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Understanding service practices of customers on the internet: a case study of a Volvo brand community

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Abstract

The significance of consumers in the process of value creation has been shown by researchers that study brand communities, in which consumers perform practices that create value. Some of these consumer practices are service practices, enacted by consumers to offer service to other members of the brand community. By drawing on value creation, service dominant logic and brand community research we, in the present thesis, identify a number of service providing practices that brand community members offer to other consumers. We conduct the research on an online Volvo fan community using netnographic research method. We have found 8 customer service practices organized in to 3 main themes. This thesis also contributes to previous research by suggesting that; customers consciously integrate resources to offer to online communities; customers propose value for other customers in the course of service provision; and that customer service practices are significant both for brand communities and the brand image. In addition to this we have outlined a model which shows customer value proposition to community members and its rewarding effect both for community members and the brand (firm). The thesis concludes with discussing theoretical contributions and managerial implications.

Key words

Brand community, brand community practices, service dominant logic, value co-creation, service practices
TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE
1. Introduction ........................................................................................................6
   1.1 Research Question .........................................................................................8
   1.2 Research Aim ...............................................................................................8

CHAPTER TWO
2. Theoretical Framework ....................................................................................9
   2.1 Customer Value Concept ..............................................................................9
   2.2 Service and value co-creation ......................................................................10
   2.3 Customers role in value creation ..................................................................11
   2.4 Brand Communities .....................................................................................13
   2.5 Value creating practices of brand communities ...........................................14
   2.6 Customer Service Practices .........................................................................15
   2.7 Customer service practices and value propositions ......................................16

CHAPTER THREE
3. Methodology .......................................................................................................18
   3.1 Introduction ....................................................................................................18
   3.2 Qualitative Research .....................................................................................18
   3.3 Research Design ............................................................................................19
      3.3.1 Case study ................................................................................................19
   3.4 Data Collection ..............................................................................................20
      3.4.1 Primary data ............................................................................................21
         3.4.1.1 Netnography ....................................................................................21
   3.5 Data Analysis ................................................................................................22
   3.6 Validity and reliability ...................................................................................23
   3.7 Limitations .....................................................................................................24

CHAPTER FOUR
4. Findings ..............................................................................................................25
4.1 Brand Utilization Services Practices ...........................................25
   4.1.1 Maintenance ........................................................................26
   4.1.2 Commoditizing ....................................................................28
   4.1.3 Grooming ............................................................................29

4.2 Social Integration Service Practices .........................................31
   4.2.1 Empathizing .........................................................................31
   4.2.2 Informing .............................................................................33
   4.2.3 Mentoring .............................................................................34

4.3 Brand Impression Services .........................................................36
   4.3.1 Pledging .............................................................................36
   4.3.2 Praising ..............................................................................38

CHAPTER FIVE

5. Discussion ...................................................................................40
   5.1 Service practices of customers as value creating
      practices delivering real use value .............................................40
   5.2 Value proposition by customers to other customers .................44
   5.3 Significance of customer service practices ...............................45
   5.4 Customer to customer value proposition
      within the brand community- Model ........................................46

CHAPTER SIX

6 Conclusion ..................................................................................49
   6.1 Theoretical contribution ..........................................................49
   6.2 Managerial implication ............................................................50
   6.3 Further research .....................................................................50

7. REFERENCES
Chapter 1: Introduction

The significance of customers as critical contributors and co-creators in the process of value creation has been emphasized by several service researchers. Customers possess crucial resources (knowledge and skills) that are considered as basic components for value co-creation in service according to service dominant logic (S-D logic, hereafter)(Vargo and Lusch 2004). Service, which represents the interaction of entities that co-create value (Katzan, 2011) is the application of specialized competence for the benefit of another entity (Vargo and Lusch 2004). In other words, service is the means to co-create value which entails providing offerings that customers find consistently useful by using customer inputs (O’Malley, 1998). Accordingly co-creation (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004b: p. 8) “denotes creating an experience environment in which consumers can have active dialogue and co-construct personalized experiences for joint creation of value”. In this perspective customers are assumed knowledgeable, well-informed and substantial for the effectiveness of co-creation of value. In fact customers are not limited to interacting with firms only rather they also communicate and interact with other customers and co-create value. Especially the development of information technology has contributed to simplify communication and interaction between customers. These communication dialogue and participation between parties involved as suggested by Prahalad and Ramaswamy, (2004a) play important roles in value co-creation.

Indeed, Prahalad and Ramaswamy, (2004b) suggests that communication and information exchange on the internet between consumers have empowered them to challenge and evaluate the company’s value creation process. This shows not only the changing role of consumers from passive to active in the company-customer relationship but also the fact that consumers share important resources like knowledge and skills which, according to the S-D logic (Vargo and Lusch 2004) are the basis for value creation, through the internet. One of the most common ways for consumers to interact on the internet is establishing a brand community: meaning that those who admire a branded good or service and share

1 We use the term customer and consumer interchangeably throughout the paper
similar consciousness, traditions and moral responsibility, established as a form of community on the internet (Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001).

Research has shown that brand communities are sites of value creation. More specifically, previous studies have shown that members co-create value between them through different kind of practices that go well beyond the value that the firm creates or predicts (Schau et. al., 2009). It is the valuable practices that keep brand based communities active and attractive, strengthening the connection with the brand and interaction within community members. Several studies have focused on how these online communities co-create value and how members share knowledge and skills. Pongsakornrungsilp and Schroeder (2011) have discussed provider and beneficiary roles of consumers as important components of the value co-creation process in communities. Similarly, Schau et.al, (2009) have studied 9 different brand communities focusing on how they co-create value. They identified 12 common value creating practices across these brand communities. Even though the merits of the notion of value creating practices of communities (Schau et.al, 2009) and service (Vargo and Lusch 2004) has been discussed in the literature, less research attention is paid to the actual service practices enacted by customers. Accordingly, we follow the suggestion by Schau et.al (2009), call for deeper analysis of a broader set of practices prevalent to brand communities to increase the understanding of brand community vitality and to intensify the theoretical understanding of how value is co-created in the brand community. Besides, this thesis is inspired by S-D logic where value-in-use is central through co-creation by company-customer interaction, (quite contrary in our case, as we focus on value co-creation through customer-customer interaction). Therefore the present thesis concentrates to address the suggestion of previous research by Schau et.al. (2009) focusing on identifying service practices enacted by brand community members to offer and provide services for other customers. Service practice, which is further elaborated in the theoretical review, is a routine behavior of applying competences for benefit of oneself or others within the brand community.
1.1 Research Question

Community researchers, Pongsakornrungsilp and Schroeder (2011) and Schau et.al (2009) have emphasized the importance of communication and interaction between customers for value co-creation within brand community. Customer-to-customer interaction according to Venkat, (2012) is “direct or indirect, face-to-face or technology-mediated, active or passive interaction between two or more customers in the service setting or outside the service setting, which may or may not involve verbal communication”.

Keeping this in mind we want to study what kinds of service practices do consumers perform in the brand community? And how customers provide service to each other within the brand community? To answer these questions we focused on the communities established on the internet, specifically a Volvo brand community. Since there are many Volvo brand communities online, we have specifically chosen a Volvo community forum established and run by owners and fans of Volvo cars in UK, as our case study, official website:[http://www.volvoforums.org.uk/] (VCF, hereafter).

1.2 Research Aim

According to Schau et al. (2009) there are twelve common value creating practices among brand communities which they categorize in to four main thematic groups of social networking, impression management, community engagement and brand use. We draw upon these value creating practices and Service Dominant Logic research as a structural guide prevailing in brand communities so as to verify and generate an elaborated and deeper analysis of brand community practices in relation to service and value co-creation which help members to solve problems and which add to their practical skills or know-how to deal with matters (brand related and other). Therefore our purpose in this paper is to study how customers provide service to each other within the community.
Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework

In line with our purpose to identify how customers provide service to each other through value creating practices in brand communities, we will review service theory (customer value concept, Service and value creation, and customers role in value creation) and community theory (brand communities and value creating practices in brand communities) in order to deepen the understanding of the focal points of this research paper. Based on this review we elaborate on our understanding of the notion of customer service practice and discuss the relationship between value propositions, a key concept in service theory, and service practices.

2.1 Customer Value Concept

Corresponding to the main focus of this thesis (service provision through value co-creation), we have reviewed literatures about the concept of value from the customers’ perspective, as it is important to be familiar with the notion of value in order for co-creation that takes into consideration their personal needs and interests. Thus, what is customer value? “Customer value is a customer’s perceived preference for and evaluation of those product attributes, attribute performances and consequences arising from use that facilitate (or block) achieving the customer’s goals and purposes in use situation” (Woodruff, 1997: p. 142). Similarly Butz and Goodstein (1996; in Smith & Colgate, 2007) define customer value as being what customers get (benefits, quality, worth, utility) from the purchase and use of a product versus what they pay (price, costs, sacrifices), resulting in an attitude toward, or an emotional bond with that specific product or brand. These definitions specify the consumers’ expectation and assessment of attributes to an offering and result evaluation after using it on how it helps in accomplishing the purpose of using it, especially in addressing their value expectation.

According to Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004b, p. 6) “the meaning of value and the course of value creation with a customer changes as a consequence of the changing nature of consumer –company interaction where they co-create and
extract value”. Noting the redefinition of value in that the traditional concept of value creation was only company centered in which value is created inside the firm for the consumers where consumers were outsiders and had no role in the value creation process (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004b). However, the dynamic change in the world, especially the development of information technology, has influenced the value creation process through collaboration, integration and co-creation between parties involved. Correspondingly Vargo and Lusch (2004) have also suggested that information, knowledge and skills that are regarded as operant resources are now being the center of attention than the offerings and communication, cooperation, working together and building long-lasting relationships are the key factors for value co-creation. Accordingly without the application of these crucial resources an offering by itself is not sufficient enough either to demonstrate its value or to meet the customers’ expectations. This necessitates the focus on the operant resources and be service oriented for co-creation of value as described in S-D logic (Vargo & Lusch, 2004) which is discussed in the following section.

2.2 Service Dominant Logic

As the aim of this thesis is focused upon service practice this part deal with the notion of service. The paradigm shift with regard to the primacy of the service dominant logic rests on key areas of resources (operant resources) and ways of better utilizing these service resources. Thus “the application of the specialized competences (operant resources) through process and performances for the benefit of another entity”, i.e. service is inevitable in today’s economy (Vargo & Lusch, 2004: p. 2). Consistent with this view Grönroos, (2006) have also defined service as a process of activities intended to solve customers’ problems through communication between a customer and people on behalf of service provider and involving other customers. It appears that communication and integration with customers facilitates the service process which paves the way for value co-creation coherent with wants and desires of customers. As suggested by Grönroos, (2006, p. 319) “Services emerge in ‘open’ processes where the customers participate as co-producers and hence can be directly influenced by the
progress of these processes”. Hence through service it is possible to co-create value with customers and to disclose the value of the company’s offerings-operand resources (Vargo & Lusch, 2004, Grönroos, 2006).

Operand resources, According to Vargo & Lusch, (2004, p. 2) “are resources on which an operation or act is performed to produce an effect”, in other words they are means to achieve some sort of service or desired value-in-use. These involve goods and services that are offerings of a company. These resources were central to companies, where they produce and offer goods and services for consumers without consumers’ inputs with an intention to convince about the value during or before exchange with customers. However, with the emergent of the new dominant logic- S-D logic the focus has shifted to service- the course of doing something beneficial for and in conjunction with the customers (Vargo & Lusch, 2008). This entails the application of one’s competencies or knowledge and skills which are referred to as operant resources (Vargo & Lusch, 2004).

Operant resources represent competencies, skills and knowledge which are applied to act up on operand resources and other operant recourses to produce an effect (Vargo & Lusch, 2004). S-D logic describes operant resources as a source of wealth through conveying knowledge and skills, and a guide to value through beneficial application of these special competencies (Vargo & Lusch, 2004). In addition to this, customers are also considered as operant resources in which they are regarded as active participants in the production process and in relational exchanges not as passive recipients which companies act on them to create transactions with resources (Vargo & Lusch, 2004). This concept signifies the critical role and importance of consumers in the value creation process as discussed below.

2.3 Customers role in value co-creation

Value co-creation through interaction is central to service (which is the focal point of this research) so as to facilitate customers benefit from value-in-use of the service. Customers play crucial role in co-creation (Wikstrom, 1996; Grönroos,
in that company’s task is to facilitate consumers to create their own value through its offerings, considering firms as providers of offerings and facilitators in the course of value co-creation while consumers act upon the crucial activities of value creating process. In the same context Vargo and Lusch (2004) have also suggested that the company offerings are not the ultimate offerings of value rather the value is dependent on the consumers’ know-how and information on how to extract the value of the offering according to their own precise needs.

“The enterprise can only offer value propositions; the consumer must determine value and participate in creating it through the process of coproduction. If a tangible good is part of the offering, it is embedded with knowledge that has value potential for the intended consumer but it is not embedded with the value (utility). The consumer must understand that the value potential is translatable to specific needs through coproduction. The enterprise can only make value proposition that strive to be better or more compelling than those of competitors”, (Vargo & Lusch, 2004: p. 11).

The statement substantiates that whatever value potential has the offering (from the company’s point of view) it has to be communicated with the customer so as to co-create value and the customer has to find it in line with his/her own specific need to benefit from using that offering. Similarly speaking Prahalad & Ramaswamy, (2004b, p. 7) have mentioned that “High-quality interactions that enable an individual customer to co-create unique experiences with the company are the key to unlocking new sources of competitive advantage”. Thus regarding consumers as a knowledgeable active participant in the value creation process, companies are now more and more focusing on supporting consumers’ personal effort on their own value creation by designing a system which can facilitate consumers own value creation rather than being limited to the old view of providing goods and services, (Wikstrom, 1996). Thus substantiating the fact that considering consumers as the crucial role players in determining the value of the offering or value-in-use is noteworthy in service-centered view (customer-centered view), Vargo and Lusch (2004).
Accordingly customers by interacting with other customers can share important knowledge and skills (basics for value co-creation) over the offerings. One common way focused up on here regarding customer-customer interaction is that consumers establish community forums based on a branded good or service, and form a relationship to exchange information and knowledge (Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001) which is discussed as follows.

2.4 Brand Communities

As it is mentioned in the introduction part our objective is to identify how customers in brand communities provide service to each other, hence we discuss the notion and significance of brand communities in this section. Brand community (Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001) is gathering of consumers in the form of communities who possess similar interest in that particular offering, service or brand and share parallel concern that distinguishes them from others who are not included in or who are not part of that community. It refers to a specialized community based on a structured set of social relationships among admirers of a brand which is not restricted to a geographical area where the core of the community is a branded good or service (Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001). Similarly McAlexander.et.al, (2002) has defined brand communities as groups established on the basis of shared aims or brand. With regard to these brand community notions, we focus on VCF- an on-line brand community, to understand how customers provide service to each other in this community. Such kind of virtual communities (Pongsakornrungsilp and Schroeder, 2011) are platforms for value co-creation. More emphasized by Prahalad & Ramaswamy, (2004a, p. 4) connotation of brand communities as “a networking in which individuals share ideas and feelings without regard for geographic or social barriers, are revolutionizing emerging markets and transforming established ones”. Consistent with this view is Schau et.al (2009) description of brand communities, though established with the major purpose as a central focus on the branded good or service, involve in different activities that create value, it can be additional value to the branded offering (the brand itself) or other values important to the community members but not related to the brand. Accordingly the sharing of
these ideas through different practices comprises knowledge and competences which are important service resources to create value for the members within the community as elaborated in the following section.

2.5 Value creating practices of brand communities

Central to the aim of this thesis is the notion of value co-created through service, determined by the practices of the parties involved (brand community members in our case). Likewise, recent developments in technology have created an opportunity to observe how online communities are contributing on creating values on the products or services they obtain. Different researches have studied to see how these online communities are co-creating value. Pongsakornrungsilp and Schroeder (2011) discussed provider and beneficiary roles of consumers as important components of a value co-creation process. In addition to this, Schau.et.al, (2009) have studied 9 different brand communities on how they co-create value and from their studies they identified 12 value creating practices in the community. They have also suggested that “value resides in the actions, interactions, and projects that acquired resources make possible or support” Schau.et.al, (2009, p. 31). These action and interactions are the course of practices that allow the co-creation of value that the community members can make use of. Practices according to Warde (2005) are performed coordinated entities of doing and saying things based on understanding, procedure and engagement. This concept is further explained in detail by Reckwitz (2002; cited in Warde, 2005: p. 133) as:-

“Practice (Praxis) in the singular represents merely an emphatic term to describe the whole of human action (in contrast to ‘theory’ and mere thinking). ‘Practices’ in the sense of the theory of social practices, however, is something else. A ‘practice’ (Praktik) is a routinized type of behavior which consists of several elements, interconnected to one another: forms of bodily activities, forms of mental activities, ‘things’ and their use, a background knowledge in the form of understanding, know-how, states of emotion and motivational knowledge”.

14
This signifies a much broader connotation of the practices rather than just defining it as an opposite to theory or assumption. It incorporates performance (in words or in action), knowledge & skills and mutual understanding (in the case of social practices). Indeed the connotation of practices blends in brand communities practices starting from their establishment (common understanding and shared value) to their continuation and development (where they create value and help each other through these crucial activities: - Practices). Meaning that it is the presence and value of these practices that construct online communities to stay together in the forum otherwise it is easy for such kind of internet forums to be stagnant and inactive.

The practices common to brand communities, as described by Schau et.al (2009) are categorized under the themes social networking, impression management, community engagement and brand use. Inspired by their research we, in this thesis, focus on customer service practices, which we discuss and define in the section that follows.

2.6 Customer Service Practices

The definition of service practices as can be derived from their respective definition of service and practice, is a routine type of behavior of applying competences (knowledge and skills) through physical or mental activities of doing or saying things for own benefit or the benefit of others. This crucial concept though has not been explicitly focused upon in previous researches, is the main focus of this research paper. Likewise, the notion of customer service practices underlies where customers involve in such activities for their own benefit or for the benefit of others (other customers and/or companies). The presences of customer service practices are evident in previous researches; for instance Karpen et.al, (2011, p. 28) has mentioned that “customers have more to offer than just financial resources. They have, for example, ideas, competencies, and labor, enabling them to act on other resources and provide benefits to the co-creation partner”. This clearly shows that customers possess operant resources that can be applied on other resources to make effect and to help benefit the other party
involved in the co-creation process. Which is consistent with the view which suggests that operant resources as producers of effect in S-D logic (Vargo & Lusch, 2004). Similarly empathizing, commoditizing and grooming practices stated in Schau et al. (2009) as value creating practices are also service practices of consumers where they propose value and offer service for other consumers within the brand community, these practices are further elaborated in the empirical part. On the other hand, the provider role of consumers mentioned in Pongsakornrnungsilp and Schroeder (2011) shows consumers working for the benefit of other consumers within the brand community. They precisely state it as “More experienced members act as providers by contributing new resources – knowledge, information, statistics, data, or well analyzed arguments to the overall resources of the community” Pongsakornrnungsilp and Schroeder (2011, p. 310). Therefore the significance of value within this service practice keeps the interaction of consumers to continue and strengthen brand community forums active and attractive.

2.7 Customer service practices and value propositions

So far we have seen that value is the mediator (which serves as a network) that keeps relationship of customers in the course of their interaction with other consumers or. This idea has been profoundly explained by Lusch et al. (2010, p. 20) as

“A value network is a spontaneously sensing and responding spatial and temporal structure of largely loosely coupled value proposing social and economic actors interacting through institutions and technology, to: (1) co-produce service offerings, (2) exchange service offerings, and (3) co-create value”

Accordingly the customer service practices in community forums accompany value propositions based on the subject matter (which can be brand related or on other matters rather than the brand) so as to help parties in the interaction process benefit from the offering. Hence customer service practice denotes the presence and proposition of value within customer-customer interaction through the internet that possess an advantage that either both parties or one of the party
involved in the process can make use of. This keeps the interaction to be ongoing, genuine and up-to-date that paves the way for another service (by encouraging members to participate in the process). Consistent with this view Lusch et.al (2010) have mentioned relieving and enabling tasks as the two ways of providing service that are interrelated and having mutually beneficial relationships. Relieving involves doing some task for someone that he/she rather had to do it, hence this will have a positive effect (by easing the burden and saving resources) so that he/she is enabled (given the opportunity and resource) to focus on important issues and do other tasks more effectively and efficiently (Lusch et.al, 2010). This interrelated effect of the service practice not only encourages the value-in-use of the proposed values but also increases the effectiveness and efficiency of the operant resources (knowledge and skills) employed to deliver the service and operand resource (offering).
Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This part describes the methods we have used in order to collect the data. The study is based on qualitative research and case study research methodology. For research design we have used exploratory research. In order to survey our data we have applied netnography and the data collection is based on primary data. This method will help us in order to answer the research problem on what service practices consumers are performing in VCF community and how consumers provide services to each other. Validity and reliability of the thesis is also described in this part followed by limitation of the study at last part of this section.

3.2 Qualitative Research

As discussed by Bryman and Bell (2007, p. 28) “qualitative research is a strategy that usually emphasizes words rather than quantification in the collection and analysis of data and that mainly emphasizes an inductive approach (which is moving from specific observations to broader generalizations and theories)”. We adopt this method in our observation to find out how members in the brand community interact and provide service to each other. According to Marshall and Gretchen (2010) qualitative research is a practical and interpretive foundation in the lived experiences of people. In this research paper the reason we have used qualitative research is in order to discuss and analyze our findings on how customers provides services to each other in VCF community. Qualitative research is typically enacted in naturalistic setting, draws on multiple methods that value the civilization of the participant in the study, it focuses on circumstance, and it is an emergent and evolving, and basically interpretive (Rossman & Rallis 2003). Ghauri and Gronhaug (2010) have also suggested that qualitative data are used to describe phenomena guiding to the construction of theories and generation of hypotheses. For this reason, qualitative research will guide us to overview how Volvo brand community performs service practices based on the data collected, which will give an output for our analysis.
3.3 Research Design

According to Ghauri and Grønhaug (2010), research design is the general plan for connecting the conceptual research problem to related and feasible empirical research, in other words it provides a plan or a framework for data collection and analysis. In order to get answer for the research problem we have employed exploratory research method because it will help us to briefly examine our finding based on the collected data and to analyze the empirical data corresponding to the theoretical review.

Exploratory research often concentrates on the capacity how to observe data, collection of information and helps to construct explanation which is theorizing (Ghauri & Grønhaug 2010). We have based the collection of data through observation of Volvo brand community discussion threads for instance, events and meetings, general Volvo & motor discussion, lounge and introduction, member’s discounts on parts & service, technical topics, spare-part sales & wants. Through observing those threads we are able to assess how Volvo brand community members perform different service practices and how they provide services to each other.

3.3.1 Case study

Case study is the study which is based on qualitative and field based construction and analysis of the studies (Bonoma, 1995; cited in Ghauri & Grønhaug 2010, p.109). It is concentrated on studying of entity, person, group, association, culture, event or circumstances (Ghauri & Grønhaug 2010). Similarly our case study focuses on a Volvo community forum [http://www.volvoforums.org.uk/]. This forum is part of the Volvo owners club which was established 1962 in UK by owners and fans of Volvo cars (volvoclub, 2012). The club provides different benefits for club members like supply Volvo special tools which will make repairs easier and safer, discounts on Volvo parts, discount on services repairing parts at workshop and special discount arranged with Volvo on new Volvo parts and organize delivery(volvoclub, 2012). While the forum helps the members in
providing a general technical information and guidance. It also facilitates members interact each other through asking information, getting feedback, giving opinions and discuss on different topics (volvoclub, 2012).

According to Yin, (1994; cited in Ghauri & Grønhaug 2010, p110) “case study is a preferable approach in order to answer ‘how’ & ‘why’ questions”, accordingly we have selected the case study in order to get answer to the research problem. We choose VCF community because it is one of the oldest, successful and very active communities which recently celebrated 50 years anniversary. The club has around 20,000 forum members and out of these 5000 have an exclusive membership who paid a membership fee, they have special discounts and events than the regular members who join the forum without fee (volvoclub, 2012). However both of them can equally participate in discussions and activities within the forum. Basically we choose this forum for three main reasons. Firstly choosing this brand community that has passed through long journey and still pursuing in the community will be a good help for us to have broad data and well-structured information in order to answer the research problem by observing on how the community members co-create value through performing different services practices. The second reason is that the forum allows anyone who is interested to join and participate freely in the discussion without any charge. We use this opportunity to be members in this community and it also helped us to collect the information where majority members participate in and benefit from. The third reason is that Volvo forum is an excellent exemplar of brand community that contributes to people to interact and co-create values through exchanging information’s, holding different events, getting help from the community and helping others to solve their problems. These are all good supplements for us to identify the different services practices and how consumers provide services to each other in the community.

3.4 Data Collection

Data collection should be based on the research design and research problem (Ghauri & Grønhaug 2010), likewise when we collect our data for this thesis we
have given a consideration to collect the data by observing VF community on how fans of the brand (customers) propose value through providing different services within the community. In this part we have used primary data in order to collect the available data’s from the brand community.

### 3.4.1 Primary data

According to Ghauri and Grønhaug (2010), primary data is the data that is collected by the researchers for the first time which the data is relevant for the researchers study to answer research question. As suggested by Ghauri and Grønhaug 2010, p. 102 “primary data can be collected through observation, experiments, surveys (questionnaires) and interviews.” In our thesis we have collected our primary data through observation of the forum threads (discussion topics). We choose those threads that have high star mark (rated by members), a great deal of number of viewers and threads that are more relevant to the aim of the study. We collect the data by acting as non-participant observers and embedding the research aim with the phenomena in the community (Ghauri & Grønhaug 2010). We downloaded the relevant data directly from the online conversation and copied, and then inscribed (given a name) and downsized to fit the purpose of this thesis (Kozinets, 2002). The data gathered are from the year 2007-2012 (all still active). It was not difficult for us to access this information in the VCF-community. We registered in VCF community and became members then we started gathering information that will help us to answer the research problem through observing different threads. Table1, attached in the annex shows the title of threads, the number of viewers and the number of replies made to the selected threads along with the service category.

### 3.4.1.1 Netnography

Netnography is an online research methods that used to the study of the communities and cultures created through computer-mediated social interaction (Kozinets 2010). We employ this methodology in order to observe how customers provide services to each other in VCF community. Netnography is a good resource for qualitative research studies (Bowler 2010). It helps to identify what power the communities have on the society or culture around them, so that it is
important to apply this methodology (Bowler 2010). VCF community is one of the largest and oldest community where there is close interaction between members which they share the same purpose in order to advocate and support the brand. In our observation of the community we focused on threads that members discuss on different issues and those issues involve knowledge and skill sharing from the members’ different experiences which help the rest of the community member to solve problems and add to their knowledge. We focused on 22 threads with respect to our aim and identified 8 service practices which we later divided them in to 3main themes which helped us to analyze in brief.

As discussed by Kozinets (2010;cited in Bowler, 2010) there are different methodological stages and procedures for netnographic studies in order to answer the research question, by collecting the data through directly copying from the computer-mediated communications of online community members’ conversations and observations of the members activities on how they interact. After collecting the data the researchers analyze and interpret the classification, coding analysis and contextualization of communicative acts (Kozinets, 2010; cited in Bowler 2010). In the forum there are about 300 posts every day on average and we select the threads that will help us to answer the research question. For instance there are minimum 95 viewers and maximum 73,312 viewers of the selected threads and participating members in the discussions and number of replies ranges from 4- 741. It seems most of them have benefited from getting help for their problems with the car and also share their experiences on other issues. Through using this method we have gained an opportunity to collect the data by ourselves which helped us to have insightful view on the community and to get a good understanding on how customers’ provider services to each other.

3.5 Data Analysis
In this part we discuss how we analyzed the collected data corresponding with theoretical part on value creation, brand community and service dominant logic. As defined by Ghauri and Grønhaug (2010) data analysis is the method of sorting and organizing of the collected data. We have identified eight (8) service practices
that customers provide to each other. In order to briefly analyze our finding we have categorized these practices in relation to Schau et. al. (2009) as Customer service Practices and we divide them into three main themes based on their main focus of the services in relation to Schau et. al, (2009). These themes are Brand Utilization Services, Social Integration Services and Brand Impression Services. In those 8 service practices we have used conversations collected from 24 threads that focus on service providing practices of consumers that show value proposition between the community members. These are Maintenance, Commoditizing and Grooming services under the theme Brand Utilization; Empathizing, Informing and Mentoring services under the theme Social Integration; and Pledging and Praising services under the theme Brand Impression. Based on these threads we have drawn our analysis corresponding with theory which guided us to answer the research question.

3.6 Validity and reliability
As described by (Bryman & Bell 2007) validity and reliability are important to evaluate the quality of business research. Validity is apprehensive on the accurateness of data measurement (Golledge & Stimson 1997). Reliability is the steadiness of the measurement and trustworthiness of the data (Ghauri & Grønhaug 2010). In this thesis we have collected valid and reliable data for our findings by registering and being members in VCF community. This community is well known and has recently celebrated 50th year anniversary. Being a member in the community has helped us to collect the data (conversations) directly (primary data) from popular threads with many viewers and high star marks which help us to answer our research problem. We have referred 16 articles published in journal of marketing, journal of strategy and leadership, journal of consumer research, journal of service research and journal of consumer culture. In addition we have referred online articles, books and e-books. Based on the information in the empirical part and in relation to the reviewed literatures, we have done analysis of the thesis which also answers the research questions developed in the introduction part.
3.7 Limitations

The study is limited to a single online brand community due to time shortage. Even though netnography helped us to gain understanding service practices of the Volvo online community in their natural environment, it was not easy for us to know the culture of the community within such a short while (since the communication is virtual, it takes more time to understand the culture than in the corporal world). For instance their language usage in their conversations was more of technical words and jargons; they also use different symbols to express their feelings so it takes time to comprehend all of those things. In addition to this, collecting the data that is relevant to our research aim was time taking and intricate since the community has very broad information regarding different aspects.
Chapter 4: Findings

In this part we describe how VCF members provide service to each other through the interaction and communication with one another. In particular, we are focusing in the customer service practices that the members of this community enact. As we previously defined customer service practice, it is a routine type of behavior of applying competences (knowledge and skills) through physical or mental activities of doing or saying things for ones’ own benefit or the benefit of others. We based our study on a Volvo online brand community to find out these practices in the community in broad terms including those practices revealed by previous researches consistent with the definition that shows the practice of service and value proposition between the community members. Consequently, our findings show that community members provide services within the community by proposing value through different practices. We refer to these practices as Customer service Practices and we divide them in to three main themes in relation to Schau. et.al (2009) based on their main focus of the service. These themes are Brand Utilization Services, Social Integration Services and Brand Impression Services. Hence Maintenance, Commoditizing and Grooming services under the theme Brand Utilization; Empathizing, Informing and Mentoring services under the theme Social Integration; and Pledging and Praising services under the theme Brand Impression. Of these eight service practices, Empathizing, Grooming and Commoditizing has been previously described as value creating practices by Schau et.al (2009). We have also found these practices in the VCF community playing a role as service practices, which will be elaborated further under the respective titles. Following is the description of the practices along with posts made by community members and explanation of the posts.

Customer service practices

4.1 Brand Utilization Services: - These service practices are similar to brand use practices in Schau et. al, (2009, p. 35), they are “distinctively meant to an improved or superior use of the focal brand”. These services practices help members to better utilize consumption facilities of the Volvo
car, to minimize cost on the car and to help keep the car to have long-term value. Under these service practices are *maintenance*, *commoditizing* and *grooming*.

4.1.1 Maintenance

In the community we have observed that some members conduct maintenance service practices for the car parts with a cheaper price and high quality, as described by the other members (users of the service). We call these practice maintenance because the posts from the service providers and also users show that they observe better performance in their car. In this practice, consistent with the notion of customer service practice the service provider (who is also a member of the community) is applying his/her special skills and competencies to repair a specific part of the car for a better performance. Hence the benefit of the service goes to both the provider of the service (financial income and/or satisfaction for helping others) and the service users (better product performance).

For instance, the following poster (Jim) proposes cleaning and checking service for car injectors describing the need for the service and benefits with technical details of his service. In addition, he mentions that the service is recommended by many experts and it is rarely available in most garages due to lack of equipment. He also mentions that his service price is reasonably fair with high quality suitably designed for forum members (they are also guaranteed to get their money back if it doesn’t work correctly after service) than similar services by others with high price and low quality.

Injector cleaning and testing now available at down to earth prices […] he mentions why the service is necessary and the potential problems when cars don’t get this service…] Many experts agree that injectors need to be cleaned and checked for consistency every 25 to 30,000 miles […] he mentions that the service is rarely available and may cost up to £200 with low quality[…] then he mentions that his service will restore 90% of faulty injectors to their original specification. The service will cost £6.00 per injector including postage, and he describes the procedures to send injectors […] All the injectors that are returned and stated to be in full working order will be guaranteed to function correctly or your money back. If requested, a report can be included stating the condition of the injectors before &
after service. This is an “AT COST” service to the members of the forum - jimathan, senior member-Dec 21st, 2007

Similarly the following poster (Simon) is proposing a maintenance service to modify cars to help forum members to have a better performing car. He mentioned that working in a Volvo main dealer for many years and being a member in many forums has helped him to know the problems of Volvo cars and possible solutions to resolve the problems. He also mentions that he do not get financial benefit from the service rather he would like to help the forum members.

My name is Simon and I have worked in the parts department at FRF Motors (a Volvo main dealer) for the best part of the last 10 years. I have a genuine interest in cars and modifying I feel that the fact I have been a fairly big user of many forums over the last 5 or 6 years all helps me provide the service that I would expect to get if i was on the buying side of the equation. Working in a Volvo main dealer and being a big forum user meant that eventually the two came together I would like to add that I personally have no financial gain from this, i do not make anything extra from this service, (as i have been asked on a few occasions). For me it really is a case of piles of extra work... lol (honest!) but i enjoy doing it and enjoy being able to provide this service to fellow volvo owners. Rufe Aug 21st, 2008

We also take the following post for the purpose of this paper (from a number of posts made by users of the above services), to show how much the forum members appreciated the services. We can see that SATURNURANUS is satisfied after the service and he is motivating others to take advantage of, and benefit from the service. He also mentioned that the service charge is reasonable for such impressive service.

“Wotcha folks! For the benefit of anyone considering cleaning their injectors, I would like to add my experience of Jims cleaning service to this thread. […]first he mentioned how long the service takes, then how to send the injectors to jim and how they can check after service performance...] I’m impressed. Jim's service is quick, easy, cheap and personal. He called to confirm I had received the injectors back and then gave me a full report on what he had found, and the work carried out. […]then he expresses his appreciation and mentions that the cost is reasonable…] Bravo! posted by 17-01-08"
4.1.2 Commoditizing

As part of Brand Utilization Service this practice involves the activity of distancing or approaching the market to buy or sell a specific product or part of a product to best utilize the focal brand (the car) (Schau. et al., 2009). In relation to customer service practice, members (those who have information or knowledge) give advice and suggestions to other members about the cost and performance of products in the market including quality details about the product and/or the firm selling the product which is related to maximizing the value of the car, for instance, to replace worn parts those who have these important information or knowledge will help the rest of the members to know the type, worth and quality of different products that will help maximize the performance and efficiency of the car, hence benefit from the service.

For example, in the following post we can see that a community member is giving advice on buying a specific part for the car by comparing different brands and their prices as well as details of the differences in their performance. And finally he gives his suggestion on what he thinks of is best and other customers have to buy.

[...here the poster recommends LPG brand, however he also states potential problems if it is factory fit model, and if the problem happens, he thinks the replacement will cost up to £800...]. Depending on the car, that'll be between £1500 and around £1750 inc VAT. If your new car is a Ford-era Volvo then it'll cost a bit more as these conversions need what's called a valve-saver system. Basically, Ford-Volvo engines ain't as durable as Volvo-Volvo engines, and LPG exposes this quite quickly. A non-turbo 2.5 V70 on LPG will do around 25 mpg. At current LPG prices that'll work out at 15 per mile. The same car on petrol will do around 30mpg - 21p per mile. [...lastly, he recommends LPG-converted car to buy...]. Cheers Jack... Capt Jack 16-03-12

The following post was a reply to a customer who wants to buy a break for his car. Here the master member gives an advice that it is better to use Volvo OEM brake discs because it is verified by the forum members that it is best for the car even if it cost more money and he suggested him to have more guaranteed product than the cheaper one.

It’s been proven quite a bit on this forum that its best to go Volvo OEM parts to replace worn parts, they are slightly more, but will last far longer than blueprint parts - it works out more
expensive to go for the 'cheaper' option, also, for something like brakes, do you really want to cut corners? (m1tch1987, 22-04-2012, Master Member)

In the following post we can see a senior member giving advice for a new member who wants to buy Volvo 740 turbo. He briefly describes how to check the car carefully, like if it has full service history, if the car electricity works properly, to check cooling system and if the head gasket is not leaking. He also advice him to check on the tyres, brakes, clutch and other consumables are good and nearly new. This member will have a good know how to check the car and their related prices when he go to the dealer and the others also can learn from this post what parts to check when they buy a car.

[...here the poster advices on what the buyer have to check before buying...]. Manuals are better than automatics. For the price that one is, it should be pristine. There should be very little wear. A Volvo with 165000 or even 265000 will look not too different from a 65K car. Make sure it hasn't been clocked.[.....here he lists a number of advices on how to test the car....]. If you see pink antifreeze, take $1000 off the price, as this is what a garage will charge to repair the heater/air conditioner. [...he suggests that the car components have to be in god condition for the above stated price, he also suggests the buyer can save money if he learns to fix the car by himself...]cheers, Brian (redboy,27-04-2012, Senior Member)

4.1.3 Grooming

This practice involves the concern and advice on how to take care of the product within the community members without a mandate by the manufacturer (Scahu. et.al, 2009). Grooming is a service practice in that it entails sharing of specialized skills or competence based on personal experience to upkeep the car to give better value and to protect it from deteriorating. Hence members benefit from this service by getting knowhow and new ways of protecting the car from damage, on how to make it look good, and better ways of maximizing its value in use.

For instance, in the following post a master member gives advice on how to remove rust under the seat by using a wire brush and penetrating oil so that the seat will be flexible to adjust as desired.
The torx bolts go through the floorpan. And the protruding end rust solid with the underside. So get on your back under the car and remove the rust with a wire brush, use lots of penetrating oil and try again to remove them from the topside. It can help to first try to turn them tighter then loose. That way you break the rust loose. B2OF master member 11-03-12

Similarly in the following thread we can observe that the premier member is giving a technical advice for members who have problems with locking and unlocking the car doors. He explains what it causes this and how to fix it by spraying with lubricant to decrease friction.

**Problem: v40 door won't lock**

had this problem on a few cars, can occur when the outer door handle is pulled before the door has fully unlocked with the remote, also it can occur if there is something inside the door panel i.e. waterproof membrane is bowing the rod inside the door panel, also had to change a couple of C/L motors for being "lazy", you need to remove the door card and pull the lock button up when unlocking, also check the unlock/locking rod is not bent and causing excessive friction on the lock button in the panel, worth spraying with lube the locking mechanism inside the door as a first test and reassemble and try. (grass hopper, 04-06-2009, Premier Member)

In the following text we can see a member describing how to reset service light which is a reminder that informs the driver when it is time for the car to be serviced. He briefly explains what procedures to take to reset the service light and why it is important to have a service reset light. This post also is helpful for others who don´t have a clue on how to reset service remainder indicator.

Resetting the Service reminder indicator (SRI), model years -2001. The service reminder indicator (SRI) informs the driver that it is time for the car to be serviced. The lamp remains lit for 120 seconds when the ignition is switched on. Note! If the lamp flashes, it may be because one of the service parameters has not been programmed. Proceed as follows to reset the service reminder indicator (SRI):
- Ignition position I - Press and hold in the reset button for the trip odometer - Ignition position II - The service reminder indicator (SRI) starts flashing when the reset button for the trip odometer has been pressed for 10 seconds - Release the reset button for the trip odometer within 5 seconds. The instrument gives an audible signal when resetting has succeeded. Note! If the trip meter reset button is not released within 5 seconds the indicator is not reset. However the indicator will stop flashing. (28-10-2011) Markaz.
4.2 Social Integration Services

The main focus of this service practice is on broadening and strengthening the interaction among community members. This service is similar to the social networking practice of consumers as in Schau et.al, (2009, p. 34) where “the practice focuses on creating, enhancing, and sustaining ties among brand community members”. This service includes Empathizing, Informing and Mentoring service practices.

4.2.1 Empathizing

In Empathizing service practices members express their sympathy to each other when they face problems on areas concerning the brand and other issues that are not related to the brand. Consistent with customer service practice, we can see that members express their concern and share their views in their conversation about problems, by expressing their personal experience in relation to such specific situations and suggest possible solutions to resolve the problem. This in turn can create a sense of belongingness and encourage members to express their problems for discussion (whether brand related or not). Hence members benefit from this service practice either by applying the methods other members use to cope up with the problem or by getting someone to talk to, who understands their situation and shares similar ideology. Our findings regarding this services show consistency with Schau et.al (2009, p. 34) suggestions that “social networking practices evolve and move past brand boundaries” as they incorporate issues not related to the brand.

For instance, the following two posts were taken from a thread to sympathize a member who has technical failure with the car and he couldn’t start the car because the battery was dead. However, he called to the dealer and explained about the problem but he got the answer that they don’t have a recall notice for the problem as it is not common. Accordingly the following poster explains that the problem is odd and he had no such problem. However he expresses his sympathy and wished him a good luck to get help from the dealer.

er not that common! I have had 2 XC60s and had no battery problems with either even when map light has been left on overnight by accident. Still seems odd. Hope
Unlike the above poster, the following poster explains that he have had similar problem with his car. He also explains how he get a solution for the problem and he added that it is common to have electronic failures that sometimes car owners or even Volvo don’t understand why it is happening.

I’ve had an issue when pushing the key fob in and pressing the start button resulted in nothing happening and all the instruments/lights going blank/off. Key fob was then not released when pressed. Nothing to do with a flat battery, I had about an hour before completed a 500 mile journey. Five minutes later, pressed the button again and the car started without issue, the fault has not been repeated and I'm at a loss as to why it happened in my case. There are things happening with the electronics of these cars that we, and Volvo, don't understand and perhaps my car was tired and needed a longer rest! XC60 D5 SE Lux Premium - With rattles and intermittent fault with electric tailgate, just ordered a new one! higthepig, post 15-03-12

The following post is about a member who have lost his sister and other members comforting him and showing him their sympathy. They also advice him to be strong and while expressing their condolences to him and his family and telling him that they are right by his side to listen to him and to help him.

Yes Oily, I recall the facts and from personal experience I know what you are going through right now. Although this doesn't immediately help you, time DOES help. I could have said time heals, but I'm not even there yet, so I can't say it with confidence. Please let your feelings flood out as much as you like wherever and whenever you are, don't hold back. If you want to go somewhere to 'let go', then go. If you want to let it flow in here, then welcome, we'll understand and support you, of course, you know that already. Don't try to be the brave stiff upper lip type, a damn good bawl is better, (in my experience). All the very best mate, my condolences go to you and your family in this dark time. Bless you all. You WILL come through the storm and you WILL reach settled waters. The ripples of the past will still be there, but less as you sail clear. You'll be fine, but you're not there yet. Be patient. Chin up. Bob (captain_pugwash_20,02-08-2011, Master Member)
4.2.2 Informing

As one of the social integration practices informing involves exchanging important information between community members, for instance information about events and gatherings, sharing experiences, asking for help, getting a free advice from members, notices about participating in different activities like charity, car show and members get together etc. The basics for this practice to be a customer service practice lies in its ability to involve members and help them take advantage of different occasions or activities or information through important notices by other members who have the knowledge or information about such facts and their associated benefits. Therefore community members can get awareness about different things which they can make use of.

For instance we can see in the following conversation that a member informing others to come to charity program and if they come they will have a chance to meet peoples from different forums and there will be free food and coffee, as most people would like to join events that are free of charge. Hence the way he informed to the community will encourage members to come and have a good time with other peoples and participate in the charity. In this case they will do two positive things both helping on the charity and also entertaining themselves. This shows us how this brand community are creating a good social interaction with in members and strengthen the community.

Charity dyno day 3rd march at hlm bromsgrove .

“hello peeps the is a charity dyno day at hlm Bromsgrove raising money for the air ambulance all clubs welcome and it will be a good day and remaps done on site on the same day .35 pounds for the power runs with free food and coffee and tea, this is a very good social gaveling and also a chance to see some cars on the dynos as well as meeting members off different forums. All types of cars are welcome turboed or not. This is for a worthwhile charity and a nice day so please join in or if you just want to donate to the charity that can be arranged too. Thanks for reading this thread. (Smithy, 20-01-2012, Master member)

The following poster informs about discounts, he stated that forum teams have negotiated with MRG car dealership in order to provide special discount to the members on parts and services that the company provides.
They have reached to an agreement to give this special offer to members and he is encouraging members to take advantage of this special discount.

The forum teams have been approached by Ashok with the following offer he has managed to negotiate for forum members from MRG in Chippenham. MRG are a franchised dealership, and have hosted a couple of open days for members of the various UK Volvo forums. I think it's fair to say that they are generally held in a very high regard both by those who have attended these events, and who use them for their regular servicing. If you want to PM Ashok to take advantage of his offer of delivery of parts to meets he is attending, you can do so here. MRG in Chippenham very kindly offered to extend an exceptional deal to all forum members on both parts and servicing. They also offer fantastic after sales customer support, and I am very grateful that they have agreed to continue to offer substantial discounts on parts, general servicing and other related work. (foggyjames,06-10-2008,300 Register keeper)

The following post was made by Ollie who works in Sky Insurance and he is also a member of the community. As we understand from the post, the insurance company has offered special discounts to the VCF community members and Ollie is informing the members to take advantage of this special offer. He lists the specific criteria like age requirement and driving experience to get comprehensive insurance. He also lists a number of benefits that makes this insurance offer unique than other insurances which help them to get permission from VCF administration together with the company’s long year experience.

Hi all, with permission from club admin, Sky Insurance are very pleased to be on board with the Volvo OC and Volvoforums and we are also pleased to announce that we are able to offer our car club member discount to any member who meets our criteria. […]here he mentions about the company’s experience with forums and specializations…]We believe that anyone who puts the time and effort into looking after and modifying their ‘pride and joy’ is a lower risk than your average driver.

Ollie Jul 15th, 2010

4.2.3 Mentoring

In this service practice members give moral and psychological support, advice and problem solving suggestions from their personal experience and observation when other members face brand related or other problems. It is customer service practice, in that members (who have knowledge and practical experience in how
to solve a problem) give this service for free to help other members (who are new
to the problem and don’t have the knowledge on how to deal with it) to benefit
from it.

For instance, in the following post we can see that one member has come out to
discuss in front and tell others not to be afraid to talk about their depression and to
ask people for a help. This gives an opportunity for others who have similar
problems, but afraid to talk about it, the courage to participate and this will help
them to learn from others experience.

“A very interesting question and that not everyone would admit on suffering. I have
suffered depression for quite a long time and initially tried to cope with just some
counseling which helped a lot. With finally being diagnosed with Chronic Fatigue
Syndrome a couple of years ago after many years with the problem getting worse I
was faced with problems arising from my illness and became very depressed from
losing my old life and having to adjust to a completely different life. I found I needed medication to cope and even now feel at times as if I am living on a
knife edge. Fortunately I have always had support from my family and they have
also helped by taking some of the pressures off me. However, I now just live life one
day at a time and am never afraid to ask for help or support when I need it. I am
fortunate to have a GP who is a good listener and spend the time I need”. (Mike
Brace, 02-06-2012, Premier member)

The following post was made in a reply for request made by a member who just
bought Volvo 850 turbo and he explains that the car has clunk on the bumps and
the rubber at the top is chewed, so he asks for help on what part he need to buy
and how to fix it. Hence the following poster is giving details of procedures on
how he can do it. This will give a good awareness for the person who needed
advice and also for the rest of the community members who have similar
problems.

If your doing strut top plus top hat is a little more tricky. Compress the spring only
a bit, crack the top nut on the shock and take the top hat off then put the nut back on
a couple of threads. Compress spring greatly. Undo bottom bolts and strut top bolts.
Pull strut out and replace strut top and put the centre strut nut on for insurance. Line
everything up and bolt top and bottom in. Undo centre nut and replace top hat. Bolt
it on tight, make sure everything else is tight then loosen spring compressor. Put
wheel back on and job done. Logan360 07-Jun-2012
The following post is made by a senior member in response to a question on how to change spark plugs by a junior member. He lists all the procedures including pictures on how to do it. He also added the importance of changing the plugs regularly and the damaging consequences of not changing regularly.

GUIDE : Changing your spark plugs

Your spark plugs perform an essential role for your engine and should be monitored/maintained regularly. […] here he mentions about potential damages due to plug failure, and then he suggests a good brand to buy and lists procedures on how to change i….]. This gives a more even distribution of spark and is designed to encourage a better flame front in the cylinder i.e. a more even burn of the mixture If nothing else you should look at your plugs at least every year to see what's going on in the engine - the plug can tell you if you are too rich/lean and a multitude of other things - pick up any Haynes manual or similar for a description of the various engine conditions shown by your spark plug tips. Anyway, down to business - how to change plugs .(JSeaman, 28-08-2007, Senior Member)

4.3 Brand Impression Services

In this service practice members express their strong feeling and emotional attachment which is strongly favorable to the car (brand), its associated value and meaning in their life including its primary purpose of transportation and other values in their private and social life integrations (they feel proud and confident of their car when they meet other peoples). This service is similar to impression management practices as in Schau et.al, (2009) where the focus of the practice is to create favorable impression of the brand among the society outside brand community. This service practice includes Pledging and Praising service practices.

4.3.1 Pledging. It is obvious that firms promise for their clients as well as potential customers to provide best quality product or services which gives maximum value for customers in an effort to produce exchanges. However, the other way round, this practice (pledging) shows that consumers undertake promises to continue using the product and be loyal to the brand justifying their reasons why they are giving their words. What makes this practice a service
practice lies in their justification to continue using the product. Here customers share their knowledge and experiences in using that specific product (even some of them comparing it with other similar products) show how they benefit from it and let others know about those benefits, in other words, they propose value based on their personal experiences. The following post was taken from the thread “Would you buy another Volvo?” Since most of the replies have similar content, we only take few of the posts for the purpose of this paper.

The following poster explains that there is no other car that fits his interest other than Volvo. Even though he had experience with other cars, he realizes that Volvo is the only comfortable car for him since he had a back surgery. So he assures that he is definitely buying another Volvo not any other brand. This practice tells a lot for those members who have similar health problems. Some of the members in this thread have also explained that the forum is the main reason for them to stick to the brand in addition to the fair price of Volvo cars, since they can get valuable information.

Yes. I have tried other cars (company cars) but I am afraid that Volvo make the only cars that I can sit in comfortably on a long journey. I've had two major back operations, and every other car I have tried, I suffer after about 20 minute to half an hour. Had a company Citroen C5 for a while, it was pure agony on a long run, and I needed assistance to get out the thing. Alec (My other car is a WD 2-10-0) Alec Dawe post 18-01-12

Similar to the above poster the following poster also pledges that he will buy another Volvo car. He mentions that he has bought a Volvo car recently but he is also saving money to buy additional Volvo. He also mentions that he use to drive Honda cars for long years, however after his test drive of the Volvo car he managed to see the quality difference and now he is not driving Honda cars anymore.

[….here he explains that he has recently bought a V40 Volvo and he is planning to make good use of it and he continues as follows about his future plan…)My plan is to get saving like mad and buy a nice V50 at some point. I've never had a Volvo or even driven one until last week when I test drove the v40 !! I must say, I like the car. I thought I was a 'Honda man' after having them for the last 8 years, but when I look back, they have all died far to early. I'm looking to jump ship and hang my hat on
In another thread, the following poster explains that he bought his first Volvo from his friend and he made a promise to keep the car. He also explains that he have bought another Volvo not just to keep his friend’s promise but he thinks that Volvo is the best and he will continue to use the same brand.

Wouldn't have anything else. I was sold my first Volvo (460) by a friend for £1 on his deathbed, with the promise that if anything happened to it I was to buy another Volvo to take his disabled wife, Marion, around in. When Betty (the 460) died I kept my promise and found a V40 (VV). When VV was written off a month ago others tried to talk me into getting a different make but none could change my mind. I had made a promise and even if I hadn't I wouldn't of changed my mind. I now have another V40 (Booboo). They have always been the best cars I have driven.

4.3.2 Praising

Here members act as ambassadors of good will for Volvo brand. Accordingly the following posts by the community members under study reveal the fact that they have a very deep and strong emotional attachment for the brand in that they express their love and their feeling about using the brand that makes them so proud and passionate. Justifying the reasons why they prefer the brand and explaining how it is important in their life the members not only impress outsiders but also make an impact on community members to keep using the same brand. As part of customer service practice, here members explain that they have benefited way too long by owning the Volvo car from its original purpose of transportation, for instance they state that it gives them comfort, self confidence and pride while they are driving or when they meet other peoples. Hence signifying associated benefits and value of the car in their personal consumption as well as its crucial role in their social interactions, members create awareness of these benefits as well as substantiate the choice of internal members in buying Volvo and impress the outside society about those benefits. For example, the following poster appreciates Volvo cars and he explains his major reason for choosing Volvo is the safety. He mentions about the crush incident happened between Volvo car and another brand car and the Volvo car was ok after the
accident while the driver in the other car lost his life. A survey of “The Sun” newspaper also shows that Volvo is the best car - according to markgsv40.

Apart from the looks of the modern Volvos, there are two things I forgot to mention. Firstly there is the safety. Years ago scooting along the M62 in an old pug 205, my wife said I needed something safe. After watching one of those motorways cop programmes where there was a three car pileup involving a truck, a pug and a volvo. I think it was the M5 and the pug was crushed beyond recognition and the Volvo took it all in its stride. Unfortunately the person in the pug died. That threw it for me. Secondly, the Sun did a survey for the best car to have alfresco fun in. And the Volvo estate came out tops. markgsv40 06-Jun-2012

Haremach, similar to the above poster expresses his pride and love for the brand. He explains about the looks of the car and his feeling while driving it as amazing. He also added that he is going to get a new Volvo because the one he has is so old and in poor condition. However, he feels sorry just to lose the old one.

“I just love that feeling you get when the 'brick' goes into sports mode and just takes off - leaving everything else standing! The looks are just amazing like 'that shouldn't happen'. Sadly our first 960 is just leaving us for that big volvo graveyard in the sky - she has a very poorly engine and has sat on my drive for the best part of 2 years (could bear to part with her!) lots of tears are to be shed. The 'new'one arrives later this week same age, more miles but really well serviced and looked after needs some TLC on the body laquer though. So yes I have real pride in my volvo's love em love em off to sweden at the end of the month too!” haremach post, 06-03-2011

The following member explains that he is proud to be the owner of Volvo car. Even though the car seems to have a problem with the radio he still feels proud and he thinks the problem can easily be fixed by asking some help.

Hello all, i recently became the proud owner of a Volvo 850 t5 glt and loving it but i seem to have a small problem with the radio in that when it's on the volume doesn't get very loud so I checked the back and there doesn't seem to be a cable in the amp socket. Not really sure if there's meant to be anything there but thought I would ask anyway. Thanks guys Ghost6412 02-06-12
Chapter 5: Discussion

In our finding we have identified eight customer service practices enacted by customers active on brand communities to give service to other customers by proposing value so as to help themselves or others benefit from the service. Our findings support the views of Vargo and Lusch (2004, p. 7) which suggests that “value-in-use results from the beneficial application of operant resources sometimes transmitted through operand resources”, in that customer service practices tremendously involve operant resources consciously applied to community members for co-creation of value and to help members benefit from the service. Hence, based on the empirical data we suggest that customers consciously integrate resources to offer to online communities; customers provide service by proposing value for other customers; and customer service practices are significant both for brand communities and the brand image. We have also outlined a model that illustrates the value proposition process within the brand community and its rewarding effect for community members and the brand (the firm).

5.1 Customers consciously integrate resources to offer to online communities

In the VCF community members’ primary purpose of joining the forum is to get information, help and assistance mainly in brand related and secondly in other matters. As it is described in Parahalad and Ramswamy, (2004b) though there are a lot of choices for customers nowadays, they are still unsatisfied with the value of the offerings and these unsatisfied customers join or establish brand communities to influence the value creation process. Hence what we observed in the VCF community supports this fact. Of all services, Brand Utilization Services focuses on improving the car for better utilization through maintenance, commoditizing and grooming service practices. These service practices help members to explore and use new and different ways of using and preserving the car. Consistent with this view Schau.et.al, (2009, p. 39) have argued that “Practices continually create and perpetuate new opportunities for consumption”. Similar to the service-centered view in S-D logic (Vargo & Lusch, 2004) which dictates the importance of collaboration with customers for customization of
products for better value proposition to meet individual needs, value in these services is created through mutual and open interaction and discussion of individual customers through the internet. For instance in maintenance service practice the service providers (also community members) explores and introduces for other members new way of improving the car service by repairing some parts of it with a reasonable price. Similar to the connotation of service in S-D logic, the service provider is applying his competences, knowledge and skills (operant resources) through performing the maintenance practice on the car (operand resource) to make financial benefit for himself and let the users get competent service (Vargo & Lusch, 2004). We can see that the service providers integrate their skill and experiential knowledge (operant resource) to be applied on the car (operand resource) to improve the performance of the car. As we have seen from the posts by beneficiaries of this service they have found it valuable in that they witnessed the excellent performance of the car after the service. In addition to posting ‘thank you’ notes for the service provider, we have seen that they also encourage others to take advantage of the service. It is also similar in commoditizing service practices where members exchange information about buying car parts or the whole car. This dialogue or interaction is the source of value co-creation for members in the community (Parahalad and Ramswamy, 2004a). Here they discuss and suggest each other about products and prices, what is important to buy for cars to make them efficient and long lasting, where to buy quality product at reasonable price including what is worth to spend in what type of product. These discussions involve important knowledge (operant resource) and equip consumers with a better understanding to realize the value of the car and to maximize its value by customizing according to their needs. Grooming service practice, on the other hand, is a suggestion by members from their experience and knowledge about the Volvo car on how to take care of it. The discussions here include common problems and their solutions about Volvo cars, how to take care of the car by cleaning rusts and by painting it with lubricant and how to solve some technical problems. As we understand from their discussions some members have no clue while some members have experiential skills and knowledge about such important things. Thus by interacting in open and
transparent discussions members will co-create value for the betterment and efficiency of their cars.

The Social Integration service Practices which focuses on broadening and strengthening the interaction among community members, includes empathizing, informing and mentoring service practices. This service mainly equips members with social values which is “the perceived utility of an alternative resulting from its image and symbolism in association or disassociation with demographic, socioeconomic, and cultural-ethnic referent groups” (Smith & Colgate, 2007: p. 8). In the case of Empathizing members sympathize to each other providing emotional support for members in the community who have got problem or who is disappointed with something related to the brand or something related to his/her personal life. This practice creates sense of belongingness and common sense of value within the community (Schau et.al, 2009). Which is also consistent with emotional value concept as in Smith & Colgate, (2007) which is the apparent value gained through its ability to bring about or enable feelings like comfort, security, passion or affective states. Similarly, informing service practices within the forum will integrate the community and help to create value through exchange of information. Members share information regarding brand related or not, which they think is valuable and important for other members too. As stated in the S-D logic the intangibles like information and knowledge are basis for interactivity and connectivity which are more critical for services (Vargo & Lusch, 2004). Mentoring service practices like the above services provide value for community members. As we have seen it in the empirical part, members give advice, support and provide possible suggestions from their personal experience to solve a particular problem by other member in the community (which can be brand related or not). Customers cannot get such valuable services from the companies, rather discussing their personal problems and failures in the product within the forum will create the opportunity for them to know easy and better ways of solving the problem.

On the other hand, Brand Impression services that focuses on expressing loyalty to the brand and pride for inside community as well as the society outside the
brand community. This service practice involves to a great extent the justification behind such pride and promise to be loyal to the brand. This service is consistent with the notion of Impression management practices in Schau et.al, (2009) as a value creating practice using underline principles for the purpose of dedicating their time and effort to the brand and inspiring the society outside the brand community. Included in this service practice are pledging and praising. As it is apparent, firms promise to their customers through different ads and interactions with consumers to deliver the best quality product that involve excellent value observed that consumers promise or give their words to Volvo to stay loyal to the brand by stating that no other brand will match their preference. Yet, this unusual however important practice has a tremendous effect both on the consumers and the company. This consumer-generated content has a strong justification and experiential explanation for undertaking such promises Schau et.al, (2009).

As we have previously seen in the theoretical part, brand communities are established and run by the fans and admirers of the brand. This facilitates the pride (in relation to praising practice) in the brand, as described by Schau et.al. (2009) community members play a very crucial role in creating a favorable impression over the outside society by acting as ambassadors of good will of that specific brand. Consistent with this view Vargo and Lusch (2004) suggested that consumers obtain further value from the product to accomplish high level self esteesms in addition to the direct service they get from the product or service. The following quote best describes our findings with regard to reasoning of praising service practices.

That is people often purchase goods because owning them, displaying them and experiencing them (e.g., enjoying knowing that they have a sports car parked in the garage, showing it off to others, and experiencing its handling ability) provide satisfaction beyond those associated with the basic function of the product (e.g. transportation) (Vargo & Lusch, 2004: p. 9).

The course of performing these service practices follows similar pattern in the VCF community, where members propose value for other members in the community in all service practices.
5.2 Customers provide services by proposing value for community members

According to the service dominant logic (Vargo & Lusch, 2004: p. 11) “the enterprise can only make value propositions that strive to be better or more compelling than those of competitors.” However, we have observed that it is not only enterprises that propose value rather all customer service practices in the VCF community are undertaken through integrating resources into a value proposition that are uniquely designed to fit individual preferences and involve critical importance for parties involved. Consistent with this view Parahalad and Ramswamy, (2004a, p. 5) have stated that “value co-creation highly depends on individual experience”. In maintenance service practice for instance, the service provider with a special skill and competence (operant resource) that will be applied on the car (operand resource) to make the car more efficient and effective proposes value with a number of lists of benefits advantages. Similarly in commoditizing the suggestions to approach the market (to buy a car or spare part) (Schau et.al, 2009) are based on knowledge and skills about the product and the market. Through these operant resources members support and advice each other whether or not a particular product worth or cost something so that others will learn on how to approach the market regarding the focal brand (the car). As we have seen in the grooming practice also, the suggestions stems from knowledge and personal experiences- which are referred to as operant resources to be applied on the car (operand resource) to protect it from damage and to make it valuable and good performing for a longer period of time (value proposition), hence service practice in general.

The social integration service practices of empathizing, informing and mentoring involve intangible resources that can help equip the beneficiaries of these services to make use of it and multiply its value and create additional operant resources (Vargo & Lusch, 2004). For example in the case of empathizing, members give ideal support and sympathy with one another in case of disappointment and failure which they cannot get from Volvo Company. Similarly informing helps them to know current activities, know different options regarding brand related or other matters and to increase their social interaction. Mentoring on the other hand, involves experiential skills and knowledge on how to deal with or solve a specific
problem, given by members who are familiar with the situation for those members who are new to the situation and don’t know how to handle it. Hence all these services engage value propositions which have the capacity to better off and to make effect as used by the beneficiary.

The same applies to brand impression services of pledging and praising, here the justification for the actions of customers either to give promise or to express their personal feeling of emotion for the brand lies in the value of the car from their personal perspective of value. Which is consistent with the view of Parahalad and Ramswamy, (2004b, p. 9) stating that “unique value to customers is their experience”. Thus sharing of these valuable experiences is at the same time proposing value for others in the brand community and especially for the outside society. Accordingly in pledging service practices, consumers witness about the value potential of the product (Volvo car) from their personal experience with the car and some customers even witness about its preferential values while compared to other brands. Similarly in the case of praising we can see deep and favorable emotional attachment to the car in their conversation. The value perspective in their conversations is not limited to the cars primary purpose (transport) rather they also explain the benefits derived from the car in their private and social life. In both cases the customers are showing value-in-use, thus propose to others to realize such value.

5.3 Significance of customer service practices

So far we have seen that customer service practices in the VCF community are value creating practices which involve value proposition for other customers based on personal experience and knowledge performed through open interaction and communication. Consistent with this view is the significance of intangible resources, skills, information, knowledge and ongoing relationship in S-D logic (Vargo & Lusch, 2004). The brand utilization service practices endow members with new or additional ways of maximizing the value-in-use of the product (the car). This will help them to have better performing, efficient and at the same time good looking car, in a sense they can save time (due to increased efficiency of the car) and they can save money (decreased cost or no cost for related expenditures).
The social integration service practices on the other hand help members to have a strong social connection, make friends in the community, and comfort them to feel like they have ideal family, so that they feel free to bring any matter for discussion (whether brand related or not) and get valuable information and knowledge for free. It is similar with brand impression service practices, where someone praising about the brand, witnessing the values and promising to stick to the brand will make the community members confident and proud in their choice (being member of that community) in addition to making an impression to the outside society. Thus all service practices stated above have different value creating activities in the brand community depending on engagement in the practice. Hence our findings support the argument by Schau et.al, (2009, p. 40) that “value underlies all practices and that engagement in practices is an act of value creation”. In general, the more value the customers get from the product the more they will be happy and satisfied. And the more they are happy with the product the more they will be confident and proud and thus praising about the brand and pledging to stick to the brand. This in turn facilitates building a favorable brand image both within the brand community and the public outside the brand community.

5.4 Customer to customer value proposition within the brand community-Model

Based on our analysis of customer service practices, we have outlined a model that best describes customer to customer value proposition within the brand community and its effect on the firm (brand) in the figure below. There are two sets of customers within the brand community as described as follows. In the picture, the upward arrow at the bottom of the fig. representing customers denotes those customers who directly engage in the service practices either providing the service to help other members or those who join the conversations in support of the services. These customers, by integrating their knowledge and special skills (operant resources) to be applied on the car (operand resource) or to be transferred to other customers (operand resources) for better performance and substantial benefits, propose associated values for other members in the community through service practices (Vargo & Lusch, 2004). In doing so, these customers are
relieving the firm (Volvo) in that they are devoted to the brand and they are also inspiring other members to keep using the brand, which the firm (Volvo) rather has to do (Lusch et.al, 2010).

The second set of customers in the community which are indicated by the downward arrow at the top of the fig. denotes those members who are viewers of the conversations and users of the benefits associated with services (by asking different questions). This set of customers includes the whole of the community in that service providers in one service can also be users from the service itself and other services. Hence the experiential assistance, problem solving solutions and inspirational justifications can help these community members to realize value-in-use of the offerings through the service practices (Vargo & Lusch, 2004). This in turn will increase the customers’ satisfaction level in using the brand. Hence this enables (provides resource and opportunity for) the firm (Volvo) (Lusch et.al, 2010) to get loyal customer and get information about future demand (which is critical for efficiency and effectiveness). It also gives companies guides on what to focus on. Meanwhile, value is an important link that keeps company-to-customer and customer-to-customer relationships and interactions.
Figure 1, Customer to customer value proposition model within the brand community
Chapter 6: Conclusion

Corresponding to the aim of the research (to identify customer service practices), we have identified eight (8) customer service practices. We have categorized these practices under three main themes, namely Brand utilization services, social integration services and brand impression services. In addition to this the paper also discusses in detail how consumers perform these practices (for instance, through dialogues & discussions and by integrating resources in to a value proposition to community members). The paper also discusses the significance of customer service practice for brand communities (benefit from value-in-use) and the brand image as a result of satisfaction arising from better value utilization associated with the brand.

6.1 Theoretical contribution

Combining Service dominant logic research and research on value creating practices in brand communities; we, in this thesis, have studied customer service practices within the brand community. This study has contributed the notion of customer service practices and the types of customer service practices in the brand community. Customer service practices make effects and help community members to extract value of the offering through conveying competence and knowledge in their interaction. Moreover, the study has contributed additional insight to the service dominant logic research, in that proposition of values during service provision process which is based on interaction and communication is critical for customer service practices through customer to customer interaction as it is for companies. Hence the study shows how customers perform these crucial service practices by integrating resources and proposing compelling values based on knowledge, skill and personal experience. In addition the model, which shows customer-customer value proposition within the brand community, illustrates the significance of service practices (through value propositions) for the community members and for the brand (firm) as well.
6.2 Managerial implication

As we have seen in the customer service practice model the practice has a favorable impact on companies. Meaning, the more value the customers obtain from the focal brand with the help of customer service practices it is more likely that they will stay loyal to the brand. This in turn will help the company to have reliable customers, to know about the demands and to focus on important issues which customers values most. Hence we argue that strong and active brand community can be a competitive advantage for companies. In relation to Schau et.al, (2009) we also suggest that if companies give opportunities for consumers to construct brand communities and if they assist those already existing brand communities with different resources, the consumers can gain better value-in-use of the offering that will make them loyal to the brand. In relation to value co-creation Parahalad and Ramswamy, (2004b, p. 11) have stated that “In co-creation, direct interactions with consumers and consumer communities are critical. Accordingly our findings also suggest that strong and active brand communities best suits for the purpose of value co-creation and individualized customer experience based on their unique desires and wants.

6.3 Further research

Even though we identify and analyze customer service practice as the crucial type of practice which not only creates value but also encourage customers to benefit by using the values, the study is limited only in a single brand community. Thus in order to consolidate the uniformity of customer service practices we would like to encourage researchers to study the significance of customer service practice throughout different brand communities, and the comparative similarity and difference of application of customer service practices among brand communities.
Reference

- Ghauri, P. and Grønhaug, K. (2002). Research design and methodology
- Ghauri, P. and Grønhaug, K. (2010), Research Methods in Business Studies


• Volvoclub (2012), about the Volvo Owners Club, [online], Available; http://www.volvoclub.org.uk/index.shtml [2012-02-23]
Annex.

Table 1. Observation Profile

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Thread title</th>
<th>No. of viewers</th>
<th>No. of replies</th>
<th>Service category</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Petrol injectors, a Godsend or a nightmare!</td>
<td>42,984</td>
<td>397</td>
<td>Maintenance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FRF Motors (Volvo) Swansea</td>
<td>73,312</td>
<td>512</td>
<td>Maintenance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GUIDE Changing your spark plugs</td>
<td>4,491</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>Mentoring</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>help with seat removal</td>
<td>809</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Grooming</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cheap Brake Discs</td>
<td>735</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>Commoditizing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discount scheme with Sky Insurance!!</td>
<td>8,644</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>Informing</td>
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<tr>
<td>Depression</td>
<td>11,391</td>
<td>741</td>
<td>Mentoring</td>
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<td>Would you buy another Volvo?</td>
<td>7,144</td>
<td>112</td>
<td>Pledging</td>
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<td>Looking to buy a V70 bi fuel _ Any problems?</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>Commoditizing</td>
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<td>Special offer from MRG Chippenham</td>
<td>6298</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Informing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>So I'm considering a 1995 Volvo 740 turbo...</td>
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<td>Commoditizing</td>
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</tr>
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<td>Volvo &amp; Ford??</td>
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<td>T5 radio woes</td>
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