engagement practice of appreciating can be done either directly by voicing appreciation or it can be shown more indirectly through highlighting and giving a voice to the people or the community that is being appreciated. This is an engagement practice which is very visible in the Djerf Avenue community, and it evokes feelings in the customers as well.

4.1.3 Empathizing

Empathizing is described as acts of empathy and emotional support in discussions in the brand community. Empathy can be shown on community or brand-related activities, but it can also extend outside of brand related discussions to more personal discussions, which according to Hollebeek et al. (2017) has a significant impact in building and reinforcing the bonds between members in the OBC as well as their connection with the community and brand as a whole.

"When I think about Djerf Avenue empathetic is one of the first things that comes to mind. For example, when they have these conversations on the stories and ask people "how are you feeling?" and the customers answer and they for example say that they're "not feeling that good today" or "I had a bad day" and they answer really empathetically." - Int2

The practice of empathizing was highlighted by multiple interviewees in relation to Djerf Avenue's engagement practices on Instagram. Similarly, during the observations made in the online community, empathy was shown by Djerf Avenue to customers through for example encouraging comments:

Djerf Avenue caption on a post: "What did you get from today's drop? ❤️"

- Customer 3: "Nothing because I'm so broke :("

- Djerf Avenue: "❤️ next time love, your support means the everything still! Also make sure to check out the resell page for the future where the price point is a bit lower too! Xx"

Customer x: omg didn't check out fast enough and all the mini terry bags are sold out 😞 will you restock them!

Djerf Avenue: hi angel! so sorry to hear this 💔 we do not have a planned restock of the mini terry bags in the angeltine prints at this time; however, the fruit and summer berries bags will restock next month 💕

This observation illustrates how the company portrays empathy to customer's who were not able to purchase anything from their latest drop. Empathy is shown through expressing gratitude and offering an alternative solution for the customer's problem. Similarly, in both the interviews and the observations, empathy was seen in connection to technical difficulties when purchasing, faulty items and other purchase related activities.

"When their website it hasn't been working during a launch and they [Djerf Avenue] have been really trying to show empathy to the to the customer saying that "we are sorry we know this is inconvenient but we are trying to fix it as soon as possible so hang on" but I think they really are trying to show empathy [...] and the way that they are approaching the customer they are not just saying like "oh ok well let's see what we can do" but they are like really getting to the point and trying to understand from the customer's point of view how the situation might feel like." – Int10

Some of the interviewees also connected empathizing to emotions of kindness, thoughtfulness and a sense of belonging were felt from the engagement practices of Djerf Avenue.

“To me it feels like at least all their social media presence is really kind and friendly then maybe the image of empathy comes to more from the fact that they’re so inclusive so that’s why I somehow get the same feeling that they are also so empathetic because they are so inclusive” - Int5

“I feel like the communication is always very kind and it’s I like that you are already very familiar, or almost like a family member type of communicating... I feel like the tone is always very impassive empathic and loving” -Int4

However, it is important to note that two of the interviewees did not associate the engagement practice of empathizing with Djerf Avenue. Therefore, it can be noted that empathy does play a part in the engagement practices of the online brand community, but it is not necessarily as visible or central to all of the community members compared to other practices such as assisting.

“I wouldn't say I say as much empathy from them like it's more just like kindness and just like a nice tone overall.” – Int3

4.1.4 Mingling

Mingling, along with *assisting*, *appreciating* and *empathizing* belongs to the second-sub process called the *social sub-process*, which according to Hollebeek et al. (2017) should be emphasized in online brand communities as they are all vital practices to have in an engaged OBC. All of the components of the social sub-process are visible within the Djerf Avenue online community. Mingling specifically focuses on interactions in the community that go beyond discussion on brand related topics. Mingling can similarly be seen as a means of socializing and creating more personal relationships in the community (Hollebeek et al., 2017).

According to the interviews, mingling was an important form of engagement, which many of the interviewees recognized and appreciated from Djerf Avenue.

“How they answer to you in the comment section and that’s a bit part of how they mingle. As well, they have these “lets chat” posts on their Instagram stories, I think that’s a big part of mingling and they really want to interact with their customers.”

- Int2

“I would definitely say mingling is a big part of their brand is just like actually talking to the community I'd say [...] I definitely know that like if I did comment they would reply and knowing that they would reply gives me a bit more sense of community than like the like aren't some unreachable sort of brand that I can just look at from the outside and not really like engage with.” – Int3

A central characteristic of mingling is to extend the conversation beyond themes related to the brands products, in Djerf Avenue’s case clothing. On their Instagram community Djerf Avenue discusses themes related to for example selflove, mental health, beauty as well as baking and cooking. Including subjects that are important values to the company such as the importance of mental health, creates a sense of strong values and lifestyle around the brand community.

“They are really wanting to have a conversation with their customers or followers not only about like clothes but also about other things what are important to them for example mental health” – Int10

“They do well with selling a lifestyle along with the clothes, and that’s what makes it so appealing.” – Int3

In the Djerf Avenue online community, mingling is visible in multiple different forms. For example, from observations we could see that mingling happened both between Djerf Avenue and customers as well as between customers. Djerf Avenue is often interacting by commenting on photos that customers have posted and tagged them in:

“Djerf Avenue: We are obsessed 🥰❤️

Customer x: @djerfavenue obsessed with you! 🥰”

“Djerf Avenue: Wowww this top on you 🥰

Customer x: I'm in love with it! Xx”

“Djerf Avenue: A true angel 🥰❤️

Customer x: @djerfavenue thank youuu! 🥰”

“I see it in the comments when people are like “I love this so much” and they’re like “thank you” just that sort of like somebody has put a comment there so for their brand identity they’re going to respond and make sure they have that friend relationship.” -Int3

Djerf Avenue is therefore very active in mingling with customers on their own page but also on customers’ Instagram pages.

*“Djerf Avenue: PSA! Last chance to register for tonight’s Djerfmas Zoom Party 🥰❤️
Link in our story! X*

Customer 4: Lovely team 🥰 I wanted to join but got tied up with work 🙄 Wishing the Djerf team a very happy holiday season 🎄

Djerf Avenue: We missed you angel”

The observation above additionally demonstrate the use of nicknames, which was also brought up multiple time during the interviews and similarly illustrates the friendly communication approach Djerf Avenue is using to socialize with its customers. Using nicknames to greet community members creates a sense of belonging and togetherness with the community.

“I feel that, for example, that Djerf Avenue use the name “Angels” it’s somehow feels like a bit like a concept that it’s like these people who dress in their clothes and then it’s like a community.” - Int5

“I really like their approach to talking with their customers they are like using all of these nice a nice words like Angel or sweetie or things like this that make you feel somehow more like closer to them” – Int10

Similarly, the approach of personalized messages and comments creates a feeling of a more personal or close relationship with the brand.

“The fact that they are usually talking to the audience as if there was only one person, like “I can’t wait to see them on you” and yeah using these words like “you are worthy” and somehow making it seem like the message is directed to you personally yeah it makes the connection kind of more personal.” – Int10

“It [the communication] is perhaps more personal in a certain way and light or something like that, but I think that it is a little more personalized towards the individual.” – Int6

Mingling is therefore an engagement practice which is clearly visible within the community and something that the customers have paid attention to in terms of their relationship with the brand and a sense of community in the online brand community.

“They have had this box where you could ask questions or tell about your feelings or what has inspired you lately and like nothing that is really related to selling their clothes [...] they have had recipes and a video of someone baking a cake so they are trying to bring the customer to these moments, not only like designing the clothes or doing anything related [...] they have had these lives on Instagram where customer has the opportunity to just hang around with them” – Int10

Mingling is the final practice in the social pub-process category, and it can be concluded that in terms of the *social virtual brand community engagement practices* all of them are present in Djerf Avenue’s Instagram community. More significantly, they are all practices which are valued by the community members.

4.1.5 Celebrating

As an engagement practice, celebrating refers to the collective celebration of common milestones, anniversaries or accomplishments of the community or of individuals within the community (Hollebeek et al., 2017). Together with ranking, it creates the *achievement-based* engagement practices sub-process. Ranking however, was not visible in the online brand community in the way that Hollebeek et al. (2017) had described it. Rather the absence of ranking, thus equality of community members was more highlighted.

In the case of Djerf Avenue’s community, celebration can be seen through celebrations of both smaller and bigger milestones. For example, there is celebration for each new

item drop, which happens approximately once a month. In addition, Djerf Avenue celebrates one of their customers through a concept called “Angel of the week”. This concept introduces one customer per time and celebrates them as members of the community by sharing their story to the community. In some sense, this celebration could also be seen as a ranking engagement practice, as it is not possible to feature all customers in the concept of “Angel of the week”. In addition, celebration is done for bigger milestones, for example when Djerf Avenue reached 500 thousand Instagram followers in January 2023. In the observation the celebration of 500k followers is heightened through a giveaway to the followers:

“500K #djerfaveangels !! forever grateful To celebrate this, you & your bestie now have the chance to win a 500USD Djerf Avenue gift card each!” – Djerf Avenue

“They had this third-year anniversary thing where they showed how they had celebrated that between the team but also how they want to celebrate it together with the customers [...] they were doing this thing where you could comment on the post to be involved in this in this Instagram giveaway, so I have definitely noticed that they are trying to engage their customers in these celebrations as well” – Int10

Celebration in the Djerf Avenue community is also directed towards the anticipation of new item drops, thus creating hype around the new items.

*“Customer x: ”🥺🥺🥺🥺🥺 MY HEART ACHES FOR THIS”
Djerf Avenue: “February 7th can’t come soon enough 🥺🥺💖”*

“It seems that when there is a new drop there [at the Djerf Avenue office] are always nice cakes and proper parties and they buy flowers and stuff. Maybe it feels like it's a way to get the consumer to feel that I want to be a part of that and then that they want to buy from the new drop because it becomes such a hype over the new clothes.” – Int5

“I think there's a lot of hype over new things that they're releasing. Especially I think one of the big ones is during Matilda's birthday and drop like I remember is really big hype over the items and I'm pretty sure things sold out from there. I can also see them celebrating things like within the company like “we've been a company brand for year or something like that.” – Int3

In addition to celebrating the launches of new products, there is also celebrations towards the community and the journey of the company. This celebration however goes quite closely hand-in-hand with the engagement practice of appreciation towards the community.

“There are no words that can express what we are feeling today 🥰 never in our wildest dreams did we think Djerf Avenue would be where it is today when we started it 2019 in our hometown Borås. From doing everything ourselves from packing orders to customer service to now having a team of amazing people who help us bring our vision and dream to life. Thank you for supporting us, if you've been here since 2019 or if you just found us. We love you!! / Matilda and Rasmus 🥰” – Djerf Avenue

Djerf Avenue has also put effort into creating dedicated events for the community to celebrate together, for example the annual Djerfmas, Christmas party is an event organized every Christmas, which any community member can join and be a part of the celebration live on Zoom.

“During Christmas they had zoom Christmas dinner where anyone could join to the zoom where the team was having this dinner and then you could kind of virtually be be involved” – Int10

“I feel like that something that supports the “family experience” that they're kind of celebrating with their family and that includes the workers and the like the brand itself and also like the customers are part of that so like you can feel that you're individually invited to their party so I feel like it may see community experience and you can experience that you are kind of like part of their family” – Int4

Importantly the celebration of customers can also be observed through frequently including the customers on their Instagram page and thus celebrating them as their customers.

“They repost their customers wearing Djerf Avenue and they for example write “amazing outfit” or whatever, maybe its celebration of people wearing Djerf Avenue.” – Int2

4.2 Connecting online engagement practices and brand loyalty

This sub-chapter proceeds to answer to the third sub-objective of the study, which is to analyze how the brand community members experience the engagement practices from the viewpoint of *behavioral* and *attitudinal brand loyalty*. Brand loyalty can be divided into *behavioral and attitudinal loyalty*. According to Russell-Bennett et al. (2007) true brand loyalty stems from a combination of both types of loyalty. *Behavioral loyalty* connects to support of the brand through purchases and intention to repurchase in the future as well. In comparison, *attitudinal loyalty* stems from an emotional connection to the brand, that is shown through support of the brand through for example positive word of mouth. Both types of loyalty are important to a brand. Customers also benefit from being loyal to a brand through for example gaining a sense of belonging in the community, developing a stronger and more personal relationship with the company as well as other customers. In addition, loyal customers often have more insight into brand related information.

According to the interviews, the virtual brand community engagement practices studied from Djerf Avenue's Instagram community, created *a sense of community and belonging* for many of the interviewees. This sense of community was rooted into the way the brand communicates with its customers, through especially assisting, empathizing and mingling.

"I feel connected to the brand because their communication makes you feel like a part of something." - Int1

"It is kind of like my safe space, it's kind of like more than just the clothes. I feel like it's some kind of or you could almost say that it is a bit like a community, and you can feel that you belong in the community, and I mean the other main thing is that it's inspirational and it brings me happiness." - Int4

The personal connection Djerf Avenue has built with their 500 000 followers is built through engagement practices that feel personal to the individual, such as talking directly and personally to each community member. In addition, through the observations and interviews it is evident that the company spends a lot of time personally communicating with its members, answering to their questions, assisting them and mingling with them. This is an engagement practice which takes a lot of time, but which is evidently having a big impact on the community members and their *sense of belonging*.

“When they talk in their social media, they emphasize on saying “we” instead of “I” and “you”, which adds to the feeling of togetherness and “we-ness” and makes the community tighter.” - Int2

Similarly, the engagement practices of mingling, appreciating, empathizing and assisting are done in a manner in which the individual feel personally valued, which builds *a stronger connection between the individual and the company*. As illustrated above, this can be achieved through choices in the use of language. In the case of Djerf Avenue, the use of personal words such as “you” “us” and “we” to describe the brand community create an increased feeling of togetherness according to the interviewed community members. A heightened sense of community and belonging can according to Russell-Bennett et al. (2007) be connected to brand loyalty.

The discussed engagement practices have primarily created *attitudinal loyalty* for the community members. However, they have also resulted in *behavioral loyalty*. One of the interviewees stated that they had recently had to unfollow the brand on Instagram due to engagement practices, which made purchasing their products too tempting for her and therefore in order to save her money she had to temporarily unfollow the company. This finding illustrates the behavioral consequences of the engagement practices of Djerf Avenue.

“Actually, I just unfollowed them on Instagram, yeah too much of a temptation [...] I had to unfollow them because they are doing it so well that I feel like I can't follow them anymore because then I want to buy their things. I definitely think it's [their

OBC engagement] something that makes the brand really engaging or feel close to you [...] Overall I really love their brand and the only reason that I am not at the moment like following them on Instagram is because I'm trying to refrain from any impulse buying decisions and I really want to pay more attention to my purchasing behavior.” - Int10

This finding indicates that the company has strong engagement practices which have an influence on both attitudinal and behavioral loyalty. Attitudinal loyalty does not however require the customer to show their loyalty through financial practices, such as purchases. Attitudinal loyalty towards a brand is showcased through for example support, positive word-of-mouth and activity within the community. Engagement practices supporting attitudinal loyalty were also present in the online brand community. The notion of supporting the brand and belonging to the community without the need of financial investments was supported through both observations from Djerf Avenue’s engagement practices as well as through the feelings of the interviewees. The quote below by Djerf Avenue taken from their Instagram illustrates the appreciation the company also has to community members showing attitudinal loyalty towards the brand.

“Whether you come to Djerf Avenue to shop, to find inspiration or connect with new friends - thank you. I appreciate you more than words can express.” - Djerf Avenue

Similarly, in the interviews the notion of feeling like your able to belong to the online community without necessarily buying the products came up several times. The consensus was that the community also offered other types of value to the customer, such as style and lifestyle inspiration and a safe space.

“I feel like belonging to their community is so much more than just buying those clothes and that in principle you can belong to that community even if you've never bought anything from them, and that maybe it's not so tied to that consumption and even if it is tied to consumption, it's somehow not as obvious.” – Int5

“I get a lot of inspiration from the brand even though I wouldn't necessarily purchase every piece.” - Int7

“I just like there like the atmosphere and they always have like some kind of like other ideas besides clothing and style styling tips like they're just I feel like they're really inspirational or like they have beautiful pictures for example and I well I'm an aesthetic person so I appreciate beautiful pictures and also they have like recipes and then they have some kind of like mental health tips” – Int4

In the Djerf Avenue online brand community, brand loyalty is therefore created through engagement practices which impact not only behavioral loyalty but also place emphasis on creating attitudinal loyalty.

A *feeling of community* was similarly built through a strong focus on engagement practices which focused on promoting inclusivity. This engagement practice was done through the inclusion of different races, body types and even disabilities in their online community. Customers and regular people are used as models, which promotes the feeling of inclusion and belonging for all sizes and body types. In addition, a model for each clothing size is always included in their product marketing which makes customers feel appreciated and seen, which in turn made them feel like they are accepted by the brand and a part of their community in the way that they are.

“For example, I'm a short person so I like when there's a short model so I can like compare how they how the piece actually would fit me so like that I can actually find body that is similar to mine so yeah that creates a feeling of inclusion like some something I can relate to and that's actually makes the purchasing easier.” - Int7

“One factor that makes it feel natural, is that kind of personal relationship and somehow that inclusivity and that kind of feeling that you can kind of belong to that community even if you're not like that, you know, like a model, skinny or like a super influence so somehow it makes you feel that even an ordinary person can somehow feel that they are part of a brand, so maybe that's the reason why it even feels so personal.” – Int5

Djerf Avenue's engagement practices also enabled community members to form a *stronger connection to the brand and an insight into brand related information*. According to the interviews, the wide range and availability of assistance and the friendly man-

ner in which the company communicates with its members through mingling, empathizing, appreciating and celebrating makes the customers feel more connected with Djerf Avenue.

“I mean the way that they are speaking with the customers has made me feel more connected to the brand. For example, if I have some questions, I would not be afraid to ask them because I feel like they’re willing to listen. I feel like I would get the needed information from the brand.” - Int1

“I think that it adds value, because they really want their customers to feel good and they really want to make sure you get the right size and that you really wear the item and love it. From my experience when they helped me with the sizing, I felt “okay now I’m more connected to you” and they really wanted to help and care about their customers, and I think it makes the brand feel more meaningful.” - Int2

Not only have the engagement practices made the customers feel more connected to the brand but they have also made them feel *more connected to other customers online and in real life*. Thus, members of the online community feel a connection to other customers due to the sense of community Djerf Avenue has built on their Instagram page. Importantly, the feeling of community also expands beyond just the online brand community.

“There’s such a sense of community between people, yes, and even not only through social media, but in other ways too.” – Int8

Some of the interviewees shared their experience of meeting other community members in real life and experiencing a sense of togetherness from belonging to the same community. This is largely due to the feeling of togetherness in the online community as well as the friendly engagement practices which Djerf Avenue use, which makes members feel closer to each other. According to Dessart et al. (2015) the connection with likeminded customers is also one of the characteristics or benefits of a strong relationship with the brand, thus leading to brand loyalty.

“There definitely is a bit like a sense of community around the brand, [...] it is crazy because it has become such a phenomenon, or I feel like sometimes when you're walking down the street, you can recognize the type of people who probably follow like Djerf Avenue. It's somehow, really crazy. It somehow connects people. Also, with your own friends like that we talk about it so much, it's not like we would talk about H&M for example in the same way [...] it's kind of weird but I feel like it connects people like that.” - Int5

I've noticed that [a connection to other customers] more in real life, for example, I've seen some completely random girls, for example when I've been at work, I've had the same pants on and they've immediately started to chat with me, so clearly they've also had the feeling that they feel comfortable to do that because of the brand community, you know, like “ok you like that [Djerf Avenue] and I like that” so you immediately feel comfortable to start saying something even though you wouldn't even know the person, so there's definitely a sense of that [community].” - Int8

It can therefore be seen, that through the use of the social engagement practices Djerf Avenue has created a close and recognizable community among its members, which also extends offline. The conversations with other community members in offline could be characterized as the engagement practice of mingling in real life. The conversations with unknown community members illustrates the strength of the community as people feel comfortable enough to approach other community members in real life. This is especially interesting and special in countries such as Finland, where mingling with strangers is not necessarily a common practice. These findings are supported by Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) who state, that through online brand community's members create a strong connection also to community members they have never met before.

“Because you can see that everyone is so enthusiastic on their Instagram, I think that that kind of lowers the barrier to also comment.” - Int10

The interview quote above illustrates how the engagement practices which the company uses on their Instagram page lowers the barrier and encourages customers to similarly engage with the brand and among one another. According to Algesheimer et al. (2005)

a higher level of community engagement correlates to higher levels of brand loyalty and satisfaction.

An interesting observation which came up in some of the interviews was the differentiation to competitors and how Djerf Avenue is the only clothing brand that the interviewees followed on social media. This thus illustrating that Djerf Avenue has been able to create an online brand community which is stronger and more attractive as an online brand community compared to their competitors.

“I feel that there is a personal connection to it [Djerf Avenue] or something, but I can't think of any other brand that I would similarly follow, I don't really follow any other clothing brand like this on social media” - Int5

“I think that's [mingling and appreciating] also something that's really unique for this particular brand and what would make me want to follow them or even in this in this case unfollow them because they are doing it so well that I feel like I can't follow them anymore because then I want to buy their things” – Int10

The details, effort and time Djerf Avenue puts to the engagement practices on a weekly basis and the genuine feeling of it differentiates them from competitors and makes customers feel *a personal connection from the brand*.

“For example, if a customer is asking something or putting a comment in their post, they really answer and they really want to be there for you and it creates a bond, it feels like the people working there are your friends, it's not like they're above you, but that you're equal.” - Int2

A personal connection with the brand, creates a stronger relationship for the customer. A stronger relationship in turn often leads into brand loyalty (Algesheimer et al., 2005). The interviewees commented that following the brand on Instagram makes them feel like they are a part of “something bigger”. Similarly, it was stated, that due to the effort Djerf Avenue puts into their engagement practices, they make the brand feel more personal to the individual and the brand feels smaller than it really is.

“I think that it feels like a smaller brand and, in the same way, maybe more approachable, although of course, I know it's a big brand, but at the same time, it still feels like a smaller brand, somehow.” – Int6

This statement also supports the feeling of a tightknit community, which makes Djerf Avenue more personal and feel closer to the customer. In addition, creating a community that has engagement practices which go beyond the selling of the clothing items proved to be an important factor in feeling connected to the community.

“I think that they have a really nice presence and community, that makes me want to stay there and their content is engaging, and I like their content, not just the clothes but the brand speaks to me.” – Int2

“I do think it is a community and I kind of feel like a big part of it.” – Int4

Another indicator of behavioral brand loyalty is being ready to pay a premium price for the products, due to the loyalty towards the brand:

“I am loyal to the brand, now I’ve come to the realization, I love everything they do. Always when they release something I’m like “ah I want this”, but you can also have the pieces somewhere else cheaper, but I like the brand and everything they do, their values, the way they assist and the way they are I still buy from them so yes, I’m loyal. I think that the way they are with their customers, they’ve done a really good job with that, and it adds loyalty from customers because they really answer to you and want to communicate with you.” – Int2

This interview quote illustrates how the customer acknowledges that she could find similar pieces to Djerf Avenue from other places for cheaper prices, but due to the brand, its values and the ways in which they engage with their customers makes her loyal to the company and thus she continues to pay a premium price for the pieces. This can be highly linked to the use of the *social virtual brand community engagement practices* used by Djerf Avenue.

“It's like I get so much inspiration from there all the time that it's like one brand that has influenced my style quite a lot, so yes I somehow feel a connection to that brand and community.” – Int5

All of the defined benefits of brand loyalty which were identified in the theoretical framework for this study were also found in the responses of the interviews. These benefits included: *a sense of belonging, a stronger relationship with the company and with other customers and insight into brand related information*. In addition, characteristics of both *behavioral* and *attitudinal loyalty* were identified in the responses of the interviewees, thus together creating true brand loyalty. Table 5 below highlighting's examples of *the benefits of brand loyalty for a customer* found from the interviews. In addition, the table identifies whether the example showcases a case of *behavioral* or *attitudinal loyalty*.

Table 5. Summary and examples of brand loyalty in the case community.

Benefit for the customer	Example	Behavioral or attitudinal loyalty
Sense of belonging	<i>"I'm a short person so I like when there's a short model so I can like compare how they how the piece actually would fit me so like that I can actually find body that is similar to mine so yeah that creates a feeling of inclusion like some something I can relate to and that's actually makes the purchasing easier."</i> - Int7	Behavioral loyalty
Sense of belonging	<i>"I feel connected to the brand because their communication makes you feel like a part of something."</i> - Int1	Attitudinal loyalty
Stronger relationship with the company	<i>"I just unfollowed them on Instagram, yeah too much of a temptation [...] I had to unfollow them because they are doing it so well that I feel like I can't follow them anymore because then I want to buy their things. I definitely think it's [their OBC engagement] something that makes the brand really engaging or feel close to you."</i> - Int10	Behavioral loyalty
Stronger relationship with the company	<i>"If a customer is asking something or putting a comment in their post, they really answer and they really want to be there for you and it creates a bond, it feels like the people working there are your friends, it's not like they're above you, but that you're equal."</i> - Int2	Attitudinal loyalty
Stronger relationship with other customers	<i>I've noticed that [a connection to other customers] more in real life, for example, I've</i>	Attitudinal loyalty

	<i>seen some completely random girls, for example when I've been at work, I've had the same pants on and they've immediately started to chat with me, so clearly they've also had the feeling that they feel comfortable to do that because of the brand community, you know, like "ok you like that [Djerf Avenue] and I like that" so you immediately feel comfortable to start saying something even though you wouldn't even know the person, so there's definitely a sense of that [community]." - Int8</i>	
Insight into brand related information	<i>"I think that on their Instagram their sizes are communicated in a good way. This maybe makes me more likely to purchase something, because often when I'm online shopping it's hard to know if the size is right, and I think they [Djerf Avenue] have a lot of pictures of different body types and that at least could help me to make a purchase decision." - Int1</i>	Behavioral loyalty
Insight into brand related information	<i>"I have asked them last summer, about sizing, because I bought this tube top and I was between sizes and I wanted to ask which one would be better for me and they responded to me almost immediately [...] I felt very like I was cared about, and they added some emojis, which was nice, just like a friend would answer to me." - Int2</i>	Attitudinal loyalty

5 Conclusion

This chapter concludes the study by presenting and summarizing the main findings of the research. The first sub-chapter is the conclusion of the findings, while the second sub-chapter provides managerial implications based on these findings. The third sub-chapter presents limitations of the study and suggests ideas for future research topics on the subject.

5.1 Summary and the most important findings

The aim of the study was to investigate how different customer engagement practices can build brand loyalty in online brand communities. The study was done as an intensive case study based on the online brand community of the clothing brand Djerf Avenue. With the growing importance of utilizing different social media platforms in building loyal customer relationships it is important to understand how engagement practices in these communities create brand loyalty. In addition, it is vital to recognize which engagement practices have the most significant impact on making customers loyal community members. According to Dessart et al. (2015) and Villanueva et al. (2008) the understanding of how to effectively engage with customers in the correct way on online platforms is vital for the long-term success of a company. The results of this research give insight into what type of engagement practices are most impactful in creating value for customers in the brand community and how this translates into true brand loyalty of both behavioral and attitudinal loyalty.

The study aimed to answer the research question of: *How can virtual brand community engagement practices increase brand loyalty among customers?*

The first sub-objective of the study was to define the key themes of the study, which were *brand loyalty*, *customer engagement* and *online brand communities* and to discuss them in *the framework of virtual brand community engagement practices*. In this study

brand loyalty was looked at from the point of view of both *behavioral and attitudinal loyalty*, as according to Russell-Bennett et al. (2007) both types of loyalty are needed to achieve true brand loyalty. *Behavioral loyalty* has often been emphasized by most research and companies as it is defined as loyalty that can be seen through purchasing frequency as well as the intention to increase purchases in the future and thus it is directly linked to the financial performance of the company. (Romaniuk & Nenycz-Thiel, 2013; Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001; Hem & Iversen, 2002). *Attitudinal loyalty*, however, is seen as the emotional commitment to a brand, which shows itself through, for example positive word of mouth and high levels of engagement with the brand (Russell-Bennett et al., 2007). Research by Russell-Bennett et al. (2007) highlights the significance of understanding and nurturing both types of brand loyalty.

The second theme of the first sub-objective was *customer engagement*. The added value of customer engagement was highlighted by previous research done by Dessart et al. (2015) and Vivek et al. (2012). The research described how an interactive relationship has the ability to deepen the relationship between a company and the customer beyond a surface level purchasing relationship. The theory illustrated the growing significance of engagement in online platforms, which have enabled the creation of more dynamic and real-time brand engagement practices. In addition, according to the findings, higher levels of customer engagement correlate to a higher level of brand-related activities such as spreading positive word-of-mouth and brand awareness (Hollebeek et al. 2017).

A central part of the literature review section of the study was the exploration of the eight virtual brand community engagement practice framework created by Hollebeek et al. (2017). The framework identifies eight engagement practices which are *greeting, regulating, assisting, appreciating, empathizing, mingling, celebrating and ranking* and situates them in a continuum of a community member's journey starting from a new community member and developing into a full and engaging member of the online brand community. Based on the findings of the first sub-objective a theoretical framework for

the empirical part of the study was created, which illustrates the eight virtual brand community engagement practices in relation to lower and higher levels in brand engagement and brand loyalty, as well as their connection to true brand loyalty of both behavioral and attitudinal loyalty. In addition, the benefits of online customer engagement and true brand loyalty to both the company and the customer.

The second sub-objective of the study was to *identify which kinds of virtual brand community engagement practices can be found in the Djerf Avenue online brand community*. This sub-objective was investigated in the fourth chapter of the study through the empirical research. To answer to the second and third sub-objective two empirical research methods, observations and interviews were used in order to gather comprehensive data from the online case community. The observations gathered data on the use and the frequency of the eight *virtual brand community engagement practices* from a period of four months. Based on these observations and the theoretical framework from chapter three, the themes for the semi structured interviews were defined. The interviews were done with ten community members from the Djerf Avenue online brand community. The interviews were used to build a thorough understanding of the virtual brand community engagement practices visible in the community as well as their connection to brand loyalty.

Through the empirical data it was found that the engagement practices of *assisting, appreciating, empathizing, mingling and celebrating* were the five engagement practices that were most significantly present in the case community. This finding was supported by both the observations and the interviews. The three remaining engagement practices of *greeting, regulating and ranking* were not found as significant engagement practices used in this specific community. The five engagement practices were communicated in the community through text, photos, videos and comments and especially the engagement practices of assisting and mingling were found in the community on almost a daily basis. The interviews highlighted how the use of these engagement practices made the participants feel closer to the brand and the community around it. Additionally, the

themes of inclusion and representation of different types of people in the online community were emphasized by the interviews.

The third sub-objective of the study was to *analyze how the brand community members experience the engagement practices from the viewpoint of behavioral and attitudinal brand loyalty*. The findings of the interviews indicate that the used engagement practices create *a sense of community and togetherness* within the case community. According to the findings the sense of community was deeply rooted into the way the company communicates with its customers in the online community. A sense of community was built especially through the engagement practices of *assisting, empathizing and mingling*. In addition, the interviews showed that the community members felt valued by the brand, and this was shown especially through the use of words such as “you” “us” and “we” in *assisting, mingling, appreciating and empathizing*. This practice was shown to strengthen the attitudinal loyalty of the community members. However, it was also found to have an impact on their purchasing behavior and thus behavioral loyalty. According to the theoretical framework, for customers a sense of community is one of the benefits of being a brand loyal community member.

It was found that all of the five engagement practices in question resulted in *a stronger relationship with the company*. According to the findings, *assisting and mingling* especially made the brand feel closer and more personal to the community members. Similarly, it was illustrated how the use of engagement practices, which created a sense of togetherness also resulted in *a stronger relationship with other community members* online and in real life, thus making the community stronger as a whole. Having a strong relationship with the brand can be seen as benefitting both attitudinal and behavioral loyalty.

Finally, *insight into brand related information* was also found as a result of the engagement practices. Especially active *assisting* made the customer's feel like they were able to access valuable and accurate information regarding the brand and their clothing. This

made them have a higher sense of behavioral loyalty, as it was found that assisting made them more likely to want to purchase something from the brand. In addition, the availability of information made the customers feel cared about, which supported a growth of attitudinal loyalty.

It was therefore found that the engagement practices classified as the social engagement practices of *assisting, appreciating, empathizing, mingling and celebrating* made the most significant difference in the relationship the community members had with the brand as well as other community members. Both attitudinal loyalty and behavioral loyalty could clearly be identified in the findings of the research as a result of the five engagement practices. In addition, it can be concluded that all of the benefits identified in the theoretical framework relating to loyal online brand community members were visible in connection to the five engagement practices. These benefits were: *sense of belonging, stronger relationship with the company, stronger relationship with other customers and insight into brand related information*. Therefore, it was found that the systematic use of social engagement practices that feel authentic to the community and add value for the members make the community members more loyal to the brand in terms of both behavioral and attitudinal loyalty.

5.2 Managerial implications

This study offers managers insight into the importance of engagement practices as a way to build sustainable and true brand loyal customers. The theoretical framework and the empirical analysis of the observations and thematic interviews offer managers with a developed understanding of how different virtual brand community engagement practices work as building blocks for creating behavioral and attitudinal brand loyalty in an online brand community. It similarly offers understanding on choosing the right engagement practices to focus on in order to build a brand loyal online community.

Additionally, the findings of this study help managers to understand how to utilize engagement practices as a part of their social media marketing strategy. According to the findings, it is not necessary to use all of the eight engagement practices illustrated by Hollebeek et al. (2017) to achieve true brand loyalty. Rather, the results indicate that it is important for managers to find the engagement practices that feel most authentic and resonate to the brand and the community in order to build relationships with the community as well as nurture the relationships within the community. From the case community of Djerf Avenue, we can learn that successful online brand communities with loyal community members are created when the brand leads by example of illustrating authentic engagement practices to their community. Portraying these engagement practices as a part of the brand image leads the community to replicate these engagement practices to create an interactive and closer community.

The results of this study provide managers with insight into what types of engagement practices are most appreciated by customers. Simultaneously illustrating the importance of choosing to use the engagement practices which align best with the brands overall image and objectives. The importance of finding the right engagement practices is illustrated in this study by exploring how the case community does not use the engagement practice of *ranking* in their community. Even though ranking is defined as one of the virtual brand community engagement practices in the typology created by Hollebeek et al. (2017), it is not visible in the case community to support the company's value of equality. The results of this study therefore help managers to navigate social media marketing strategies to create engagement practices that are enjoyed, reciprocated and appreciated by their customers.

5.3 Limitations of the study and future research suggestions

This chapter outlines some of the limitations of the study as well as introduces suggestions for future research. This study researched how virtual brand community engage-

ment practices increase brand loyalty in customers. The research was done as an intensive case study from the perspective of the online brand community around Djerf Avenue's Instagram. The diversity of the interview sample could propose a limitation for this study. It is important to note that the case brand community is a global community with members from around the world. However, due to the background and location of the researcher, in this study eight out of ten interviews were done on Finnish community members. This geographic homogeneity could portray some cultural limitation on the study as individuals from different cultures might perceive different engagement practices differently. However, it should be noted that the experiences of the two non-Finnish interviewees were fairly in line with the rest of the interviews. Nevertheless, a broader and more globally representative sample of interviewees could have provided more diverse perspectives on the subject. This is something that should be kept in mind regarding future research on the subject.

Additionally, most of the interviews were done as video interviews over Zoom, which could create limitations to the gathering of the empirical data. It could be argued that not all of the natural characteristics such as body language can be fully observed in a video interview, which could set some limitations to the study. However, observations in the brand community were also used to collect empirical data, which makes the data fairly comprehensive as a whole.

Future research on the subject could be done in the form of an extensive case study, where multiple online brand communities are examined as case communities. This would be interesting as it would allow for a further developed understanding of how engagement practices create brand loyalty in different types of brand communities in for example different industries or different target audiences. The subject could also be studied in the form of a qualitative research, which would allow to gather a larger sample size of the researched online brand community.

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Appendices

Appendix 1. Material list

Djerf Avenue [@djerfavenue]. Instagram posts between 13.11.2022-13.3.2023. Instagram. <https://www.instagram.com/djerfavenue/>

Image 1.

Djerf Avenue [@djerfavenue]. (2022, December, 1). “*We love a good mocha* 🍷.” [Photographs]. Instagram. <https://www.instagram.com/p/ClpJOyspL6m/>

Image 2.

Djerf Avenue [@djerfavenue]. (2023, February, 7). “*@itschloethiessen layering the cutest way* 💕.” [Photograph]. Instagram. <https://www.instagram.com/p/CoWWSm4t2Kh/>

Djerf Avenue [@djerfavenue]. (2023, January, 21). “*Forever obsessed with @ohhey-imashley* 💕.” [Photograph]. Instagram. <https://www.instagram.com/p/Cnr51Hat1E6/>

Djerf Avenue [@djerfavenue]. (2022, December, 30). “*pov: you and your bestie before heading to your NYE dinner* 🍷.” [Photograph]. Instagram. <https://www.instagram.com/p/Cmyi41Wtuka/>

Appendix 2. Thematic interview questions

Background questions

- Name?
- Age?
- Gender?

- Occupation?

Relationship to Djerf Avenue

Djerf Avenue background questions

- For how long have you been following Djerf Avenue?
- Do you remember how you initially started to follow Djerf Avenue?
- On which social media platforms do you follow Djerf Avenue?
- Can you remember what got you initially interested in Djerf Avenue?
- What makes you still want to follow Djerf Avenue?
- Do you think that there is something that differentiates them from competitors?
- How often do you interact with Djerf Avenue on Instagram?
- How has your experience been?

Djerf Avenue VBCEP's generally

- How would you describe the interactions between Djerf Avenue and its customers?
- Are there any specific ways in which you remember Djerf Avenue communicating or interacting with their audience in Instagram?
- Have you ever communicated directly with Djerf Avenue? How was your experience?
- How does Djerf Avenues Instagram communication make you feel?

Virtual brand engagement practices

Assisting

- Do you remember any instances where you would have noticed assisting on Djerf Avenues Instagram page?
- Have you been assisted by Djerf Avenue on Instagram?

- How was your experience?
- How has this made you feel?
- Has it made you feel more connected to the brand? More likely to purchase something?

Empathizing

- Do you remember any instances where you would have noticed empathizing on Djerf Avenues Instagram page?
- Have you felt empathized by Djerf Avenue on Instagram?
- How has this made you feel?
- Has it made you feel more connected to the brand? More likely to purchase something?

Mingling

- Do you remember any instances where you would have noticed mingling on Djerf Avenues Instagram page?
- Have you been mingled with Djerf Avenue on Instagram?
- What about mingling with other customers?
- How has this made you feel?
- Has it made you feel more connected to the brand? More likely to purchase something?

Appreciating

- Do you remember any instances where you would have noticed appreciating on Djerf Avenues Instagram page?
- Have you felt appreciated by Djerf Avenue on Instagram?
- What about by other customers?
- How has this made you feel?
- Has it made you feel more connected to the brand? More likely to purchase something?

Celebrating

- Do you remember any instances where you would have noticed celebrating on Djerf Avenues Instagram page?
- Have you felt celebrated by Djerf Avenue on Instagram?
- How has this made you feel?
- Has it made you feel more connected to the brand? More likely to purchase something?

Ranking

- Do you remember any instances where you would have noticed ranking of followers on Djerf Avenues Instagram page?
- Have you felt celebrated by Djerf Avenue on Instagram?

Which of these virtual brand community engagement practices stand out the most to you?

Why?

Connection to brand loyalty

- Do you recall any engagement practices that have made you feel a sense of belonging to the brand?
- A stronger connection to the brand?
- Is there a specific way of communication that makes you feel more connected to the brand?
- Do you remember any examples?
- Does Djerf Avenue's engagement practices in Instagram make you feel like you have more insight into brand related information?
- Do you feel like you are a part of a community?
- Is there any specific actions/interactions that have made you feel that way?
- Do you feel connected to Djerf Avenue?

- Why do you think that is?
- Do you feel like Djerf Avenues communication on Instagram has made you connect more with the brand?
- What about other customers?