“I crashed my car into a cement pole and cried all the way home but my eye makeup was still perfect”

A qualitative study of members’ sense of belonging within Sephora’s commodified community: Beauty Insider

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Abstract

Title: I crashed my car into a cement pole and cried all the way home but my eye makeup was still perfect – a qualitative study of members’ sense of belonging within Sephora’s commodified community: Beauty Insider
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This study seeks to understand ways in which members’ experience a sense of belonging within Sephora’s own commodified community: Beauty Insider. Three research questions are presented, the final one being of highest importance: in which way do members of Beauty Insider experience a sense of belonging? To be able to understand the members, previous research is presented where Muniz & O’Guinn’s (2001) study on Brand Communities is essential, as well as the study conducted by Dholakia et al. (2004) on participation within communities. To better understand what activities members engage in within communities, a theoretical framework based on fan cultures, consumer culture and participatory culture is presented to gain a better understanding of the aspects of a community. This study will approach the research questions mainly using focus group interviews, as well as a necessary description of the discourse content of the platform to better understand the context of the study. The study concludes by presenting a result and an analysis that is, mostly, in line with previous research as well as discovering new aspects of members attitudes towards Beauty Insider and which meaning members experience as a result of participating in different activities within the community.

Keywords: Commodified communities, participatory culture, fan culture, consumer society, sense of belonging, online communities
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1. Introduction

When Time Magazine designated “You” as Person of the Year in 2006, the editors paid tribute to the millions of anonymous users online who dedicated their time, attention and energy to the booming, new web culture. The editors behind the cover story praised the many volunteers filling up so-called user-generated content platforms (van Dijck 2009, p. 41). The rise of Web 2.0 enabled a space online for these millions of users to share their opinions, thoughts and work for others to enjoy. It gave the users the opportunity to create, change and influence content online in a way that had not been possible prior to Web 2.0. The power to reach an entire world with their messages was now at every users feet, making the users online presence a powerful tool.

The content created by these users is usually shared within different online communities, as users sometimes join various communities based on interests, hobbies or brands. Online users can now be part of a community that extends even further than geographic location or time zone. This results in communities with millions of members who are actively contributing by discussing their favourite TV-show or their favourite supermarket as well as creating a connection and a sense of fellowship within the community (van Dijck 2009, p.45). By joining online communities, the individual user is not only central but an essential part of the community. Undeniably, when Time Magazine designated ”You” as the person of the year in 2016, the editors had figured out just how powerful the presence of online users was becoming. A few years later, in online communities, users joined together to discuss their interests and passions to create a whole new, and even more powerful tool. Online users were no longer seen as individuals but as members of a community. Thus, creating a movement from a powerful ”You” to a shared ”We”.

A brand community is a commercial community revolving around one particular brand where members discuss and review various products connected to the brand. I decided to look into one of the biggest and fastest growing online brand communities today: Sephora’s own community Beauty Insider with over 10 million users (McEachern, 2017). Sephora is a global company that specializes in cosmetic products ranging from different exclusive brands to their own proprietary budget brands. I became a member of their community less than six months ago and I have, since then, visited the page various times when I wanted more information about a product or a store that I visited. My interest in conducting a study of their community began as I read threads posted by members within the community. I discovered that members were discussing everything from lump-free mascara to their relationships. This was interesting
to me as members of the community would not only discuss different beauty products but also engage in conversations concerning childcare or their personal lives. Members on Sephora’s community seemed to have a special connection and a great deal of loyalty towards one another as they opened up about private, real-life problems that they were facing. My interest in Beauty Insider is, therefore, based on trying to understand which kind of meaning the community gives to its members, as well as if the members of the community establish a sense of belonging.

This study uses focus group interviews with members of Beauty Insider in order to understand what motivates them to participate on the community and which sense of belonging that Beauty Insider provides to its members. Going forward, I would like to clarify that the term Brand Community is created and used by the marketing industry, and in research conducted within the marketing field. As a result of this, I will from now on use the term Commodified Communities to describe the type of platform that revolves around a brand. This is due to the fact that I chose to define my study in order to stay within my field.¹

¹This will be further explained in the chapter on previous research.
2. Purpose and research questions

The purpose of this study is to explore members' attitudes towards Sephora's commodified community Beauty Insider. The purpose of the method will be to try to comprehend how to better understand these members and what their activity within the community means to them. To be able to approach the purpose of this study, three research questions will be asked:

1. In what activities do the members engage in within the community, and which meaning is offered by the activities?

2. Does the member of the community feel a sense of belonging within the community?

3. If so, in which way do members experience a sense of belonging?
3. Previous research

This chapter provides an overview of previous research of what marketers and marketing researchers refer to as Brand Community. To stay within the field of Media and Communications and to move away from the marketing aspect of this term, I will not spend time looking into the various aspects of the term from a marketing point of view, but rather focus on how the interest in commodified communities occurred and how the interest has shifted and progressed.

3.1 From loyalty to community

In the 1980s, airlines and supermarkets were offering their customers memberships in loyalty clubs as a way to connect their existing customers to their brand (Arvidson 2006, p. 63). To become a member of these loyalty clubs, customers exchanged their personal information in order to receive minor benefits from the company (ibid). As the importance of corporate branding and creating a common identity among customers emerged, these (not so loyal) loyalty clubs were redesigned into communities. This, as a way to connect the customer to the brand in a more effective way. It also worked as a way to connect consumers with other consumers, due to the new technologies interactive possibilities (Madupu & Cooley 2010, p. 3). This shift, from loyalty clubs to commodified communities, enabled members to interact and create a union within the community that was centred on one commodity. As the interest in understanding commodified communities emerged, Muniz and O’Guinn (2001) explored the characteristics, processes, and particularities of three brand communities in their ethnographic study Brand Community. The aim was to try and understand the relationship between a customer and a commodity. The authors use the term Brand Community to describe the phenomena, as do plenty of other researchers within the field, see for example van Dijck (2009). However, I will only be using the term brand community when discussing aspects of Muniz & O’Guinn’s study as the authors are responsible for the term. In any discussions outside of their study I will use the term Commodified Communities instead as a way to eliminate the marketing aspects of the term, and to be able to separate it from the empirical phenomena. When Muniz & O’Guinn (2001) conducted their study, commodified communities and the fact that people identify themselves with a commodity was a new research field. Today, the idea of commodified communities has changed. Following their study, the interest in research surrounding commodified communities grew among researchers who had previously been
focusing on offline commodified communities. This is mostly due to the fact that the rise of Web 2.0 enabled other uses of communication within communities (Findahl 2013, p. 77). The definition of the relatively new term Web 2.0 by Tim O’Reilly, captured the revolutionary start to what can now be known as the "architecture of participation" (O’Reilly 2007, p. 17). With the rise of Web 2.0, a shift occurred as a contrast to mass media and the existing mass community. With it came endless opportunities to create and participate in online communities (Findahl 2013, p. 78). The fast communication and the social nature of the new web enabled user-generated content and with it came platforms like YouTube, Facebook, and Myspace (see for example Zwick & Bradshaw 2016, p. 92; Wilberg & Wadbring 2013, p. 107). With the term user-generated content I am referring to users’ ability to create content by either posting, commenting or reviewing products online. Additionally, the interactive nature of the World Wide Web enabled fast and easy communication among users, thus contributing to the extremely fast growth of online communities surrounding commodities (Madupu & Cooley 2010, p. 2). Therefore, as the internet went from being a self-orientated medium to a participatory medium (Zwick & Bradshaw, 2016 p. 92), researchers shifted their focus toward online commodified communities. Another reason for this shift is that online commodified communities attract members from all over the world and the consequent level of participation has risen as a result of participants not having to be geographically present in order to participate (Madupu & Cooley, 2010 p. 18). Previous studies divided the research field between virtual life and physical life. In other words, what happens online and what happens offline. With the new media and their accessibility features, studies were now focusing on what happens when online- and offline worlds collide even further (Lindgren 2012, p. 157). As the interest in online communities grew among researchers within the field, studies were now being conducted with intentions of trying to understand what drove participants to not only become members of commodified communities but also what reasons they had for participating.

3.2 Active and non-interactive participants

Studies showed that participation behaviour among online commodified communities can either be active or non-interactive. Members defined as non-interactive can also be referred to as lurking members (see for example Madupu & Cooley 2010, p. 4; Burnett 2000). Lurkers are users who only observe without contributing. Lurkers are recognized by their habit of staying in the background, reading posts posted by other members without interacting. Despite keeping in the background, Burnett

2 Offline commodified communities are defined as geographically bound and only consistent with limited membership and participation (Madupu & Cooley 2010, p. 18)
(2000) states that lurkers are the most important participants in online communities, even though they appear to be invisible. To add to this, Nielsen (2006) stated, in his article on participation inequality from 2006, that participation among members often follows a 90-9-1 rule. Nielsen found that ninety percent of members on online communities are lurkers. Nielsen also found that nine percent of the members contributed from time to time and that one percent of members participated a lot and were responsible for most contributions within the community (2006).

3.3 Core components

According to Muniz & O’Guinn (2001) and their ethnographic study on brand communities, as mentioned above, there are three core components when it comes to brand communities. The components that the authors found in their study were: Consciousness of kind, Moral responsibility and, Shared rituals and traditions. The first component, consciousness of kind, are defined as ”the intrinsic connection that members feel toward one another and the collective sense of difference from others not in the brand community” (Muniz & O’Guinn 2001, p. 413). This contributes to members feeling a special connection to other members within the group as if they know each other and are therefore beyond strangers. Muniz & O’Guinn argues that this would explain the fact that members refer to themselves as us and we (2001, p. 418). According to similar research conducted around commodified communities, a special interest for studies on social identity is of importance when discussing research conducted on trying to understand the sense of belonging within a commodified community (Hund & McGuigan 2019, p. 5). One aspect of social identity within brand communities is that the individual member views themselves as a member of a community, as he or she is belonging to it (Dholakia et al. 2004, p. 245), resulting in members establishing a collective representation of who one is, instead of viewing himself or herself as one separate individual (ibid). The second component of commodified communities, according to Muniz & O’Guinn (2001), is shared rituals and traditions. A few examples of these practices are: a special language within the community, celebrations or events (Muniz & O’Guinn 2001, p. 413). The third and final marker of a brand community is moral responsibility. By this, Muniz & O’Guinn (2001) refer to a ”felt sense of duty or obligation to the brand community as a whole, and to its individual members” (Muniz & O’Guinn 2001, p. 413). Muniz & O’Guinn states that integrating and retaining members take various forms. For example, one forum on a Macintosh community provided horror stories of using a PC instead of a Mac (2001, p. 420). Moral responsibility, therefore, functions as a reminder to stay loyal to the brand in question.
4. Theoretical framework

In the following chapter, the theoretical framework for this study will be presented. The chapter includes theoretical perspectives that are being used to approach research questions similar to mine. To better comprehend how to understand members of commodified communities, theoretical terms such as consumer culture, user-generated content, participatory culture, and fan culture will be presented. The theories are all dependent on each other as well as essential when it comes to community building.

4.1 Consumer society

Baudrillard (1998) states that society is organized around the consumption and advertising of commodities from which individuals can gain prestige and identity (p. 7). In other words, consumer society is centred around an award-system, where different commodities reward you with different status or ranking in society. One of the key elements of consumer society is that it has the power to create identities out of consuming commodities. Arvidson (2006) describes it as “with a Macintosh computer I can become a particular kind of person, and form particular kinds of relations to others” (p. 8). Therefore, within consumer society, when using a MacBook, you become a mac-person. Individuals do not purchase a commodity only for the commodity itself, but by purchasing a commodity the individual is able to create their own meaning and identity. This is due to commodities representing a symbolic meaning in society and the symbolic meaning is linked to a certain lifestyle. These commodities enable individuals to act and feel a particular way in society. A notion exists within consumer society that promises a better life or a new life even when buying products that support and adds to individuals’ self-image (Arvidson 2006, p. 80). In a consumer society, a product is no longer just a product, it could also be of value of your lifestyle, or even enable a certain lifestyle. The idea of individuals being able to buy products to attain certain identities or in order to gain prestige is what generates consumer society. An example of one identity being, within Beauty Insider: a VIB person.

4.1.1 User-generated content

Neiburger (2010) states that the emergence of Web 2.0, with emphasis on user-generated content, had valuable potential for community building (p. 13). Since the rise of Web 2.0, members of commodified communities are now able to create their own self-image, by both consuming various commodities in order to attain certain status within the community and by expressing their own opinions and publishing
their own content. Media theorists have traditionally been focusing on what effects media has on its audience, as during "old media" recipients had little direct power to shape media content (Jenkins 2006, p. 215). However, with the shift in new technologies, the audience has now changed from being viewed as recipients to active participants. This is where term user-generated content is appropriate, as a way to describe the valuable information made up of different opinions, personal experiences and works created by users themselves (Xiang & Gretzel 2010, p. 7). Within the term user-generated content, there are two different factors separating the term. The first being content providers, which refers to the actual content generated by users. The other one being data providers, which refers to users, perhaps unwillingly and unknowingly, providing information about their profile and their habits online. Data providers are, therefore, contributing to personalized marketing within the site or the community (van Dijck 2009, p. 49). The circulation of user-generated content - across different media and different platforms - depends largely on consumers’ active participation, a term that will be discussed in the following section.

4.2 Participatory culture

Participatory culture involves users and members acting not only as consumers but also as producers, creating their own content within the community (Jenkins 2006, p. 5). Participatory culture represents the idea of the audience as active participants, able to both contribute with their own content by reviewing, commenting or creating pieces for other members, as well as consume content created by others (Bengtsson et al. 2016, p. 179). This culture responds to the new media’s interactive technologies, such as user-generated content as mentioned above, by making participation possible for average users in a new, powerful way (Jenkins 2009, p. 8). This theory is a result of the convergence between the traditional theory of "passive, old media" and "new, interactive media" (Bengtsson et al. 2016, p. 179). The results of this convergence created the idea that the public is no longer to be viewed as just consumers, but also as producers, creating the term "prosumers" as the two terms were combined (Bengtsson et al. 2016, p. 179). Participatory culture is, therefore, a term used to describe the new possibilities for the audience to participate, enabled by the new technologies (ibid). The participatory culture created a space for the audience to engage in the media content that they were exposed to. Consequently, participatory culture also enabled possibilities for modern fandom and fan culture, as fans were now invited to participate in a way that had not been possible prior to the convergence between new media and old media.
4.3 Reasons for participating

As the interest in trying to understand the audience as active instead of passive emerged, Dholakia, Bagozzi & Pearo (2004) offered five motives for members to participate in online communities: Information motive, Self-discovery motive, Social integration motive, Social enhancement motive and the Entertainment motive (p. 243). In their survey-based study, the authors conclude that these motives are primarily fulfilled for participants of commodified communities (ibid). Dholakia et al. (2004) state that an individual’s information needs are fulfilled by both receiving and sharing information within the community (p. 244). This means that by posting questions and reading other members responses, members can learn about the commodity as well as the consumption aspect of the product (McKenna & Bargh 1999, p. 256). Dholakia et al. (2004) argue that the self-discovery motive is an individual’s motive for understanding and deepening the aspects of an individual’s self (p. 244). When participating in different online communities, members will be able to identify themselves with other members and find reinforcement for their own personal values. The social integration motive refers to members’ need to interact with other members of the community for social support, friendship and even intimacy (Dholakia et al. 2004, p. 244). Furthermore, the authors argue that the social enhancement motive is the value that members’ gets from receiving acceptance and approval from other members within the community (ibid). Studies conducted on this motive have shown that many participants join online communities to be able to answer other members’ questions and provide information in exchange for recognition by other members (Hars & Ou 2002, p. 34). The final motive, according to Dholakia et. al. (2004), is the entertainment motive; online communities sometimes organise events, workshops or contests, for example, all of these are contributing to the member's entertainment (Madupu & Cooley 2010, p. 9).

4.4 Fan Culture

Mark Duffett (2013) describes what he calls media fandom as ”the recognition of a positive, personal, relatively deep, emotional connection with a mediated element of popular culture” (p. 2). With the rise of Web 2.0, it allowed fan cultures to become more widespread and more accessible for members within the fandom to participate, and to participate together (Bengtsson et al. 2016, p. 189). Despite fan culture having strong elements of active participation, fan cultures encourage the participants to generate creative expressions and other products of creativity within the community. Fiske (1991) describes fan culture something that ”involves a pleasurable reworking of the texts and the forms of visual culture that the media of mass communication make commonly available” (see Evans & Hesmondhalgh 2005, p.
To build from this argument, Fiske states that fan culture goes further than the interest in the celebrity in itself. Fiske’s work on audiences in media and cultural studies contributed to a great deal of interest within the field of active participation among audiences, as did his argument that all communities create formal and informal rules, as well as their own hierarchies (see Evans & Hesmondhalgh 2005, p. 152). Rules created within a community would not bear the same meaning outside of the community. One important aspect of fan culture is that members have the ability to create “in-group solidarity”, as well as the members creating their own rules and hierarchies (Evans & Hesmondhalgh 2005, p. 153). This is common within fan-based communities as hierarchies have the power to control members of the community with regards to different rankings of their membership. Members who have gained high symbolic meaning within the community are rewarded with higher ranking and are therefore considered to be of higher symbolic status (Evans & Hesmondhalgh 2005, p. 154). Therefore, members with higher ranking and more knowledge are more likely to gain respect and admiration from other members. Modern fan culture originated with Star Trek in the late 1960s (Jenkins 1992, p. 28), and as new technologies enabled the audience to participate even further, it created what is now known as communities built around a shared enjoyment or interest (Duffett 2013, p. 178).

4.5 Summary

Muniz & O’Guinn’s (2001) study on Brand Communities sparked a great deal of interest in the field. The interest in offline commodified communities shifted towards online commodified communities as new technologies from the possibilities of Web 2.0 enabled the audience to participate in a way that had not been possible prior to Web 2.0. As a result of this, the audience were no longer to be considered as consumers but also as producers. As researchers carried out studies to try and understand the core characteristics of online commodified communities, links to both commercial community and fan culture were found. This, due to the fact that hierarchies and a collected identity were visible within the communities. Studies were now being conducted with the intention of understanding which factors drove members to participate in commodified communities, and why participants chose not to participate.
5. Method

In the following chapter the method approach will be presented, as well as arguments regarding the choice of methods in terms of how it relates to the purpose and thesis of this study. In addition, I will present my study participants, data collection and procedures followed. Furthermore, the advantages and disadvantages of the choice of method will be discussed to conclude the chapter.

5.1 Methodology approach

There are essentially two ways of looking at reality: the first one being the positivist viewpoint, which states that there is one absolute truth that we need to find (Kjørup 2009, p. 87). The second one being the hermeneutic viewpoint, which constructs reality as something to be decided depending on who seeks it. Since the purpose of this study is to understand which sense of belonging commodified communities can offer to its members, this study will adopt the hermeneutic point of view and accept the fact that reality is influenced by our understanding of one certain reality (Kjørup 2009, p. 81). I decided to use a qualitative method with a hermeneutic approach. In contrast to quantitative methods and quantitative data, which refers to the statistics of a phenomena such as age, weight or length, for example, qualitative methods are preferred when studying the untouchable things in life such as thoughts, experiences, and intentions (Ahrne & Svensson 2015, p. 10). Prior to deciding methods to approach the purpose and thesis, I considered conducting surveys as my method. After further research and consideration, I decided against surveys and a quantitative method in general. This, due to the fact that this study seeks to understand if members of one specific community feel a sense of belonging within the community. I was never interested in the number of people that felt a sense of belonging within the community, but instead: what sort of belonging the participants’ experience. To further explain the choice of methods, it is essential to go back to my thesis. My purpose is not to understand how much meaning users receive from brand communities, nor is it my intention to understand how often they receive a sense of belonging within the community. Results of that kind would, however, have been attainable had I chosen a quantitative method.

I decided to use focus group interviews for this study. This method is defined as ”a group discussion where a small group of people meets for a limited time to discuss aspects of a subject or theme, presented by the researcher” (my translation, Dahlin-Ivanoff 2015, p. 82). This method differs from group interviews as the interaction between participants translates into data. This data can, later on, be
coded and used as empirical material (ibid). The goal when conducting focus group interviews is not to reach an agreement within the group but to share one’s opinions in regard to a subject or a theme (Kvale & Brinkmann 2014, p. 191). Therefore, by conducting focus group interviews, I can gain knowledge of which meaning the participant gives different situations, happenings and activities (Ekström & Johansson 2019, p. 102) to collect meaningful data needed to answer my thesis. Furthermore, I do understand the complications and arguments against using a qualitative method and focus group interviews. Kvale & Brinkmann (2014) states that traditional critique of qualitative methods consists of, to name a few, arguments that an interview is not a scientific method because it is too dependent on individuals (p. 212). Another argument being that the questions asked by the moderator could potentially be too leading and, therefore, participants answers what they assume to be the right answer, rather than their own answer. Despite these arguments, I decided that I would gain the most data by using this method and that it would be beneficial for collecting data from participants opening up about their own experiences. That is of far higher importance than the critique raised against the method due to the fact that a far deeper understanding is offered when conducting interviews.

This study will be supplemented by a necessary description of the discursive content on Beauty Insider. This will help deepen the understanding of both the visual content within the community itself and the various terms and community-based language used by the participants in this study. The description of the discursive content will, therefore, be used as a way to approach the structure of Beauty Insider by analysing texts within the community.

5.2 Study participants

Since this study is based one company and the members of their commodified community, it was essential to draw a sample from a population of individuals who were all active on Beauty Insider. The sample of participants for this study was, therefore, a strategic sample. When first organising the interviews, I reached out to forty different members on Beauty Insider with the aim of retrieving data from members within the community as that would result in the most beneficial data for me. The same template was used in all of my messages, explaining who I was and asking them if they would be interested in participating in this study. I consciously drew a sample of members with regards to their ranking and tier within the community. The messages were distributed to members over all rankings: varying from Rookie and Go-Getter to Insider and Rouge. I was ignored by all forty members within the community. A decision was made that further attempts would be too time-consuming and would affect
As a result, the sampling strategy was altered and a community on Facebook called *Pink Room* was used to draw my sample. Pink Room is a women-only group with over 150,000 members discussing anything between inspiring Instagram accounts to complicated relationships with their in-laws. As a result of changing sample strategies, the template was adjusted to make sure my recruits would consist of Beauty Insider members. Since the ambition was to recruit a women-only group with participants in their mid-twenties, the interviews were homogeneous with regard to age and gender. This decision was based on the fact that I wanted the participants to be able to relate to each other and each other’s experiences as that would result in a better discussion. Additionally, it was of high importance that the participants did not know each other prior to the meeting as participants are more likely to fall into already familiar, social roles within the group (Dahlin-Ivanoff 2015, p. 87). My intention with the interviews was for everyone to be able to speak their mind as freely as I would allow them to.

### 5.3 Data collection

Based on Kvale & Brinkmann (2014), an interview guide was formed to better prepare for my focus group interviews. The questions were based on Krueger’s (1998) interview guide where five types of questions are central; opening questions, introductory questions, transferring questions, key questions and concluding questions. By using an interview guide, the interviews became semi-structured. This, due to the fact that I decided before conducting my interviews what my participants would be discussing, and in what order (Kvale & Brinkmann 2014, pp. 172-178). My decision on using a semi-structured interview form was also based on the fact that it would help me in my work when coding the data collected from my interviews. Furthermore, the interview guide helped me organise the questions and to better understand how to approach the purpose of this study. Two focus group interviews were carried out, with six participants in each group. According to Kvale & Brinkmann, six to ten participants are the most beneficial number of participants (2014, p. 191). The two focus group interviews were carried out in different settings and different cities in Sweden. I began the interviews with a brief orientation where the purpose of the study was summarized. Furthermore, I explained that my mobile phone was on the table to be able to record the interview, something that the participants had been

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3 Facebook (2019). *Pink Room*. Available at: [https://www.facebook.com/groups/1636123779957663/about/](https://www.facebook.com/groups/1636123779957663/about/). [10 April 2019]

4 Interview guide is to be found in appendix.
informed of prior to the interview as well. During the interviews, as a moderator I had to occasionally intervene and bring up a new aspect of the subject that needed to be discussed. This was an effective way to keep the interview short and productive, which was helpful for me when turning my data into empirical material, but also for my participants’ who kept their interest and engagement throughout the interview. After conducting both my interviews, I decided to elaborate on the information that had been given to the participants prior to the interview, as participants asked me to further explain my thesis.

In regard to the description of the discursive content on Beauty Insider, it was approached using a conventional inductive approach. This approach allows the text to speak for itself and create themes and categories that describe the content (Hsieh & Shannon 2005, p. 1279). Prior to analysing the text, I did not prepare any categories or themes which my analysis would follow. I read the text to be able to get a broad overview of any thoughts or ideas that would help my coding. Following that, the material was organised in different categories, subcategories and created themes that were connected to relevant theories and previous research. As a great deal of data could be collected from discursive content, and the purpose of the analysis is to gain a better understanding of the platform itself, there was a need to define my analysis. Only parts of the front page, one subcategory, and my own member page were used. Texts from the front page were used to describe the setting, the subcategory was used as a way to collect data from texts by looking at two different threads found within the subcategory, and my own page was used to look into the community from a member's point of view. This, to be able to present a deeper understanding of the community itself.

5.4 Procedures Followed

After conducting both the interviews, I listened to the recordings several times. Svensson (2015) describes this as a primary interpretation of the data collected from interviews (p. 212). After going through the recordings, the data collected from my interviews were transcribed. This is referred to as a secondary interpretation (ibid). Following the transcription of data, I continued by coding the transcripts by organizing and categorizing them depending on which questions that had been asked, to find common themes and connections throughout the interviews. Even during my first interview there was a preliminary idea of how my analysis of the data would develop. As argued in many method books, the analysis of the empirical material starts while conducting the interviews (Ahrne & Svensson 2015, p. 24). This benefited me in terms of coding the data collected as it made categorising and thematising a smoother process. Furthermore, parts of the quotes were removed as participants occasionally repeated
themselves or made unwanted sounds. Finally, all of the participants have at least one quote presented, however, the participants do not have an equal number of quotes.

5.5 Validity, reliability and generalizability

With regards to reliability, one concern within the method of focus group interviews is that an interview could receive different answers depending on the moderator asking the questions as well as analysing the discussions. This is true when it comes to this study as well. However, in terms of the purpose of this study, focus group interviews were the most beneficial method because the research questions presented were all based on a deeper understanding of members of Beauty Insider. Should this study have been based on surveys or any other quantitate method, the study would have had higher validity and, therefore, been more reliable. This study, however, would not have been able to answer its research questions using that method. Regarding the question of generalizability, that is, to say something about a bigger population than researched, I believe that it can to some extent be generalizable. However, the difficulties in generalizability analyses done on qualitative data is a weakness within the method (Ahrne & Svensson 2015, p. 26). By using qualitative methods, I limited myself by the method used. Having said that, qualitative methods do not automatically make generalizability irrelevant it simply means that one needs to take extra caution when generalizing the analysis done on the empirical material before stating it as true (Ahrne & Svensson 2015, p. 27). It is, therefore, of high importance that I state that even though I carried out two separate interviews, in different cities and with different ages; there is no telling of what empirical material my next interview, should I conduct one, would bring.

5.6 Discussion of Method

The method to approach the research questions changed early on, due to this, the sampling was changed. This strategy may have resulted in a negative approach from my participants as they potentially did not want to give the impression of being more attached to Beauty Insider than they were. It is my belief that recruiting participants using Beauty Insider could have generated a different result than the one presented in this study. Another reflection regarding my method is the fact that both my interviews were being recorded. Bryman (2011) states that a recorder could contribute to participants becoming nervous or worried that their voice will be recorded. I did, however, not notice any of my participants to be worried about me recording the interviews. In regard to my description of the discursive content, the transparency of the results is fairly high as the three pages were analysed from a member’s point of
view. My intention was never to analyse the latent meaning of any text, it was simply a way to propose a setting and to deepen the understanding of the platform for the reader and for the researcher. As far as dependability goes with the description of the platform, I believe that the results of my analysis of the two threads are difficult to reproduce as I used threads on the Trending Now page.
6. Ethical Concerns

Since the ethical values of any research are of high importance, I will, in the following section account for how four of these values were considered throughout this study.

In terms of obtaining informed consent, the recipients were informed of the general purpose of the study, what was required from them as well as the relevant background information. However, as this study did not handle a delicate subject, it was not necessary to obtain proof of informed consent. The second value that was considered was the right to withdraw. The participants were all informed about the fact that their participation was optional throughout, and that they were free to drop out at any point during the study. Furthermore, my participants were informed of where this essay could be reached once published. The third value considered was protecting anonymity and confidentiality (Vetenskapsrådet, 2002). This value seeks to protect the participant’s identity and private life. The main characteristics of this value consist of keeping the participant’s names hidden, details about the participant’s private life or how the participant expresses himself or herself (ibid). This value is especially important should this study have been on a more delicate subject. If it had been, participants would have had to approve the material before the study was published, as delicate information could potentially have been traced back to the participants (Kvale & Brinkmann 2014, p. 109). Additionally, after having conducted the two interviews I immediately asked the participants whether anything was said during the interview that they did not want me to use and that they were welcome to contact me if they thought of something at a later date. Should the material be published for the public, it is of high importance that the individual has confirmed this by agreeing to it. Since this study does not focus on private or personal life experiences, the participants did not have a problem with using their real names. The final value that was considered focuses on minimizing the risk of harm for the participants. Recordings and notes from my two interviews have been accessed by no-one but myself. According to Kvale & Brinkmann (2014), all of these principles exist to minimize the risk of hurting or damaging individuals participating in studies (p. 110).
7.0 Results and analysis

In the following chapter, the results from my study will be presented as well as the analysis. The chapter will begin with a description of Beauty Insider to better understand the context of the platform. Following that, the results from the focus group interviews will be presented as well as the analysis to conclude the chapter.

7.1 Entering the community

I decided to begin the description of the discursive content on Beauty Insider by entering the category Community. This category is one out of seven on Sephora’s website. Upon entering the community as a member\(^5\), you are met by a text saying ”Real people. Real time. Real talk. Find beauty inspiration, ask questions, and get recommendations from members like you”. Scrolling down the page, you are introduced to four different subcategories within the community: Groups, Conversations, Gallery and Events. The picture covering the subcategory of conversations is a megaphone with different symbols, created to look like different messages are being sent out. Once entered, you are introduced to the ”Trending Now page”. This page contains threads with high activity posted by members on the community. This is a place for members to catch up on new reviews, other members’ lives’ or a new product release. It also has a search function where you enter keywords to locate specific threads.

7.1.1 Profile information Beauty Insider

When clicking on my own profile, I am met by an overview of my points (0 points). Immediately under my points there is a text saying ”Emma, spend $350 to reach VIB status”. Furthermore, my profile home page is filled with products with the description ”Reward Yourself”. Under this information there is chart to show my ”Beauty Insider Benefits” and information explaining that every dollar spent within

\(^5\) I will be using my own membership to deepen this description.
the community will translate into points. Furthermore, my page contains a chart to explain the different tiers within the community.

![Chart showing Beauty Insider tiers]

Beauty Insider has three tiers, all dependent on how much you spend per year. I am also introduced to the community’s ranking system. Depending on members’ activity within the community, there are different rankings for a member to obtain. These are Rookie (I, II and III), Go-Getter, Rising Star, and Boss. Therefore, next to my username there are two status indicators, Insider and Rookie. Insider has the word ”Free” next to it, explaining that my membership does not require me to spend a certain amount to keep my tier. The other one is Rookie, which is my activity ranking within the community.

7.1.2 Activities and attitudes within the community

The first thread analysed was a thread posted by a member of the ROUGE and ADMIN tier and the post was called ”New Member Monday!”. The post contained a picture of ”Team BIC” (Beauty Insider Community), a group of four women who are all standing in a Sephora store surrounded by balloons. The post reads:

Can you believe it's already May? And since it's a new month we want to take this moment to welcome all new Beauty Insider Community members with a new tradition we're calling New Member Monday. Maybe you aren’t “new” but have been lurking around the community and haven’t gotten the chance to post, either way we want to meet you and greet you 😊

We love making new friends in this community so we are starting this thread for newer members to introduce themselves.

*Introduce yourself and tell us your #1 holy grail product. We can’t wait to meet you!*
The thread seeks to address lurkers within the community to stop their lurking and participate instead. Members praised the idea and participated. One Go-Getter member stated:

Wonderful idea, mods! I know some of us started off as "lurkers", myself included, so I hope this post can help bring our newcomers out. Welcome to the Community and feel free to chat with us anytime!

This thread rapidly gained over 150 replies from lurkers who were invited to participate in the community. The majority of comments were made by lurkers, who identified themselves as lurkers, and paid a great deal of respect towards the members who had gained a higher membership due to their participation. One Rookie-member commented:

Gorgeous photo! Your makeup is ON POINT. Love the lipstick.

Members were introducing themselves and elaborating how difficult it is to pick one favourite makeup product as their #1HolyGrailProduct. Other members related to the distress that the post had caused as picking one product was considered to be too challenging. One member brought up her history with Sephora and how buying new products had become almost like an addiction to her:

lol @missjeanie!! That sounds about right. I did, however, manage to take a break from buying makeup for a couple years (by deleting the app and unsubscribing from emails and avoiding all makeup stores haha) - I still haven’t gone through everything I own! And now I’m buying more again! 😄
This VIB and Rookie member had been experiencing difficulties in trying not to shop within the community. After deleting the app and cutting all ties with Sephora she was able to stop, only to start her shopping again. Another Rookie-member engaged in the discussion:

![User Profile](image)

**Hmbsilimama**  
**Rookie 1**

hi I'm brandy I'm new & oh how I agree w you its like a kid in a candy store here I subscribed to u hope to connect

❤️ 4 -reply | 1 reply

Moving forward, a Go-getter shared her opinion of what great initiative the thread was from the moderators, and also gave her reasons for not participating as much over the past few weeks:

![User Profile](image)

**cianni**  
**Rouge**  
**Go-Getter**

What a great new idea for a thread! I've been a little missing in action for the last few weeks because of some personal stuff, but the community is always so helpful and supportive! 😊😊 can't wait to meet some new members ❤️❤️

❤️ 27 -reply | 3 replies

This Go-Getter describes the community as helpful and supportive, and gets a great deal of response from other members when revealing her struggles concerning her personal life, including recognition from a Rouge and Boss member:

![User Profile](image)

**eshoe**  
**Rouge**  
**Boss 6**

We've missed you on the masking thread @cianni! Hope life is returning to normal for you 😊

❤️ 5 -reply
The second thread I chose to analyse was "The Party Thread". A thread with over 32,000 replies, 654,000 views and 310,000 hearts given. In this thread, members discuss anything from Mom Life to difficult courses at University. It is also a thread used by members to congratulate other members on moving up a rank within the community:

@faerlegirl: Congratulations Boss girl! Such an awesome achievement

Topics varied from showing photos of new spring flowers in the garden to announcing a new career. One VIB and Go-Getter replied to another Go-Getter that had asked for updates on her job situation:

sprocketta: This isn't a rank change but something I am really excited because I'm starting a new job on the 1st. My current company will last maybe a year or two longer. I've been looking for the last year. I accepted an offer on Wednesday. It's such a relief and I'm looking forward to it.

This comment received 53 replies and 24 members hearted it, and one member replied saying that she recalled the member mentioning it months ago and that she had been in the same situation. In the same way, people were discussing child care and family situations. This ROUGE Go-Getter updated another member on her studies at university:
The majority of the party thread contained post by members engaging in discussions that were not at all related to cosmetic products or Sephora as a brand. This thread was a way for members to connect and create a sense of belonging within the community. This, as members were referring to the members within the community as we.

7.2 Focus Group Interviews

7.2.1 Aspects of a sense of belonging

When discussing why the respondents were active on Beauty Insider, the majority of the participants started discussing the fact that they had tried other platforms but kept coming back to Beauty Insider. As the respondents were relying on the community to help them with various makeup tutorials or letting the community decide which highlighter to purchase, the sense of belonging was deeply associated with the shared interests in cosmetics and the trust they experienced towards other members.

“I’ve tried others, think I was on KICKS for a while but I didn’t trust the products that was recommended to me. You can’t see any names on the reviews, it made me think that it was someone from customer service who were bored and decided to give every product 5 stars. I don’t feel that way about Insider, cause I can see who posted the review and who that member is.”
This respondent explained how she had tried another commodified community but due to her not trusting the members of the community, she left. The majority of the respondents had left reviews on products, assisted other users with product information and contributed to different threads. They all agreed that these activities within the platform contributed to a sense of belonging for them.

“Of course you get to know each other in a different way when you can see who they all are and what kind of products they like. I mean, Go-Getters that are also students are life, I have a lot in common with them, even my financial situation. On other communities you don’t have the same choice, everything is advertised for people with a normal income, and I feel left out then.”

The information given about other members on Beauty Insider contributed to members feeling included within the community. Furthermore, it contributed to a sense of belonging as my respondents were all united in the fact that they felt a sense of belonging by being members as not only their hobby was shared by others, but with regards to their financial situation too. In fact, the participants all agreed that they had not experienced any kind of belonging anywhere else, not until they became members on Beauty Insider.

“Everyone’s so welcoming, you really get to know a lot of the members... I mean they do everything to make you feel important and included.”

Finally, the respondents all agreed on the fact that both moderators and members on Beauty Insider aim to create a sense of belonging within the community fuelled by moderators always using we instead of you when discussing the community and members always referring to members as us. This was also made clear in the description of the community presented in the previous section.

7.2.2 Non-interactive activities

The participants differed in participation and ranking within the community. The only thing that they all had in common was the fact that they had never been to a physical event organised by Sephora. The main reason for this was that participants did not feel as if they had anything to contribute. Although keeping active within the community, participants felt like they would not contribute in a satisfying way due to lack of knowledge and experience. Another factor was that the step between their online world
and their offline world seemed too big, and as a result of this, the idea of meeting other members in public made them shy.

“Yeah, it would almost... I mean, in that case the interest has to be bigger, makeup is too small of an interest for me. I wouldn’t feel safe or be able to relax. And I wouldn’t appreciate having to study before the event to be able to keep up with them.”

Although participants were not keen on meeting up in person, some of them were active members who commented, reviewed and chatted with other members. The active members explained this as a social activity as they were all chatting with members about trivial things such as schoolwork or stressful jobs. One of the participants had taken her relationship with another member to a different platform, Instagram, and the two of them were talking about getting together in real life, but that never happened.

"I mean, I started talking to a mum that told me about this oil for my belly when I was pregnant. I still have her on Instagram. I know everything about her life, but we’ve never met or even talked in like six months. She’s just there.”

Participants who were not as social within the community engaged in lurking. The non-active participants all agreed on the fact that the community was a way to gain information without any requirements of actually participating. The participants who described themselves as active members, all of at least Go-Getter ranking, spoke of the community as their own community. Participants who described themselves as lurkers, all of rookie ranking, described the community as a perfect activity to kill time whilst gaining new knowledge and establishing relationships without having to commit to a relationship in real life.

H - I mean I think it’s the whole thing with being allowed into a world of expertise without being an expert yourself. It comes down to the fact that I’m able to participate without contributing.
C - Yeah, participating without contributing is the thing. Nowadays I think reading threads on Insider is a way to kill time too. Like when you’re in the bathroom for too long at work
Everyone – (laughter)
K – Is it the new activity instead of reading the paper?
Everyone – (laughter)
H – Yeah, maybe
The majority of respondents did, however, feel like Beauty Insider centres around consumerism because the respondents were under the expression that Sephora was looking to sell products and promote their own lines.

"It’s easy to shop, it really does feel like everything and everyone is for sale.”

Furthermore, due to the fact that Beauty Insider consists of a majority of women, the participants felt a sense of belonging just by being a woman and being offered threads where members could discuss whatever came to mind without being judged. One respondent said that it had enabled her to discuss childcare with other mothers, thus contributing to her sense of belonging within Beauty Insider.

“That you, I mean I can talk to others of course, but it feels like everyone thinks you’re such a girl when the only things you talk about are makeup and babies. But that’s what I care about.”

This respondent experienced a sense of belonging by being able to share interests with like-minded members. This is in line with Dholakia et al. (2004) social integration motive that refers to members need to interact with other members in order to find support and friendship. As this participant did not have anyone to discuss motherhood or makeup with, Beauty Insider was her idea of community.

7.3 Fan Culture and Consumer Culture

The front page on Sephora has seven different categories for users to explore. It is made clear that Sephora invested a lot into the community experience itself and for it to be easily accessible for members to connect to the community, given that the subcategory of community has just as much space as the category Shop. It is also made clear that the community constitutes for a great deal of the platform itself. When entering the subcategory of conversations you are immediately met by a text saying “Find beauty inspiration”. One of the five motives for participating in commodified communities offered by Dholakia et al. (2004), is the self-discovery motive which refers to members being able to identify themselves with other members and by doing that, members will find reinforcement for their own, personal values.

When accessing my own profile as a member of the community, there are a lot of features that centre on a community-based fan culture. This, as my points are first made visible, followed by my status and ranking within the community as well as information on how to obtain a higher status and ranking. The
community has three different tiers based on your consuming habits. By making one’s status within the community visible upon signing in, the member is constantly reminded of its place in the community and in the hierarchy. Fiske (1991) argues that one of the most important aspects of fan culture is the hierarchies created in terms of symbolic meaning. Beauty Insider’s symbolic meaning is defined by members ranking or tier within a community. Thus, creating a fan culture where members of higher ranking get special treatment due to their current status. Members on Beauty Insider should, therefore, be understood as not only part of a hierarchy but also part of fan culture. When it comes to the different tiers created within the community, Beauty Insider revolves around a consumer culture as a member having the choice of buying their way into a higher ranking within the community. In this case, a members ranking and the way other members view each other is directly linked to their habits of consuming within the community. Thus, creating a consumer culture by being rewarded for spending money and purchasing different commodities in order to gain prestige and status. This is made visible in Sephora’s description of the different tiers, where the Rouge tier is described as “see the view from the top”, indicating that Rouge members are above others due to the fact that members’ are being rewarded by not only being a part of a more prestige tier but also because of other member’s perception of them changes with the tier. The symbolic meaning of different commodities is of high importance on Beauty Insider. A notion exists within the community that VIB or Rouge members live a different life than Insider members, this is illustrated by different hashtags used among members, for example, #VIBLIFE, contributing to a collective identity among VIB members. These factors are characteristic aspects of fan culture. Furthermore, when a member is of a higher tier, they get to purchase different products form new lines before other members of lower rank. Therefore, it is also of great importance to understand members of Beauty Insider as part of consumer culture as members of higher tier due to their consumer habits gain respect and admiration by their ranking.

7.4 Participatory culture

The “New Member Monday” thread was welcoming new members to the community by using community hashtags and asking members to introduce themselves. Threads within the community are based on the idea of the audience as active participants in line with participatory culture, as members are expected to not only consume information found on the community but also produce their own content by posting or commenting as well as consuming commodities. The moderators behind the “New Member Monday” thread spoke in terms of lurkers and members confessed their lurking and said that it was time for a change and time to start participating in the community. With regards to which activities members engage in, the majority of the empirical material show that members’ favourite activity is
lurking. This, according to Nielsen’s 90-9-1 rule where 90 percent of members of communities lurk, nine percent participate from time to time and one percent are active members (2006). By participating in the thread, lurkers went from non-interactive, observing members to active participants, creating their own content by commenting and contributing to the thread. This proves a tendency for lurking members to participate when invited to do so. Furthermore, the majority of members praised the community due to the amount of knowledge they are exposed to when lurking around within the community, in line with Dholakia et al. (2014) information motive. The information motive was also a way to understand the participants from the focus group interviews as they compared reading threads on Beauty Insider to reading the paper in the morning. Additionally, the majority of posts analysed demonstrated a sense of belonging based on the members’ positive attitudes towards the community and by the way members opened up about private matters, one member explained her absence on the community by stating that she had “personal stuff” come in-between. Members all shared their condolences and support and said that they had missed her while she was gone. This is in line with Dholakia et al. (2004) theory on the Social Integration motive. Members’ interaction with other members, therefore, enables social support and friendship. The thread had many contributors to this motive, as members were discussing anything from “personal stuff” to household chores. The way different members were discussing their private life is also in line with Muniz & O’Guinn’s (2001) traditional marker of commodified communities: consciousness of a kind. Members discussing their private life is evidence of the connection that members feel towards each other, and the collective sense of community and belonging within the community. Members within the thread were also expressing how united they were among the community and how the community was always supportive and caring. To add to this, members referred to the thread consisting of *us* and *we*, which is in line with Muniz & O’Guinn’s theory of Consciousness of a kind as members themselves are contributing to the sense of belonging by excluding individuals outside of the community. This is also in line with the participants’ discussion in the focus group interviews as the majority of participants stated that by using *us* and *we*, they experienced a sense of belonging by feeling included. When discussing private matters, none of the members used hashtags or words referring to their own ranking within the community. This resulting in members being treated as equals and united when discussing private matters, contributing to a sense of community and a sense of belonging as this creates *us* and *them*. The second thread analysed, “The Party Thread”, showed a lot of aspects of what Dholakia et al. (2004) describes as a Social Enchantment motive, due to the fact that members were congratulating each other on making it to a new tier or ranking within the community. Members were receiving acceptance and approval from others based on their participation or consumption within the community. This thread also uncovered a lot of aspects found by Fiske (1991) on hierarchies within communities. The tier and ranking system is a system that
only gains meaning by members of the community, the system would be irrelevant when taken out of context. Therefore, members are congratulating each other on their newly gained symbolic meaning, created and recognized by members of the community. As the majority of members respectfully acknowledged other members change in ranking, there is evidence that support that members of Beauty Insider is to be understood as part of a fan culture.

7.5 A sense of belonging

In both the focus group interviews that was conducted, the participants described a sense of the belonging within the platform as a result of the shared interest in cosmetic products. The respondents were relying on other members to share their knowledge of the products sold by Sephora, and the respondents had a great deal of respect and trust towards members of the community. This sense of belonging is, therefore, an aspect of Dholakia et al. (2004) Self-Discovery motive. Members felt a sense of belonging due to the fact that other members helped them reinforce their own, personal knowledge of different commodities. Another sense of belonging was demonstrated by the participant’s description of the community as great entertainment. The participants stated that reading through various threads to find out about different products or reading threads in order to learn more about other members various personal situations had a great deal to do with their sense of belonging within the platform. Furthermore, the participants all agreed that this added to a sense of belonging as they were all discussing matters unrelated to the products sold by Sephora. The participants were able to relate and identify with other members as they opened up about private matters. The participants were all active in the community from time to time but were still ranked as Rookies due to their inconsistent participation. What Madupu & Cooley (2010) argued to be lurkers was the reality for my participants. For them, the step from a lurker to an event goer was too big. However, despite being able to open up about private matters within the community, none of my participants had been to a physical event organized by Sephora. Activities within the platform had aspects of fan cultures as well due to the fact that my participants did not feel like they had the knowledge or skills needed to be able to socialize with members of higher ranking than themselves in real life. This, due to the fact that recipients were under the impression that they did not share the same knowledge of the commodities as other members which is what Duffett (2013) describes as one of the main aspects of fan culture. This is also in line with Fiske’s (2005) argument on ”in-group solidarity”, where hierarchies within the community contribute to members of lower-ranking not feeling included enough to participate. To add to this, a link between a higher sense of belonging and a higher ranking within the community was found, due to the fact that members of a high ranking gained recognition and respect from lower ranked members and therefore engaged in a mentorship created by
their symbolic social meaning. This, in turn, creating a sense of belonging due to the fact that they are contributing by both passing along knowledge and gaining social support and admiration from members.

7.6 Trading privacy for a sense of belonging

The majority of the participants felt like the community was based on consumerism. One of the key elements of consumer culture is, according to Baudrillard (1998), that it has the power to create identities out of consuming commodities. This was made clear by the participants as they were discussing members of higher ranks as members who were socially above them. This, due to the fact that Beauty Insider uses members’ desire for symbolic meaning within the community to motivate them into purchasing products. The participants were also well informed when discussing the different tiers and ranking systems, this was made clear as they were referring to Go-Getter as a lifestyle and a collected identity among members who had obtained such ranking. A collected identity is one of the most important aspects of consumer culture, and on Beauty Insider the sense of collected identity is central as members use of, for example, hashtags to let people know which ranking they belong to. Members of Beauty Insider should, therefore, be understood as members of a consumer society as members status within the community is determined by their consumer habits. Although aspects of consumer society and hierarchies in general were visible, participants discussed how reading different threads made them feel both included in the community and, as a result of that, felt like they got to know other members by reading about their various private issues. The participant’s felt included as the information shared by other members was private and that contributed to them feeling a sense of belonging within the community as they were trusted with the private information, contributing to what Muniz & O’Guinn (2001) described as consciousness of a kind. This aspect of a member’s sense of belonging within a commodified community is to be viewed as the strongest force. Threads where members are able to discuss their life’s outside of the community, create a sense of belonging as members create a connection and a collective sense of us and them by viewing members to be trusted with private matters as us and anyone outside of the community as them. Additionally, as the majority of the recipients were all on the lowest activity ranking still, experienced a sense of belonging by reading about other members opening up: this activity is to be viewed as the most powerful aspect of creating a sense of belonging within commodified communities. Hence, as people open up about their private matters, members’ experience a sense of belonging as a reaction to feeling trusted enough be a part of the private conversation.
8. Discussion and summary

The purpose of this study was to explore if members of Beauty Insider experienced a sense of belonging within the platform as well as trying to gain a better understanding of which activities members engage in within the community. The research questions were approached by using material from previous research and a relevant theoretical framework to better understand the members of the community. The research questions were answered by conducting focus group interviews as well as by using a description of the discursive content on Beauty Insider.

In terms of a sense of a belonging within the platform, the participants in both focus group interviews all stated that they experienced a sense of belonging on Beauty Insider independent of the ranking or tier the participants belonged to. This is due to the fact that the empirical material provided evidence of a sense of belonging as a result of being able to take part in other members private life when participating, or lurking, in various threads. To add to this, the sense of belonging proved to be deeply connected to the fact that members share a hobby or a passion with the members of the community and that they experienced a trust toward other members, which they had not experienced on other commodified communities. Furthermore, the description of the discursive content on Beauty Insider showed that members feel a sense of belonging due to the fact that members speak in terms of *us* and *we* within the community when referring to other members. The sense of belonging is therefore created by members, by excluding non-members. The sense of belonging was also deeply rooted in the fact that members were able to identify themselves with other members, either because they are going through the same thing or because they share the same love for a different commodity. In regard to members’ activities within the community, the study showed that members engage in discussions in threads to discuss products, their private life or their ranking within the community. Furthermore, the study showed that lurking was the main activity for members. The unique aspect of these findings is the fact that members experienced a sense of belonging through their lurking behaviour. Thus, by lurking on Beauty Insider, members were not only able to gain information and knowledge about products or other members’ private life, but also experience a sense of belonging by being invited to take part of the discussion. As far as physical events go, neither of the participants desired to attend one and no physical event was mentioned in the two threads analysed. The sense of belonging within the platform, therefore, is rooted in the community itself, not in the physical relationships that could potentially be established.
9. List of references


Appendix

Interview guide according to Krueger’s model (see Wibeck, 2010, pp. 73-76).

Research questions:
4. Does the member of the community feel a sense of belonging within the platform?
5. In which way does the member feel that sense of belonging?
6. In what activities do the members engage in within the community?

Opening questions:
To create a sense of group cohesion and to find common interest among the participants.
7. How long have you been members on Beauty Insider?
8. How was the platform introduced to you?
9. Are cosmetic products a big interest of yours?

Introductory questions:
The participants are given the possibility to reflect on their own experiences by answering open questions as well as being introduced to the subject.
10. Would you say that your ranking within the community is related to your activity in a reasonable way?
11. Do you have any favourite features within the platform?
   – Varför är den funktionen så bra?
12. Would you say that you are familiar with all the features within the platform?
13. Would it be of interest to learn more about the various features in the community?

Transitional questions:
The subject is placed in a bigger perspective.
14. What do you feel like you gain out of being a member on Beauty Insider?
15. Would you say that you are driven by the fact that you would like to obtain a higher activity ranking within the community?
16. How much of your knowledge in cosmetic products, such as new releases and new products, would you say was given by the community?
17. Are you social individuals’ offline?
- Does your work require you to socialise etc.

18. Which reason is the most beneficial reason for your membership on Beauty Insider?
- Did you establish any new relationships with other members within the community?
- Do these relationships beyond the platform?

**Key questions:**
*These questions are used as a way to approach the research questions even further.*

19. Have you attended any of Sephora’s physical events?
- If so, how did you find it? If not, why?
- Do you think this would be an enjoyable activity?
- If you were to describe Beauty Insider to non-members, how would you describe it?
- Would you try to sell it in a particular way?

20. Would you say that you choose Beauty Insider over other cosmetic commodified communities?

**Concluding questions:**
The participants are given the opportunity to reflect on the answers that they have given, and are offered a chance change the answers given.

1. Is there anything that you would like to discuss now that was not possible during the interview?
2. Would you like to change any of the answers that given during this interview?

**Exit question:**
3. Is there anything you would like to add before we end this interview?