

# Building Brand Reputation in the Digital Age

Identifying effective brand communication to win the moment of truth online



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## Abstract

**Title:** Building Brand Reputation in the Digital Age: Identifying effective brand communication to win the moment of truth online

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**Keywords:** Brand Identity, Brand Reputation, Brand Communication, Consumer Decision-Making Process Online, Moment of Truth Online

### **Thesis purpose:**

The central purpose is to deliver a theoretical and practical contribution to existing literature in the fields of brand identity as well as brand reputation and particularly brand communication as a connecting link, lying in between. Further, the authors attempt to provide thorough understanding of the influence of online brand communication on consumers' decision-making process respectively the critical moment of truth online. In this context, a newly created brand management model is introduced.

### **Theoretical perspective:**

The literature review covers the interconnectedness between brand identity and brand reputation and theoretically examines the consumer decision-making journey in an online context. It creates the basis for the subsequent empirical research. Thereby existing brand identity frameworks have been reviewed in detail.

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### **Methodology:**

The authors apply a grounded theory strategy. Thereby a mixed method approach is used by combining both qualitative and quantitative data collection.

### **Empirical Data:**

Empirical data is gathered through in-depth interviews with twelve technology affine consumers. Subsequently, quantitative data is collected through an online survey in order to further evaluate the qualitative findings.

### **Conclusion:**

The authors conclude that multiple online communication channels have an impact on the creation of positive brand reputation and consequently a consumer's decision-making process. Thereby valuable guidance to the management process of online brand communication in order to establish positive brand reputation is provided. This is presented through a newly created model- The Brand Identity Communication Reputation Matrix (BICRM), which builds upon existing theory in the fields of brand reputation.

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## Table of Content

<b>1. Introduction.....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>1.1 Relevance of the Topic.....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>1.2 Purpose of the Study &amp; Research Question .....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>1.3 Outline of the Thesis.....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>2. Theoretical Framework.....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>2.1 Brand Identity &amp; Reputation .....</b>	<b>6</b>
2.1.1 Brand Identity .....	6
2.1.2 Brand Reputation.....	7
2.1.3 Interconnectedness between Brand Identity & Brand Reputation.....	8
<b>2.2 Brand Management Models .....</b>	<b>9</b>
2.2.1 Kapferer: Brand Identity Prism .....	9
2.2.2 Aaker: Brand Identity Planning Model .....	11
2.2.3 Urde & Greyser: Corporate Brand Identity and Reputation Matrix.....	13
2.2.4 Evaluation of Brand Management Models .....	15
<b>2.3 Online Customer Journey: Influencing Factors on Decision-Making.....</b>	<b>16</b>
2.3.1 Digital Consumer Behaviour .....	16
2.3.2 'Moments of Truth' in the Online Environment.....	17
<b>2.4 Evaluating Online Communication: Brand Communication as a Catalyst.....</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>3. Methodology .....</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>3.1 Research Aim &amp; Object of Study .....</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>3.2 Research Strategy &amp; Research Design.....</b>	<b>23</b>
<b>3.3 Data Collection &amp; Analysis.....</b>	<b>25</b>
3.3.1 Qualitative Research: Stage of Exploration.....	25
3.3.2 Qualitative Research: Analysis.....	28
3.3.3 Quantitative Research: Stage of Evaluation.....	29
3.3.4 Quantitative Research: Analysis.....	31

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<b>4. Analysis of Research Findings .....</b>	<b>35</b>
<b>4.1 Qualitative Research .....</b>	<b>35</b>
4.1.1 Sampling .....	35
4.1.2 Analysis & Findings .....	36
<b>4.2 Quantitative Research .....</b>	<b>40</b>
4.2.1 Sampling .....	40
4.2.2 Analysis & Findings .....	41
<b>5. Evaluation of Research Findings.....</b>	<b>47</b>
<b>5.1 The adapted cluster model.....</b>	<b>47</b>
<b>5.2 Evaluation of Online Communication Channels.....</b>	<b>48</b>
5.2.1 Brand Reputation Element: Relevance.....	48
5.2.2 Brand Reputation Element: Differentiation .....	49
5.2.3 Brand Reputation Element: Trustworthiness .....	50
5.2.4 Brand Reputation Element: Recognisability .....	50
5.2.5 Brand Reputation Element: Willingness-to-Support.....	51
5.2.6 Brand Reputation Element: Responsibility .....	52
5.2.7 Brand Reputation Element: Reliability.....	52
5.2.8 Brand Reputation Element: Credibility .....	53
<b>6. Implications .....</b>	<b>54</b>
<b>6.1 Theoretical Contributions: The Brand Identity-Communication-Reputation Matrix</b>	<b>54</b>
<b>6.2 Managerial Implications .....</b>	<b>56</b>
6.2.1 Owned Communication .....	57
6.2.2 Shared Communication .....	59
6.2.3 Earned Communication.....	60
6.2.4 Measurement of Brand Performance & Identification of Action Fields .....	62
<b>7. Limitations &amp; Future Research.....</b>	<b>63</b>
<b>8. Bibliography .....</b>	<b>66</b>
<b>9. Appendix.....</b>	<b>72</b>

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## 1. Introduction

In the introductory chapter, the authors highlight why the thesis topic is generally relevant from a theoretical as well as a practical point of view. Subsequently, the main purpose of the research at hand is outlined. This serves as a basis for the formulation of the research question. Conclusively, the outline of the thesis is introduced.

### 1.1 Relevance of the Topic

“The fusion of the corporate and product reputation has only reached its tipping point today. They are becoming nearly indivisible (Weber Shandwick, 2012, p. 3).”

Through the emergence of Web 2.0, information about corporate and product brands is highly accessible for a wide range of stakeholders. With regard to today’s consumption, the prevailing progress implicates a rising number of Internet- affine individuals, who frequently browse through the World Wide Web in order to acquaint themselves about brand-related issues. Accordingly, Aaker highlights in his latest publication that “digital can support the offering [of a brand] by making it more understandable and credible and by making the purchase process less frustrating (2014, p. 106).” In this context, current megatrends such as ‘Digitalisation’, ‘Automatisation & Connectivity’, combined with ‘Big Data’, result in extended information access for consumers and other stakeholders about certain products and brands. Thus, instead of drawing a stringent line between a corporation’s reputation and related products, the consolidation of both in one integrated brand reputation tends to be more efficient (Weber Shandwick, 2012).

Furthermore, marketers face greater challenges to manage brands in times, when well-informed consumers increasingly base their purchase decisions on brand reputation (Weber Shandwick, 2012). In this context, well-esteemed brands with regards to their

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reputation tend to be associated with high product quality. It is therefore essential to manage brands with the overall goal to generate and preserve positive brand reputation (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2013).

Consequently, solid brand reputation represents a key success factor regarding the so-called 'Moments of Truth' during an online customer journey (Esch, 2011). These critical instances of contact between consumers and brands allow consumers to form certain views on the brand and sustainably shape consumers' brand perceptions (Moran et al. 2014). They range from offline encounters with the brand, for instance product testing in local retail stores, to purposeful online research, such as comparing product criteria and reading customer reviews on online platforms (Lecinski, 2011).

Considering the wide scope of influence provided by the Internet, "consumers are in the driver's seat" (Weber Shandwick, 2012, p. 7), while being enabled to strengthen as well as harm brand reputation in the course of their online presence. For instance, the sharing of positive product ratings might boost brand reputation whereas bad customer reviews are likely to cast brands in a negative light (Karakaya & Barnes, 2010). In this context, empowered individuals are able to affect final purchase decisions of their friends and family. Apart from that, consumers can even influence and shape fellow consumers' evaluation of brand offerings and their online decision-making process (Moran et al. 2014; Weber Shandwick, 2012).

In order to enhance positive brand reputation, it is therefore crucial to consider critical online touch points throughout a consumer's decision-making journey. In this context, the authors aim at identifying critical communication channels of the online environment, which allow brands to strategically intervene in the process of generating solid brand reputation.



## 1.2 Purpose of the Study & Research Question

The research at hand attempts to contribute to existing scholarly literature in the fields of brand identity, brand reputation and especially brand communication as a bridging function, lying in between. Further, the authors intend to provide the reader with a thorough understanding of the impact of online brand communication on consumers' decision-making process respectively the critical moment of truth.

This implies that the main emphasis of the following study will be placed on 'online brand communication'. The reason for this is that the Internet as part of new media increasingly broadens and enhances today's communication processes. The online environment represents a virtual living space, which simultaneously reflects consumers' real lives. Depending on personal interests and social attributes, online users assemble in various online communities while using the digital space for different activities such as networking, studying or shopping. Thus, marketers respectively brand managers focus more and more on new media instead of relying solely on mass media. (Chen, 2014). To conclude, the Internet represents one of the most critical contemporary communication mediums, which has wide effects on a customer's online decision-making journey. Therefore 'online brand communication' features high relevance as the central research object of the study at hand.

Apart from that, the authors focus on the consumers' perspective since these stakeholders represent increasingly powerful individuals, especially with regard to their online presence. In contrast to that, the impact of brands is rather on the decrease (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2013).

In order to examine this specific field of interest, the authors defined three research questions, which provide the study at hand with a common thread. Thereby the answer to the first question results from an extensive literature review and the assessment of existing brand management models. In this way, the authors attempt to find out through

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which strategic measures brand identity can be converted into favourable brand reputation. As already indicated previously, the authors presume that brand communication plays a key role in this context. The main objective is therefore to adequately justify this presumption by existing theory. Thus, the following question has been derived:

***RQ1: How can brand identity be transformed into positive brand reputation?***

Subsequently, two additional research questions will be approached based on empirical evidence. By adopting a consumer's point of view, the authors thereby attempt to reveal online communication channels, which are considered to be decisive regarding the decisive moment of truth, respectively the final brand choice. This will be addressed by asking:

***RQ2: From a consumer's perspective, which online communication channels influence the decision-making process and the respective brand choice?***

Further, the authors will examine how influential consumers perceive certain online communication channels regarding their decision-making journey and their final choice of a brand. Thus, the third question is:

***RQ3: From a consumer's perspective, to what extent do the identified and manageable online communication channels influence the decision-making process and the respective brand choice?***

Based upon a precisely selected brand management model as the theoretical foundation, the authors propose an extended model that provides scholars with a comprehensive understanding of how brand communication can enrich brand reputation in the digital era. In addition to that, this tailored model offers guidance for practitioners to develop integrated brand communication strategies, especially tailored for the online environment, in order to enhance brand reputation sustainably.

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### 1.3 Outline of the Thesis

Following this introductory chapter, the underlying theory is presented, which results from a comprehensive literature review and constitutes an essential basis for the study at hand. Subsequently, the authors elaborate on the methodological approach and the selected research strategy. The fourth chapter presents the empirical findings, followed by a thorough analysis of the collected qualitative and quantitative data. Afterwards central findings are discussed and conclusions are drawn from the analysis. Thereby the key results in the context of the underlying theory respectively the defined research questions are outlined. Conclusively, theoretical contributions are outlined, followed by managerial implications, which are rounded off by the presentation of the extended model- The Brand Identity Communication Reputation Matrix (BICRM). Finally, the authors reflect upon limitations of the study and complete the overall picture by presenting a set of recommendations for further research.



## 2. Theoretical Framework

Having outlined the roadmap and distribution of the thesis, the theoretical basis that guides the research at hand is presented subsequently. It is the result of a literature review in the fields of brand identity and brand reputation as well as the consumer decision-making journey in an online context. Furthermore, the interconnectedness between brand reputation and purchase decisions is outlined. The theoretical framework forms the foundation for the subsequent implementation of the empirical research.

### 2.1 Brand Identity & Reputation

#### 2.1.1 Brand Identity

With regard to brand alternatives, consumers face plenty of possible choices. In this context, Kapferer (2012) underlines increasing conformities in corporations' marketing measures, which result in challenges to express individuality. Products, marketing campaigns and brands are progressively alike since marketers are responsive to prevailing technology in the same way while considering identical market studies (Kapferer, 2008; 2012). This implicates difficulties for consumers in figuring out distinguishing factors between certain brands. Thus, leading scholars as well as practitioners identify the importance of brand identity when it comes to successful management and diversification of brands (Aaker 1996; Joachimsthaler & Aaker, 2008; Kapferer, 2008; 2012; Keller, 2008).

According to Aaker (1996, p. 68), the identity of a brand is created through “a unique set of brand associations that the brand strategist aspires to create or maintain”. These brand associations should thereby not only represent what the brand stands for but also consist of the corporation's promise to its customers. Consequently it is vital to provoke convincing associations that take hold in consumer's minds. The brand identity ideally creates a specific value proposition consisting of emotional, functional and self-



portrayed values. Thereby long-lasting relationships shall be formed between the consumers and the brand (Aaker, 1996; Kotler, 2009). Kapferer (2012, p. 151) furthermore highlights that “identity precedes image”. Thus, before conveying an image to particular stakeholders, such as consumers, a corporation needs to define precisely what shall be projected. Also it is crucial to know the way how to transfer a message (Kapferer, 2012).

### 2.1.2 Brand Reputation

Fombrun (1996, p. 37) defines reputation as “the overall estimation in which a company is held by its constituents”. In this context, both practitioners and scholars agree on the aspect that a positive reputation facilitates a profitable brand and leads to competitive benefits (Herbig & Milewicz, 1995; Roper & Fill, 2012).

When it comes to building reputation, corporations need to ask themselves how their environment perceives them (Urde & Greyser, 2014). Thus, brand reputation represents the attractiveness of the brand towards employees, suppliers, investors, communities and customers (Blackstad & Cooper, 1995). This indicates that brand reputation is gradually shaped by the images held by a number of different stakeholders instead of being limited to the impressions of its customers respectively fans only. A positive reputation of a corporation may also consequently lead to supportive acting by different constituents (Milewicz & Herbig, 1994; Roper & Fill, 2012; Greyser, 2009).

Since for a business the “single necessary and sufficient condition (...) is a paying customer” (Aulet, 2013, p. 25), the main focus in the study at hand lays on the decision-making, which is based on brand reputation, during the online customer journey.

A positive reputation is likely to be conducive to the consumers’ perception of quality regarding the products representing the brand. Thus, since a positive view is boosting credibility of a brand, consumers may presume consistent product quality when it comes to consecutive purchase decisions about the same product (Milewicz & Herbig, 1994). Other factors that have an impact on the reputation of a brand are “customer satisfaction, employee satisfaction, comprehensive reputation, customer service, market



position, innovation, profitability, corporate social responsibility, and vision and leadership” (Roper & Fill, 2012, p. 42).

These criteria confirm that a positive reputation represents a key differentiator from the competitors and boosts competitive advantages. Consequently, customers may become more loyal towards a brand if a corporation succeeds in fulfilling its stated purposes (Milewicz & Herbig, 1994; Roper & Fill, 2012). In this context, Milewicz and Herbig (1995, p. 5) underline that reputation emerges predominantly through ‘market signalling’, what describes all forms of marketing activities that inform about specific motives and intentions of a brand.

Moreover, Bennett & Gabriel (2001) established the “averaging” principle of brand reputation. Accordingly, consumers tend to be indulgent towards unfavourable information if they have already built a positive attitude towards the reputation. In this case, they weigh their views on the brand and its reputation rather than accumulating them. For instance, a bad experience is likely to be forgiven by a consumer holding an overall positive opinion about the brand. (Roper & Fill, 2012).

### 2.1.3 Interconnectedness between Brand Identity & Brand Reputation

Accordingly, the reputation is based on the brand identity as well as the main promise that the corporation communicates (Veloutsou & Moutinho, 2008).

From this, one can deduce that there is certainly interdependency between the identity and the reputation of a brand (Roper & Fill, 2012). As stated previously, the identity of a brand reflects what the brand stands for and indicates the core aim of the corporation (Aaker, 1996). In line with this, Balmer & Greyser (2002, p. 37) highlight that “identity management is concerned with the conception, development and communication of an organization’s mission, philosophy and ethos”. Thus, it is essential for brand managers to ensure that a brand’s identity is consistent with the way it is perceived by its stakeholders (external image). In the case of an incongruity, the brand reputation may be negatively affected. Therefore the identity of the brand shall draw upon a perceivable

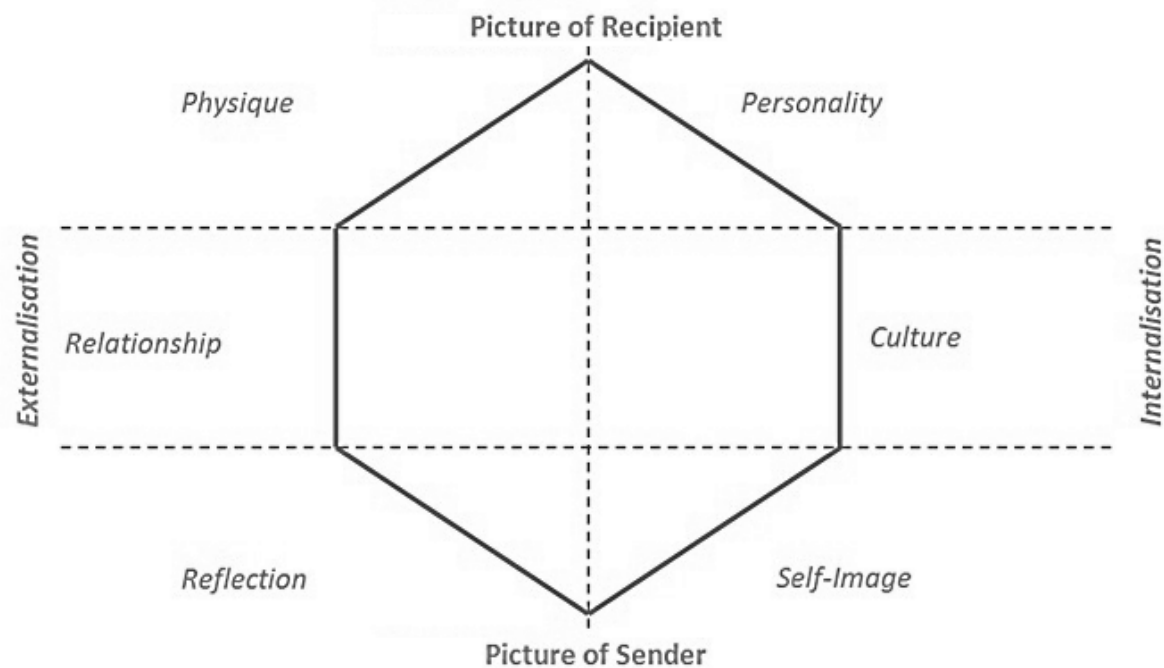
value system in order to bridge the communication gap between identity and external views (Roper & Fill, 2012). This implies that corporations need to facilitate congruence by efficiently conducting specific communicational measures.

## 2.2 Brand Management Models

The authors have reviewed existing brand identity frameworks, which have been created by leading researchers in the fields of brand management over the last decade. It is noticeable that these schemes are not only anchored in academic literature but also utilized by industry to a large extent (da Silveira, 2011).

### 2.2.1 Kapferer: Brand Identity Prism

Considering contemporary brand communication theory, Kapferer (2012) highlights that consumers conceive brands as sources for products, services and self-fulfilment. Thus, Kapferer (2012) highlights the importance of six facets of brand identity, which collectively shape the DNA of a brand, and combined them in the 'Brand Identity Prism'.



**Figure 1:** Brand Identity Prism (Kapferer, 2012, p. 158)



This scheme, first of all, depicts the *physique* of a brand, which consists of physical components that consumers associate with a brand. Apart from that, every brand owns a *personality*. Through a specific way of communicating, it successively reveals its character, which can be equated with human personality traits. Furthermore, the *culture* of a brand reflects the long-term values, ideals and principles of a brand. According to Kapferer (2012, p. 159), “major brands are not only driven by their culture but convey their culture”. This implies that this element of the prism facilitates the distinction of brands like Apple, Samsung and Sony. The ‘*relationship facet*’ describes the way a brand addresses and acts towards consumers. As an example in this context, Apple can be associated with kindness. Moreover, a brand gradually establishes a *reflection* of the type of person that it seems to be targeting. Last but not least, the *self-image* of a brand represents what a person signifies through consuming its product or service (Kapferer, 2012). To summarize, Kapferer’s Brand Identity Prism draws upon the idea that communication decides on the existence of a brand. One can deduce that through purposeful communication a corporation indicates the products that typify a brand (Kapferer, 2012).

## 2.2.2 Aaker: Brand Identity Planning Model

Aaker (1996) also conceptualized brand identity with the so-called ‘Brand Identity Planning Model’, based on various perspectives and dimensions (see figure 2). The purpose of examining distinct perspectives is to incorporate various elements, which clearly define and boost a brand identity (Aaker, 1996). Thereby the following perspectives arise:

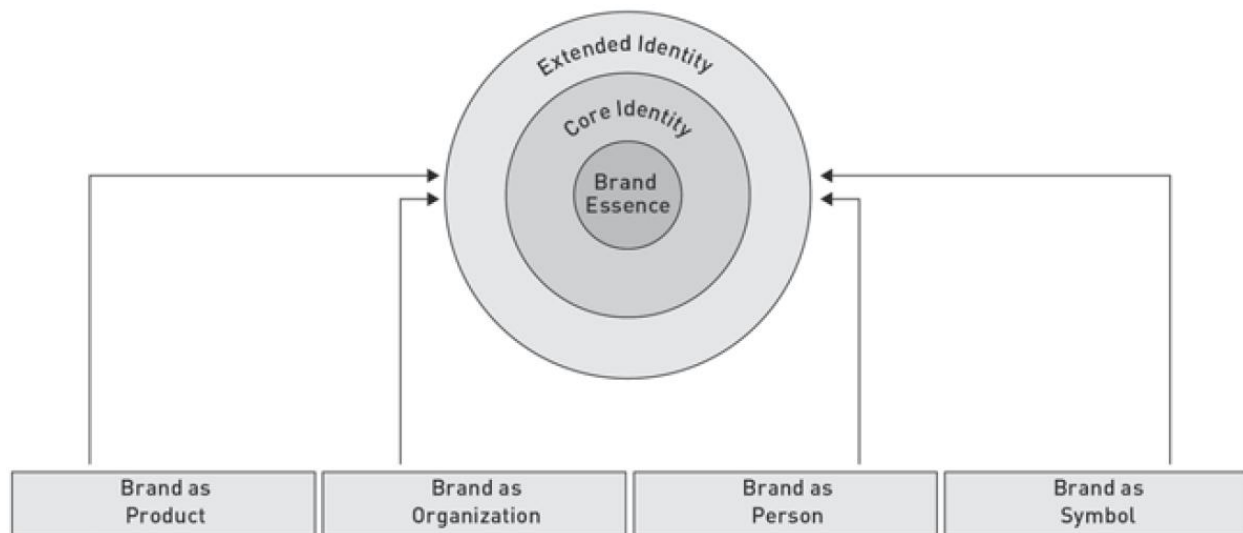


Figure 2: Brand Identity Structure (adapted from Aaker, 1996)

### Brand as a product

This perspective is related to a particular product category and product attributes, which the brand is linked to. For instance, the brand Audi is directly associated with automobiles. This kind of association ensures that consumers recall a brand as soon as the respective product class comes up (Aaker, 1996).

### Brand as an organization

Instead of focusing on a certain product class, which typifies the brand, this perspective emphasizes organizational attributes. These features like innovation, Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) or perceived quality are less apparent for consumers.





Nevertheless they can positively or negatively shape value propositions and perceptions of a brand (Aaker, 1996).

### **Brand as a person**

This perspective is related to the idea of the brand epitomizing a human character. Just like a person, a brand can reflect human attributes like attractiveness, competence, cleverness, happiness, humour, frankness, honesty or formality (Aaker, 1996). Moreover, human personalities influence how people relate to each other. Thus, relationships between consumers and brands build upon brand personality. The personality of a brand also facilitates a self-expressive benefit, as a customer may identify his/her own personality through the brand. For instance, a fan of Apple might intend to express creativity and a casual lifestyle by using Apple products (Aaker, 1996).

### **Brand as a symbol**

By looking at a brand as a symbol, it is all about what consumers recognize and recall from the visual appearance of a brand. Thus, it provides the brand identity with context and meaning. Relevant symbols include everything that epitomizes the essence of a brand, such as logotypes, symbols or design marks. For instance, Nike's 'Swoosh' or McDonald's 'Golden Arches' uniquely represent these brands (Aaker, 1996).

Apart from the four perspectives, Aaker (1996) identifies two decisive elements of a brand identity: The 'core identity' and the 'extended identity'. The essence of the brand, respectively its 'core identity', consists of the brand's substantial values and beliefs and the corporation's main competencies. The core identity stays the same in the case of a diversification or adaptations for new markets. In contrast to that, the brand's 'extended identity' is more dynamic and includes additional elements, which help consumers to comprehend what a brand stands for (Aaker, 1996).

### 2.2.3 Urde & Greyser: Corporate Brand Identity and Reputation Matrix

Urde & Greyser (2014) combined essential identity and reputation components and interlinked them in the so-called ‘Corporate Brand Identity and Reputation Matrix’ (CBIRM).

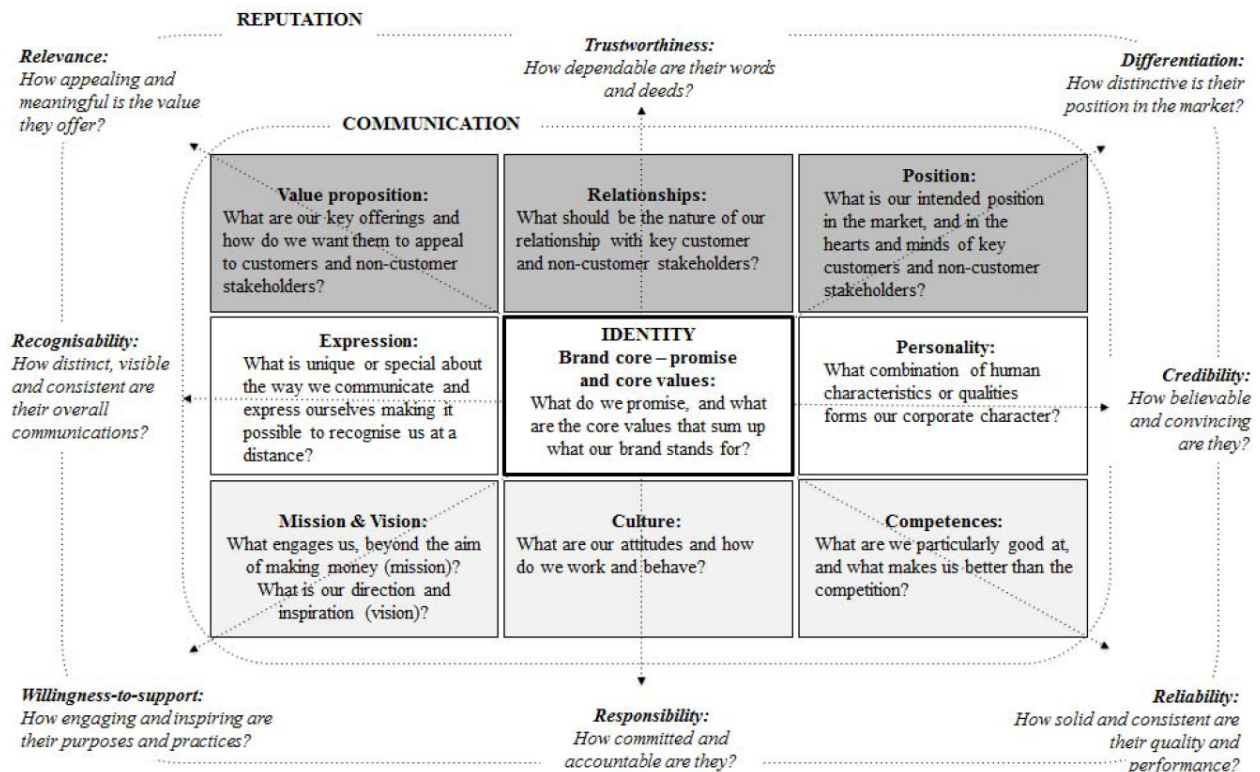


Figure 3: Corporate Brand Identity and Reputation Matrix (Urde & Greyser, 2014, p. 24)

The scheme allows an identification of potential imbalances between the internally originated identity and external perceptions of stakeholders, such as consumers. As soon as a mismatch or a match between the two elements is revealed, it is crucial to firstly examine the respective identity element (e.g. position) and then look into the communicational approach (Urde & Greyser, 2014). Thus, certain communicational measures are likely to facilitate a match between identity and reputation. A short overview of all used brand reputation elements that are incorporated in the CBIRM can be found in table 1 below.



ELEMENT OF REPUTATION	DICTIONARY DEFINITION	GUIDING QUESTION
<b>Relevance</b> (Young & Rubicam, 2003)	Closely connected or appropriate to the matter in hand. The condition of being relevant. Pertinent, to the purpose, applicable, suitable	How appealing and meaningful is the value they offer?
<b>Trustworthiness</b> (Fombrun, 1996)	Firm belief in the reliability, truth, or ability. A relationship built on mutual trust and respect: confidence, belief, faith, freedom from suspicion	How dependable are their words and deeds?
<b>Differentiation</b> (Young & Rubicam, 2003)	Distinction, distinctiveness, contrast, difference, demarcation	How distinctive is their position in the market?
<b>Credibility</b> (Fombrun, 1996)	... the quality of being convincing or believable	How believable and convincing are they?
<b>Reliability</b> (Fombrun, 1996)	Consistently good in quality or performance, able to be trusted	How solid and consistent are their quality and performance?
<b>Responsibility</b> (Fombrun, 1996)	... a moral obligation to behave correctly towards or in respect of	How committed and accountable are they?
<b>Willingness-to-support</b> (Greyser, 1995)	Approve of, encourage, stand-behind, prefer, endorse, recommend ...	How engaging and inspiring are their purposes and practices?
<b>Recognisability</b> (Young & Rubicam, 2003)	Identification from previous encounters or knowledge. Recollection, recall, remembrance	How distinct, visible and consistent are their overall communications?

**Table 1:** Elements of reputation (Urde & Greyser, 2014, p. 23)

Urde & Greyser (2014) determine different strategic connections between all eight reputation elements, which are indicated through four dotted lines (see figure 3). The corporation’s core values, the brand core and the promise constitute the heart of the framework and therefore are a part of all four strategic connections.

Thereby the ‘strategy diagonal’ ranges from the reputation element ‘Willingness-to-support’ to ‘Differentiation’, which include (but are not limited to) the consumers’ perceptions. This direction is particularly important as it links the corporation’s purpose



and its favoured position. Furthermore, the ‘competitive diagonal’ spans between the reputation elements ‘Reliability’ and ‘Relevance’. Ideally consumers have a clear perception of the corporation’s competences, through which they can evaluate the individual relevance of the corporation’s offerings.

Apart from that, the ‘communication horizontal’ spans between ‘Recognisability’ and ‘Credibility’. Thus, all kind of communication, including corporate design and advertising, is reflected by the element ‘Expression’, which makes the corporation visible and recognizable for consumers. Moreover, the internally rooted personality traits of a corporation decide about how credible the corporation is perceived externally.

The ‘interaction vertical’ shows the connection between the externally perceived ‘Responsibility’ of the corporation, which can be traced back to the corporation’s culture. On the other hand, the relationships that a corporation successfully builds ideally result in the perception of ‘Trustworthiness’ (Urde & Greyser, 2014).

This would result in the aspect that specific communicational measures are likely to facilitate a match between identity and reputation while leading to the wanted external perceptions.

#### 2.2.4 Evaluation of Brand Management Models

The authors derive from the CBIRM, presented above, that brand reputation and communication are interrelated, especially reflected through the *interaction vertical* and the *communication horizontal*.

Therefore, in the course of building brand reputation, the way how information is conveyed and/or communicated plays an important role. Consumers, for instance, may receive information directly from the corporation or from a third party. They might also use external information in order to assess the reputation of a particular brand. Thus, the development of reputation is strongly connected to individuals’ views on the stream of information. On the other hand, brand reputation is shaped through all the information known about the corporation (Bromley, 2000; Roper & Fill, 2012).



Considering the decisive correlation between brand identity, communication and reputation, the authors decided to place special emphasis on a theoretical construct, which unifies these elements in one brand management model.

Accordingly, the 'Corporate Brand Identity and Reputation Matrix' is composed of 'brand identity', 'communication' and 'brand reputation' as three interconnected layers (see Figure 3).

### 2.3 Online Customer Journey: Influencing Factors on Decision-Making

Constant progresses in information and communication technologies as well as the rapid development of Web 2.0 imply chances as well as challenges for brands. When it comes to the process of choosing a product of a certain brand, Kotler & Keller (2005) define six determining stages: identifying a certain need, searching for information, assessing alternatives, deciding to buy the product, purchasing the product, assessing the product after the purchase. However, conventional decision-making models need to be reassessed in terms of digital consumer behaviour (Moran et al. 2014; Wind, 2015). This also requires reconsidering the traditional approach to consumers' "Moments of Truth" in the light of digital technologies (Moran et al. 2014). Thus, respective subject matters will be elaborated below.

#### 2.3.1 Digital Consumer Behaviour

The emergence of Web 2.0 fosters interactive communication between brands and individuals, thus providing high potential for addressing consumers in the digital environment. Consumer behaviour in the digital environment involves digitally empowered consumers, who look for details about products and brands online before reaching a purchase decision (Moran et al. 2014; Vernuccio, 2014). This indicates that consumers increasingly represent proactive individuals. This extended consumer participation can be illustrated by the so-called pinball metaphor (Hennig-Thurau et al.



2013). Just like in a pinball game, consumers nowadays take the opportunity to respond and react to all kind of brand messages. Previously, consumers represented rather passive ‘message receivers’, which conformed to a bowling environment. Induced by an ever-increasing interconnectedness, individuals nowadays share content on different online platforms in order to make their experience with certain brands and products available for others (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2013).

Apart from that, consumers increasingly build on electronic word of mouth (eWOM) communication in order to assess certain brand offerings. eWOM includes consumers’ experiences with certain brands and products, which are shared online in the form of personal recommendations. In this context, Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004) highlight that consumers engage in eWOM because they aim for social interaction and intend to support other consumers. In this context, multiple online platforms, covering social networking sites like Facebook or Google+, provide space for consumers to exchange views about brands and product preferences and engage in peer-to-peer eWOM (Moran et al. 2014). This kind of brand-related information appears especially authentic and credible since individuals are expected to facilitate fellow consumers’ purchase decision. In contrast to that, marketers reflect the image of pursuing commercial purposes and consumers might even feel misguided. Thus, throughout the assessment of brands, consumers appreciate the opinions of fellow consumers instead of solely confiding in marketing communications (Kozinets et al. 2010). This indicates that eWOM facilitates brand assessment while boosting the process of purchase decision-making (Moran et al. 2014).

### 2.3.2 ‘Moments of Truth’ in the Online Environment

As mentioned above, prevalent digital technologies influence consumer behaviour while facilitating an information cycle that is considerably guided by consumers. In this context, ‘Moments of Truth’ are specific occasions of contact between brands and

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consumers. During these occasions, individuals conceive an opinion about brands, which may have an impact on the overall consumer decision-making process (Moran et al. 2014). Thus, every time a consumer comes into contact with a brand (customer touch point), the contact leaves a certain impression in the mind of the consumer. This can occur either consciously or unconsciously, actively controlled or not. These kind of impressions can sustainably shape the overall brand perception of consumers (Esch et al. 2014). Accordingly, the Chief Executive Officer of *Honeywell* states in the corporation's brand guidelines: "With every customer contact and whenever we represent Honeywell, we have the opportunity either to strengthen the Honeywell brand or to cause it to lose some of its luster and prestige" (Honeywell, 2004, p. 2).

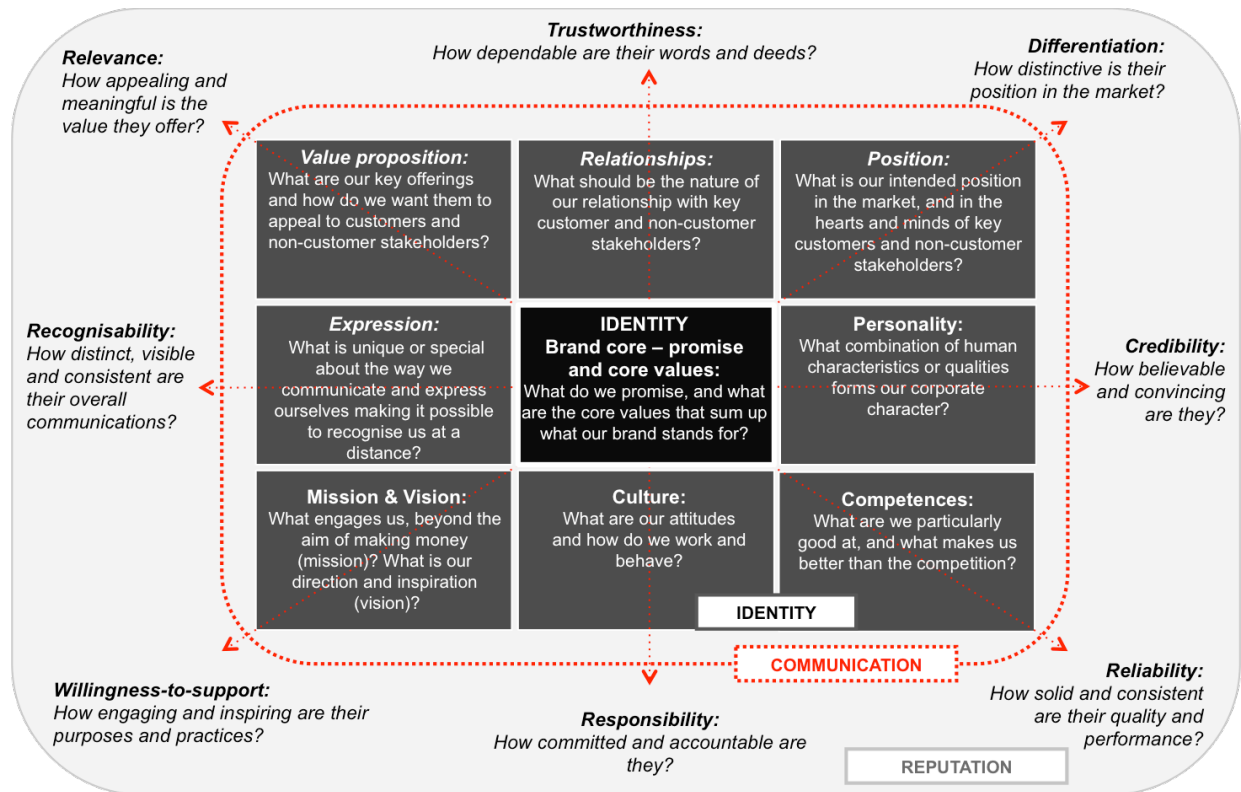
Thus, according to Esch et al. (2014), brand managers need to pay high attention to all kinds of customer touch points with a brand. However, since the Internet is increasingly affecting consumers' brand perceptions, especially online customer touch points need to be managed efficiently.

Apart from that, Procter & Gamble defined the instant of deciding to buy a product of a certain brand as the so-called 'First Moment of Truth' (Procter & Gamble, 2012). Moreover, the subsequent phase of using the product as well as the related brand experience is called 'Second Moment of Truth' (Moran et al. 2014). In 2012, Google established another instance of contact, defined as the "Zero Moment of Truth" (ZMOT). The ZMOT describes the online- research process, which occurs on consumers' computers, mobile phones or related devices. Throughout this decision-making process, consumers are likely to browse through different online channels, for instance official brand websites, review sites, comparison platforms and social networking sites (Lecinski, 2011).

## 2.4 Evaluating Online Communication: Brand Communication as a Catalyst

As already stated in 2.2.4, the 'Corporate Brand Identity and Reputation Matrix' is composed of brand identity, communication and brand reputation as three

interconnected layers. In this context, the communication layer within the model (marked red, see Figure 4), functions as a catalyst that decodes a strategically defined brand identity in operational measures, which ideally result in positive brand reputation among multiple stakeholders.



**Figure 4:** Corporate Brand Identity & Reputation Matrix (adapted from Urde & Greyser., 2014)

Based on this rationale and to provide a concrete answer to the first research question,

**RQ1: How can brand identity be transformed into positive brand reputation?**

brand identity can be strategically converted into brand reputation through effective 'brand communication'. In detail, the phrase brand communication can be divided into two equivalent parts: 'brand touch point' and 'brand message' (Kapferer, 2012, p. 152). The former can be seen as an instance of contact, where a certain message is transferred from the sender to the receiver. 'Brand messages', on the other hand, refer





to brand identity elements, which are communicated in a certain way (Kapferer, 2012). It has to be underlined that ‘brand messages’ in the context of ‘online communication’ are strongly interactive. This implies that respective messages can be either user- or brand-generated. In certain cases they even cover co-created content. This applies to multiple ‘touch points’ respectively online communication channels since they can be managed directly by brands, by brand fans or neutral parties (Haely et al., 2013, p. 1535). A number of relevant ‘brand touch points’ with regards to the online environment will be stated in chapter 3.3.4. The communication flow, which has just been clarified, results in the establishment of a specific reputation dimension as part of the ‘brand reputation’ layer.

The authors, however, identified a research gap in terms of the ‘communication’ layer of the model. In detail, Urde & Greyser (2014) lay the emphasis of their research on the interconnectedness of ‘brand identity’ and ‘brand reputation’. In addition to that, ‘brand communication’ has been identified as a connecting link between the two entities, however, without further elaborating on it. Urde & Greyser (2014) also did not conduct any empirical research on the subject of this critical layer. To conclude, the ‘Corporate Brand Identity and Reputation Matrix’ confirms ‘brand communication’ as a catalyst between brand identity and brand reputation while also showing a research gap in this particular field. Thus, the model depicts great potential for further investigation and therefore will be used as the central theoretical foundation for the research at hand.

Apart from that, as already referred to in the introductory chapter, the emphasis of the research on hand is placed on developments of the digital era and new media. This new environment entails a number of different communication platforms, which are frequently visited by consumers during their online decision-making journey. Consequently, brand communication constitutes a deciding factor when it comes to a consumer’s decision-making process and the related moment of truth. Multiple online channels thereby allow brands to engage and interact with consumers and therefore



provide potential for competitive advantage (Fieseler et al. 2010). This argumentation, combined with previous theoretical explications, indicate that a wide range of online communication channels plays a decisive role when it comes to the establishment of positive brand reputation among consumers.

Accordingly, the authors decided to conduct empirical research in the fields of online brand communication and its impact on a consumer's decision-making journey. With the emphasis on the consumers' perspective, respective findings will provide answers to RQ2 and RQ3.

Having provided a theoretical based answer to RQ1, the authors describe the methodology of the empirical research design in the following chapter.

### 3. Methodology

The following chapter describes and argues for the methodological research approach of the study at hand. Firstly, the authors provide a description of the main purpose of the research as well as the related object of study. Then the research strategy is discussed along with an argumentation for the selected research design. Subsequently, the authors elaborate on the data collection process and the related analysis of qualitative and quantitative data. In this context, two specified stages of research are presented.

#### 3.1 Research Aim & Object of Study

Before elaborating on the research design, it is essential to pose the particular field, which is going to be examined. Thus, the aim of the research at hand is to generate thorough understanding of how a brand identity can be efficiently imparted through online brand communication and thereby reinforces brand reputation in order to win the moment of truth during a consumer's decision-making journey.



First of all, a comprehensive literature review was conducted to be able to provide a profound answer to the first research question RQ1, which has already been answered in the previous chapter (see chapter 2.4). However, during the literature review a research gap was identified, as no theoretical model sufficiently addresses specific communication channels in detail. Therefore, the authors intend to explore specific online communication channels (items) that are perceived to be critical when it comes to a consumer's decision-making process. From this research gap, the authors derive the second research question:

***RQ2: From a consumer's perspective, which online communication channels influence the decision-making process and the respective brand choice?***

In further consequence, the identified online communication channels (items) will be tested for their relative importance, based on the third research question:

***RQ3: From a consumer's perspective, to what extent do the identified and manageable online communication channels influence the decision-making process and the respective brand choice?***

According to Bryman & Bell (2011), it is vital that the authors keep these pivotal questions in mind during the whole research process. Thereby a common thread is ensured and the situation of unfocused research can be prevented.

From the research questions, the 'object of study' can be deduced and defined as 'online communication'. This type of communication is performed by corporations in the context of their brands with the main goal to build favourable brand reputation among consumers (Kapferer, 2012). From a consumer's perspective, however, 'online communication' covers a mixture of thoughts, meanings and behaviour (Svensson, 2015b).

Due to the discovered research gap, the authors decide to base the study at hand on the 'Corporate Brand Identity & Reputation Matrix' (Urde & Greyser, 2014), which has been selected in the course of a literature review in the fields of brand reputation and



brand identity. The overall goal is to deliver new knowledge within this discovered research gap, thus an extended version of this brand management model will be posed in chapter 6, which constitutes a valuable contribution to existing academic literature in this particular field. Additionally, a tool for practitioners will be derived that enables to identify action areas and offers guidance for the development of brand communication strategies in the online environment. This newly created tool can be utilized to efficiently manage the reputation building process of a brand by managing online brand communication.

### 3.2 Research Strategy & Research Design

By assessing an appropriate research strategy, the authors considered both qualitative and quantitative research, which could serve to provide specific consumer insights (Bryman et al., 2007).

Due to its complexity, research questions RQ2 and RQ3 suggest a mixed methods approach. Thereby a combination of qualitative and quantitative research will enable an integrated foundation for further analysis and “maximize the reliability and validity” of the overall findings. Apart from that, the approach facilitates to draw a more thorough and rounded picture (Bryman et al., 2007; Bryman, 2007; Bryman & Bell, 2011).

Thus, qualitative data will be gathered in the preliminary stage of the research through the conduction of in-depth interviews. Further, this first stage of data collection will be based on the predefined theoretical foundation, namely the ‘Corporate Brand Identity and Reputation Matrix’. It provides the authors with a theoretical framework that enables a structured way for exploring effective online communication channels, which perceivably convey brand identity and thereby reinforce brand reputation among consumers.

In the subsequent stage, the findings of the qualitative data will be utilized to create a quantitative online survey, with the aim of further assessing these identified online

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communication channels. In detail, the online survey enables a further evaluation respectively ranking of these online communication channels with regards to the relative importance during a consumer's decision-making process and brand choice in the online environment. Finally, the measured channels will be classified by the level of possible influence by a brand, which allows comprehensive conclusions and implications (Bryman, 2006).

Regarding the employment of an appropriate research design, the cross-sectional research design has been evaluated as most suitable for the study at hand. This research design is defined as:

*“the collection of data on ‘more than one case’ and at ‘a single point in time’ in order to collect a body of ‘quantitative or quantifiable data’ in connection with two or more variables, which are then examined to detect patterns of association.”* (Bryman & Bell, 2011, p. 53)

Since the authors aim at collecting different insights of a large amount of consumers regarding their online decision-making journeys, more than one case will be illuminated in order to an interest in variation. At the same time, when it comes to the questioning process, the in-depth interviews (first stage of data collection) provide direct answers without the need of further interpretation or verification. Apart from that, the selected mixed method research entails systematic processes in order to provide a collection of quantitative respectively quantifiable data (Bryman & Bell, 2011).



## 3.3 Data Collection & Analysis

### 3.3.1 Qualitative Research: Stage of Exploration

Given the fact that ‘online communication’, as a connecting element between brand identity and brand reputation, depicts the ‘object of study’, appropriate empirical material has to be gathered. Since the emphasis is placed on exploring the consumers’ perspective and the use of language respectively communication occurs between human beings, qualitative primary data is needed (Svensson, 2015a). This suggests the selection of a qualitative research method that facilitates the detection of detailed consumer insights about online communication channels, which have an impact on the perception of brand reputation and therefore the brand choices. In detail, newly gathered primary data will provide the authors with findings that enable to find out what kind of (Svensson, 2015a) online communication can reinforce favourable brand reputation, in particular regarding the investigated communication layer of the CBIRM.

It has to be highlighted that ‘online communication’ represents a rather subjective and multi-faceted research object. Therefore the authors decided to select a qualitative research method, where consumers are able to voice their personal ideas and views on multiple online communication channels verbally. In this context, the possibility of working with focus groups in order to gather qualitative data has been taken into account. Due to prevailing group dynamics, which especially inspire study participants to think along other lines, this method might unfold interesting ideas and insights. Nevertheless focus groups have been assessed as not being appropriate for exploring the complex and individual decision-making process regarding brand reputation respectively the final brand choice of consumers within the online environment.



### 3.3.1.1 Qualitative data collection method

The authors chose in-depth interviews as the qualitative data collection method for the preliminary stage of the research (Bryman et al., 2011). This decision can be reasoned as follows:

First of all, face-to-face interaction plays an essential role when the mind-set of people is supposed to be investigated (Bryman et al., 2011). As the aim of the first data collection process is to gain insights into consumers' online experiences and behavioural patterns that arise from their mind-set, the conduction of interviews was evaluated as most appropriate. Respective in-depth interviews are conducted personally with every interviewee and without any listeners. This leads to the prevention of bias in conduction because interviewees can state their personal views on the field of interest without being influenced by other participants. The second pivotal advantage of this method emerges from its flexibility. Thus, in contrast to focus groups, the authors solely need to consider the schedule of one person at a time instead of coordinating timely availabilities of a number of individuals (Bryman et al., 2011). Moreover, in order to prevent difficulties due to geographic mobility, the participants were offered to participate in video conference in-depth interviews. Even though this way of conducting an interview cannot be equated with a personal meeting, it similarly facilitates face-to-face interaction.

### 3.3.1.2 Semi-structured Interviews

Further, it was decided to use a less-structured interview form, namely semi-structured interviews as this form facilitates a rather flexible procedure. In detail, the authors can take the opportunity to seize upon critical ideas explained by the consumers (Easterby-Smith et al., 2013; Bryman & Bell, 2011). For example, an interviewee may mention an example of one specific situation, which he/she has experienced during an online customer journey. This exploration might result from the interviewer's 'laddering down', which describes the process of inquiring further illustrations with regards to the



foregoing question (Easterby- Smith et al., 2013). Apart from that, it is possible to change from one question to another in case this is required by the interview situation.

With the purpose of preventing potential issues such as poor data that might result in difficulties regarding the subsequent interpretation process (Easterby- Smith et al., 2013), the authors decided to create an interview guide. The respective guide facilitates a precise elicitation of qualitative data while providing a flexible communicational scope (Bryman et al., 2007). Thereby it includes all areas of interest, which need to be covered during the interview. By composing the research guide, the authors attempted to empathize with a consumer's role while noting that the set of questions has to comprise the specified research issue (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Hence, the defined questions aim at identifying the different moments of truth during an online customer journey (see chapter 2.3.2). Thereby influential brand touch points respectively online communication channels, which transfer the elements of brand identity into brand reputation, are intended to be revealed. Accordingly, the questions are specified for the online environment. Based on the 'Corporate Brand Identity and Reputation Matrix', eight questions have been derived from an equal amount of elements that yield in an overall brand reputation. At this point, it has to be mentioned that the heart of the model, which covers the brand core, its values and the brand promise, affects every brand identity element and therefore also all of the brand reputation elements. Thus, since this unit of the model is rather overarching and is represented within every brand identity and reputation element, it has not been incorporated in the questionnaire.

### 3.3.1.3 Selection of Interviewees

The authors decided to conduct 12 in-depth interviews since this number is likely to yield sufficient data and consequently result in theoretical saturation. However, if new online communication channels will be gathered progressively, the panel for the qualitative data collection will be extended through the conduction of additional interviews (Bryman et al., 2011).





The selection of appropriate interviewees has been conducted by a convenience sampling. This approach represents a non-probability sampling method, which has been chosen due to timely restrictions (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Regarding the selection process of suitable participants, the authors were guided by previously specified criteria, including an affinity for new technologies. In detail, especially lead users respectively first movers, who regularly shop online, came into question. Further, people are only appropriate if they are not familiar with the field of brand management and existing brand management models. Through that one intended to prevent bias during the conduction of the interviews.

### 3.3.2 Qualitative Research: Analysis

Because of the fact that grounded theory generates results in form of a recursive process, it can be assessed as suitable for the qualitative data analysis of the study at hand. This approach entails that data is collected and analysed simultaneously (Bryman & Bell, 2011). The gathered (voice) data has been recorded throughout the interview process and subsequently transcribed by the authors. In a further step, the data will be coded so that categories for gathered online communication channels can be developed (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Consequently, the analysis of the qualitative data collection result in newly identified channels respectively items (red circles) in the sphere of the communication layer. These items, which represent influential online communication channels, provide the answer to RQ2, as they function as effective catalysts between particular elements of brand identity and brand reputation (see figure 5).

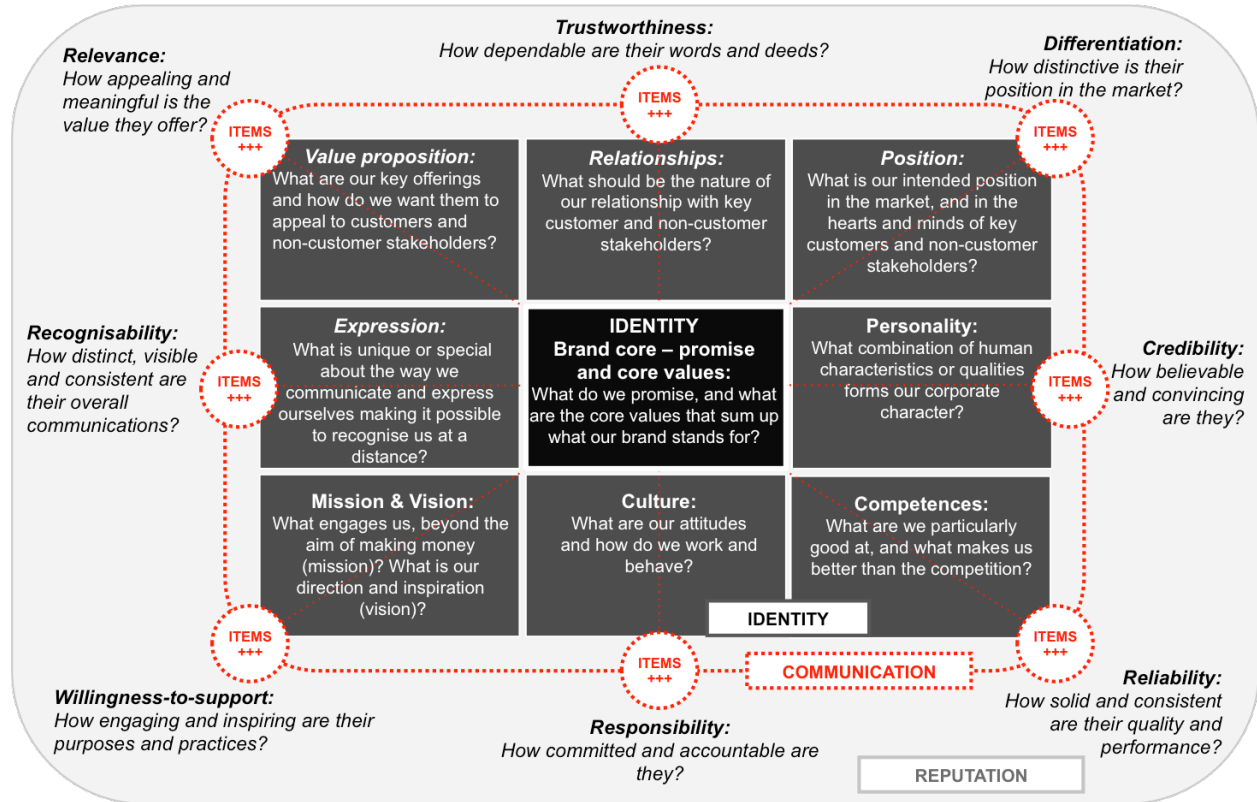


Figure 5: Explored items after Qualitative Data Collection (adapted from Urde & Greyser, 2014)

### 3.3.3 Quantitative Research: Stage of Evaluation

In order to further assess the qualitative findings, quantitative research will be conducted on the basis of the theoretical foundation and the previously identified communication channels (Easterby-Smith, 2008). In detail, the authors selected the method of an online survey for gathering representative data. For the purpose of reaching a representative panel, a minimum amount of 100 individuals has been determined for this data collection process. According to Bryman et al. (2007, p. 677), a challenge thereby is that "potential respondents need to be directed to the web site", where they could participate in the online survey.



Further, these individuals need to be attracted to participate in the survey as well as meeting respective personal criteria, which are required to reach appropriate results. Additionally, the authors considered costs, which may arise through the establishment of a professional online survey (Bryman et al., 2007). In order to manage this obstacle efficiently, an online service provided by Google, namely “Google consumer surveys”, has been used for this stage of data collection. In detail, the service provides custom online surveys that guarantee a panel including tech-savvy individuals, online lead users and first movers. Thus, this panel is especially compatible to the qualitative panel. Furthermore, the respondents can be chosen by criteria like gender, demographics, age and geographic region. Every individual that participates in the survey is chosen by Google and receives incentives for taking part. Thus, the authors are provided with representative results within a reasonable period of time and therefore reassuring to have a sufficient number of respondents. These aspects highlight that a number of potential risks are prevented through the utilization of this web service in order to gather quantitative data of high quality.

As stated initially, every item (online communication channel), which has been identified in the course of the qualitative data analysis, can be further assessed and ranked through the online survey. In this context, all detected items will be integrated in ‘multiple answer/choice questions’, each of which consists of up to six selectable answers. In order to prevent that respondents submit an answer without choosing any possible answer, the authors additionally incorporated a ‘None of the above’ option.

In this way, effective communication between every allocated element of brand identity and brand reputation can be specified. For instance, item A has been identified for effectively communicating brand culture in order to build or reinforce brand responsibility (see figure 6).

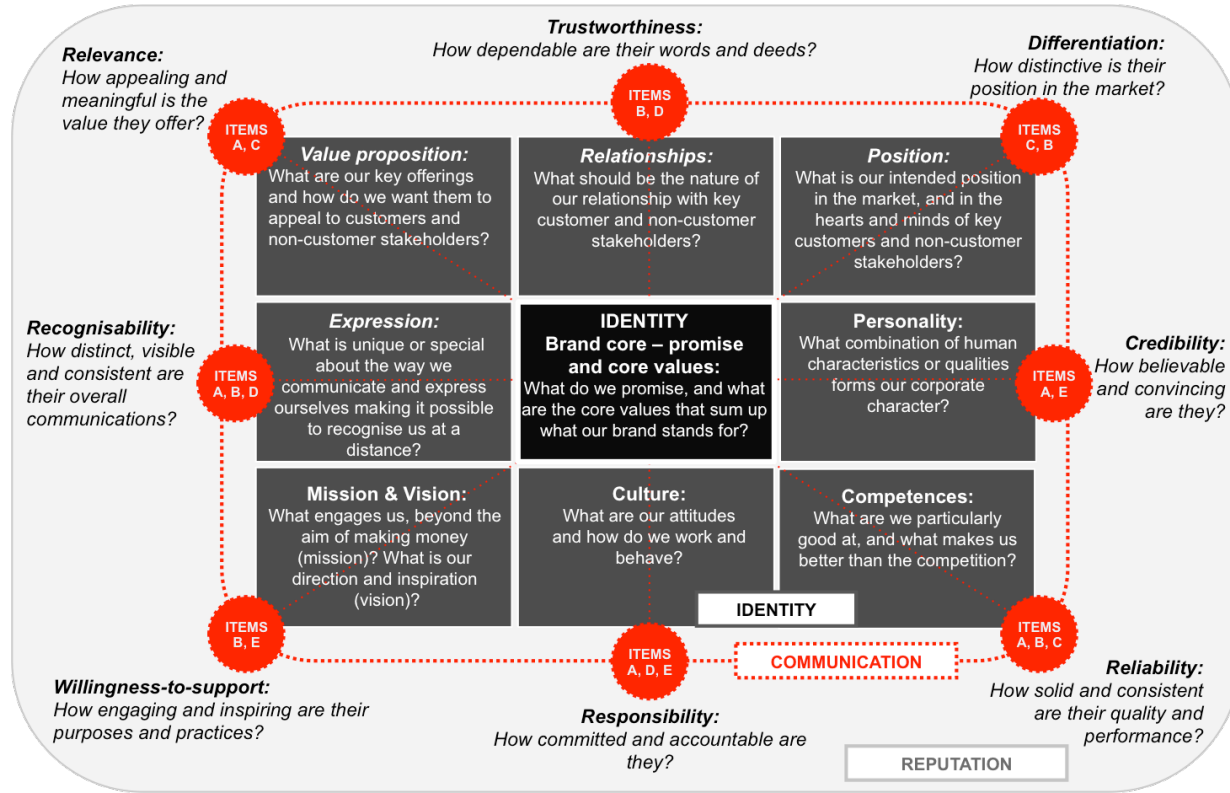


Figure 6: Allocation of effective items after quantitative testing (adapted from Urde & Greyser, 2014)

### 3.3.4 Quantitative Research: Analysis

Due to the existence of a variety of relevant online communication channels, the authors decided to distinguish them grounded on the two following key questions (Walter and Saldsieder, 2010):

- 1.) Which graduations exist regarding a brand's influence on brand-related communication on a certain online channel?
- 2.) How important is a certain online channel regarding a consumer's decision-making process?

On the basis of these two questions, the authors created a biaxial cluster model (see figure 7) that enables an allocation of explored and tested online communication channels (see chapter 5), based on the two dimensions 'Classification of brand communication' (Y axis) and 'Importance for consumer's decision-making process' (X



axis). Since this cluster model delivers a final evaluation of effective online communication channels, it will provide a coherent answer for RQ3. Regarding the vertical axis of the model, 'classification of brand communication' is oriented towards Google's ZMOT classification of 'OWNED', 'EARNED' and 'SHARED' communication, which is elaborated in detail in the following parts.

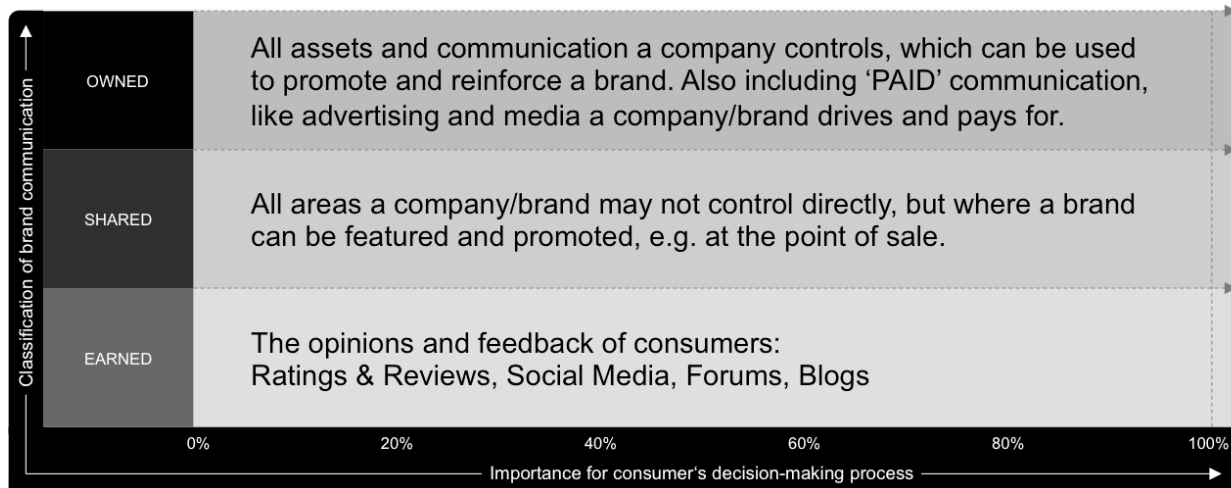


Figure 7: Cluster model (adapted from Lecinski, 2011; Walter & Saldsieder, 2010)

### 3.3.4.1 'Owned' Communication

'Owned' communication is directly controlled by a company and can be used to strengthen and promote a brand (Lecinski, 2011). It also covers 'paid' communication, such as advertising and media, which a brand controls and pays for (Lecinski, 2011). Specific online communication channels that can be assigned to this class are presented in detail below.

Flores et al. (2008, p. 465) state that "today, the large majority of companies have at least one website for their brands and products (corporate website, image website, e-commerce website)". In this context, a corporate website constitutes a communication tool, through which consumers can inform themselves about functional and technical features of the products offered (Stuart & Jones, 2004).



Apart from that, based on the phenomenon of Web 2.0, social media consist of a variety of communication platforms that allow an interchange of information. This facilitates interactive relationships between brands and consumers (Vernuccio, 2014). Respective platforms provide uncomplicated access while allowing a great number of users to socialize online (Brogan, 2010; Zarella, 2010). Thus, companies can take advantage of the opportunity to establish brand fan pages on social networking sites (SNS) such as Facebook, Twitter or YouTube.

#### 3.3.4.2 'Shared' Communication

'Shared' communication is related to channels, which can be influenced indirectly by the brand (Lecinski, 2011).

This classification, for instance, covers 'online sales channels', such as websites of leading online retailers like Amazon.com or service provider websites (e.g. telecommunication providers). In this case, communicational content can be stipulated by the brand to a great extent, however, distributors also own a certain scope of influence. For instance, online advertisements have to conform to particular brand specifications while also allowing distributors to adapt communicational messages according to individual parameters.

Besides that, one can argue that channels like 'online news portals' or 'online magazines' allow similar scope of control on the side of the brand. Even though a brand can provide selected platforms with brand-related information as part of managing online public relations, the implementation of the content is not fully controllable. This can be affiliated to the freedom of expression and a journalist's intention to report in an objective way. For example, in this instance it is not possible to stipulate certain brand specifications (e.g. brand language). Another example of this classification would be 'product comparison platforms'. Similar to journalists, authors of specific product tests typically remain neutral without highlighting certain brands.



### 3.3.4.3 'Earned' Communication

Finally, 'earned' communication can be seen as public conversations between customers respectively fans, who are intrinsic motivated to talk about products and/or brands. These conversations are likely to appear within customer reviews and ratings as well as (semi) public communication in social media (Lecinski, 2011).

This classification additionally includes online channels such as 'expert blogs' or 'independent user forums', which exhibit only minor possibilities of influence on the side of the brand. In this context, weblogs can be defined as publications on the Internet that include written entries, which are structured chronologically (Zerfass & Boelter, 2005).

Besides that, 'earned' communication includes online channels, which are beyond a brand's area of control. As already outlined above, key examples to be mentioned in this context are 'online customer ratings and reviews' and 'personal (micro-) blogging'. A variety of review websites enable consumers to reach profound decisions owing to fellow consumers, who report on their experience with certain products and brands (Karakaya & Barnes, 2010).



## 4. Analysis of Research Findings

In this chapter the analysis of conducted empirical data will be presented in order to provide answers to the research questions RQ2 and RQ3. These answers enable to achieve the overall goal of extending the CBIRM with effective online communication channels for each respective brand reputation element within the communication layer, which acts as a catalyst between brand identity and brand reputation. First, the results of the qualitative research stage, namely the identified relevant online communication channels, are presented in an aggregated form. These were conducted in explorative in-depth interviews with consumers, who regularly shop online. Secondly, for these abstract online communication channels, more concrete examples were created that are easier to communicate in a quantitative online survey. This was done in order to measure the relative importance of each explored communication channel per brand reputation element from a consumer's perspective. The evaluation of the relative importance of each online communication channel was finally done by classifying them in a further adapted version of the developed cluster model, which combines 'Scope of influence by a brand' and the 'Relative importance for a consumer' (see chapter 5.1).

### 4.1 Qualitative Research

#### 4.1.1 Sampling

The panel of the qualitative research study consists of twelve probands, who are selected by a non-probability convenience sampling method, as time during the research study is a limited factor (Bryman & Bell, 2011, p.190). All probands in the panel belong to the authors' personal network and buy in average three physical products every two months (ca. 1,6 / month) online. The probands' education respectively occupation differs in a wide range from undergraduate level (non-academics, students), postgraduate level (young professionals) to holders of a PhD (senior professionals and executives/directors). The average age of the panel is circa 36 years and the gender distribution divides to  $\frac{2}{3}$  male and  $\frac{1}{3}$  female probands (see table 2).





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Proband	Education/Occupation	Monthly purchases	Nationality	Gender	Age
1	Research Director	2,0	Swedish	Female	56
2	Intern	2,0	French	Female	23
3	Restaurant Owner	1,0	Austrian	Male	25
4	IT Consultant	2,5	Swedish	Male	32
5	Doctor of Communications & PR	2,0	Portuguese	Female	50
6	Psychiatrist	1,0	Swedish	Male	62
7	Masterstudent in Information Systems	1,0	German	Male	25
8	Masterstudent in Information Systems	1,0	Netherlands	Male	26
9	Masterstudent in Business Administration	1,5	German	Male	29
10	Account Manager	1,0	German	Male	26
11	Graphic Designer	3,5	Iran	Male	26
12	Store Manager in fashion industry	1,0	Austrian	Female	51

**Table 2:** Overview of panel of qualitative research study (n=12)

#### 4.1.2 Analysis & Findings

The authors conducted twelve in-depth interviews, which lasted in average for circa 30 minutes in a period of circa 10 days. During the interviews, the authors explored specific online communication channels for each of the eight brand reputation elements of Urde's and Greyser's CBIRM. In order to discover the most influential channels, all probands were asked for each brand reputation element about their research process respectively preferred channels for information search. After each open question, the probands were finally asked for the most helpful channel, which was used for creating category scheme for discovered online channels (see table 3 below). The full interview guide as well as the interview transcripts can be found in the appendix, since every interview was audio recorded. If a proband mentioned more than one or could not mention one specific channel as most helpful, all mentioned channels were incorporated. In order to test and create a ranking of relative importance of all explored online communication channels, all defined online channels were translated into easily communicable examples, which were less abstract for testing them in a quantitative online survey. In addition to that all online channels were summarized in subordinated communication categories. The final category scheme and all concrete examples for the quantitative test can be seen in Table 3.



Online Communication Category	Online Channel	Examples for Quantitative Research
Blogs	Expert Blog	Professional posts on expert blogs
Brand-Managed Channels	Brand Website	This online channel was not tested
Brand-Managed Channels	Brand Online Store	Brand online store (e.g. store.apple.com)
Brand-Managed Channels	Brand Online Advertising	Brand Advertisement: Banner/Video/Text
Brand-Managed Channels	Brand Media Sharing Channel	Brand Channels: Social Media/Forum/Blog
Brand-Managed Channels	Brand Profile in SNS	Brand Channels: Social Media/Forum/Blog
Brand-Managed Channels	Brand Forum	Brand Channels: Social Media/Forum/Blog
Brand-Managed Channels	Brand Blog	Brand Channels: Social Media/Forum/Blog
Brand-Managed Channels	Open Online Encyclopaedia	Online knowledge base (e.g. Wikipedia)
Independent Community Platforms	Expert Forum	Opinions of experts / brand users in forums
Independent Community Platforms	User-Managed Forum	Opinions of experts / brand users in forums
Online Customer Recommendations	Customer Reviews & Ratings	This online channel was not tested
Online Customer Recommendations	eWOM	Online recommendations from friends
Online Customer Recommendations	Media Sharing Platform	User-Generated video reviews
Online Distributors	External Online Advertising	Online retail advertisement
Online Distributors	General Online Retailer	General online retailer (e.g. Amazon)
Online Distributors	Service Provider Website	Specialized online shops (e.g. AT&T, asos)
Online Distributors	Specialized Online Retailer	Specialized online shops (e.g. AT&T, asos)
Online PR	Google News Gatekeeper	Online news: news.google.com
Online PR	News Portal	Online news: General news portals
Online PR	Niche Magazine	Online news: Specialized magazine/journal
Online PR	Online vers. of Print Magazine	Online news: e-paper of printed newspaper
Online Product Platforms	Product Comparison Platform	Product testing & comparison platforms
Online Product Platforms	Product Testing Platform	Product testing & comparison platforms

**Table 3:** Category scheme and translated examples for communication channels

After transcribing, analysing and finally categorizing all explored online communication channels, already two online channels were identified and evaluated as very influential respectively helpful with regards to build brand reputation. The reason for this is that at least one proband mentioned these two channels as the most helpful channel in every question. These two major online communication channels are ‘Brand Website’ and ‘Customer Reviews & Ratings’. The detailed answers to each brand reputation level can be checked in the transcription of all interviews (see appendix). However, the further more influential online communication channels, which were mentioned more than once in each question, are presented with an example for each brand reputation element below.

One other influential online communication channel for the brand reputation element ‘Relevance’ is ‘Product Testing Platform’ (n=3), for instance, when proband no. 6 stated:



*“There are a lot of companies, which offer the same product but you need to buy separate components. I searched for this information on the product testing websites. There I found out that Nikon offers all the components unified in one set. This is very practical for me.”*

Furthermore, an influential online communication channels for the brand reputation element ‘Differentiation’ was discovered as ‘electronic Word-of-Mouth’ (n=3), how the statement of proband no. 10 illustrates:

*“(...) before I buy it, I go to the shop or I ask friends or people I know who already got so much information about this specific product that I want to buy. So, I ask them because they have already done the work for me (...)”*

Another more influential online communication channels for the brand reputation element ‘Trustworthiness’ can be seen as ‘User-Managed Brand Forum’ (n=2), e.g. when proband no. 4 mentioned:

*“(...) when it comes to trust it is always helpful to check up other users’ opinion and experience with a product. The reviews you can find for me seem to be a bit more believable, then the information from the company itself. So I only searched for this kind of information on review sites and brand forums.”*

Two also influential online communication channels for the brand reputation element ‘Recognisability’ were identified as ‘Brand Online Store’ (n=2), when proband no. 8 stated:

*“What else I like from Sony is that they are also known for being nice designs for notebooks more than other manufacturers of Windows notebooks. (...) but they do have their own online channel, which I also actually think adds some value. They sell notebooks directly from their site like Dell or Apple, who also do the same.”*

The communication channel ‘External Online Advertising’ (n=2) is also influential for the brand reputation element ‘Recognisability’, what is illustrated by the statement of proband no. 9:

*“After I was convinced that I wanted to buy this product, I tried to find the specific advertising through price comparable machines and also from Google by just entering buying product that get a lot of advertising. Then I checked the prices of the packages. I wanted to get in touch first with the advertising.”*

An also very influential online communication channel for the brand reputation element ‘Willingness-to-Support’ was identified as ‘News Portal’ (n=3), for instance, when proband no. 1 stated:



*"I do think this is important information because if you buy a product from a special company you want to identify with it somehow. Otherwise I would not buy any products from them. For example, I would look this information up when I do not know a brand at all. (...) However, I would also try to find more information in online articles because the authors are more neutral and not connected to the company."*

A second very influential online communication channel for the brand reputation element 'Responsibility' was discovered as 'User-Managed Brand Forum' (n=4), how this statement of proband no. 5 illustrates:

*"Yes, I think it is important because it shows how fair/ unfair the company acts towards others. Especially regarding the treatment of employees is a very important aspect. (...) I would look for this kind of information in a forum. Because maybe I would find out about opinions of people who work there. I might rethink my decision if I would find negative statements about working conditions etc."*

For the brand reputation element 'Reliability' the channel 'Product Testing Platform' (n=3) was again identified as influential online communication channel, when proband no. 8 pointed out, that:

*"I mean, the reviews on this Dutch technology site. There are a lot of reviews. Maybe some American reviews sites to just cross check a bit if they have the same findings or similar interaction (...). The most important for me, I would say, are these tests because I assume the people are less biased, like an article in a tech site that reviews this model of a notebook that I just bought."*

To conclude the evaluation of further influential online brand communication channels, again two channels were revealed for the brand reputation element 'Credibility'. The first one was exposed as 'Brand Online Advertising' (n=4), where proband no. 2 said:

*"I think I got influenced because of their online advertisements. Sometimes I click on the videos and watch their advertisements. They pop up quite often on my Facebook wall."*

The second influential online communication channel for 'Credibility' was identified as 'Brand Profile SNS' (n=3), like the following statement by proband no. 1 explains:

*"I think Apple manages to show this image in a lot of different channels. I would not say it is only their website or social media sites. (...) In every online article I read about Apple as well as on their Twitter and Facebook site."*



As mentioned above, two online communication channels were identified, which have general influence on the consumer’s decision-making process respectively the decisive moment of truth, regardless of a specific brand reputation element. Therefore the authors decided not to test these two online channels again for their level of importance for consumer decision-making, but define them as ‘rank 1’ for being the most important online communication channels for every brand reputation element of the CBIRM.

In order to rank all other discovered online communication channels for their relative importance for each single brand reputation element, the online channels were translated to easy to communicable examples, which were used in eight single online surveys to test and measure their relative importance. The next chapter will present the results of the quantitative testing in more detail.

## 4.2 Quantitative Research

### 4.2.1 Sampling

The panel consists of 906 single individuals from the general population of USA and is aged between 18 to 65+ years with a gender distribution of male to female of approximately 60% to 40%. The average response rate for all eight single surveys was about 19% and they were mainly published on news websites (60%) in order to access premium content (see table 4).

Brand Reputation Element	n	Gender			Response Rate	Surveys published in Google channels:		
		Male	Female	Unknown		News	Mobile Apps	Other
Relevance	121	63	45	13	14,8%	57,9%	17,4%	24,7%
Differentiation	131	66	39	26	21,3%	62,6%	15,3%	22,1%
Trustworthiness	100	57	36	7	19,7%	49,0%	23,0%	28,0%
Recognisability	108	45	35	28	21,2%	62,0%	20,4%	17,6%
Willingness-to-support	102	48	40	14	21,2%	53,9%	20,6%	25,5%
Reliability	123	58	41	24	18,7%	68,3%	18,7%	13,0%
Responsibility	119	60	25	34	17,4%	63,0%	17,6%	19,4%
Credibility	102	50	35	17	17,3%	63,7%	17,6%	18,7%
<b>Overall Average (Overall Sum)</b>	<b>113 (906)</b>	<b>56 (447)</b>	<b>37 (296)</b>	<b>20 (163)</b>	<b>18,95%</b>	<b>60,05%</b>	<b>18,83%</b>	<b>20,99%</b>

**Table 4:** Overview of panel and published channels of quantitative research study (n= 906)



### 4.2.2 Analysis & Findings

Due to practical reasons, namely a restriction of up to six answer options per question battery at a max, certain online channels had to be combined for the quantitative online survey. For instance, all Brand-Managed Channels ('Brand Media Sharing Channel', 'Brand Profile SNS', 'Brand Blog' and 'Company-Managed Forum'), but 'Brand Online Advertising', were combined to the example 'Brand channels: Social Media/Forum/Blog'. All these combinations were made on a content-wise logic, which are marked red in table 3.

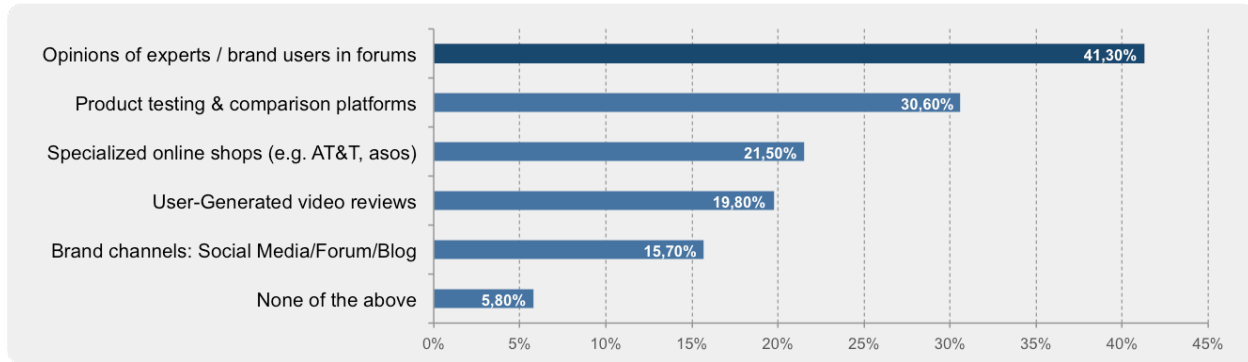
The example 'Opinions of experts / brand users in forums' was also adapted to 'With experts / brand users in forums' because of the question for the brand reputation element 'Recognisability'.

The authors decided to conduct a test run of the online survey for the brand reputation element 'Relevance' before starting the seven remaining surveys. An outcome after the run of the first online survey was that the sample (113 in average) for the online survey was too small for generating weighted data. This means that the panel cannot be seen as representative for the entire 'internet population' (system message from conducted Google consumer surveys, May 2015). Therefore, more respondents would have been needed for each online survey to reach statistical significance. However, due to time and budget restrictions (cost of 0,10\$ per participant), the authors chose to run the quantitative online surveys only with 100 participants per brand reputation element. This was decided in order to receive results for the relative importance of all discovered online communication channels in time. Within the multiple answers online surveys, all possible answers were displayed to the participants in a random order. Furthermore, all participants had the possibility to mark a survey with the answer 'None of the above' for the case that a participant did not consider any of the possible answers appropriate at all. The detailed results of the eight quantitative online surveys for all brand reputation elements are presented below.



### 4.2.2.1 Reputation Element: Relevance

*While shopping online, where would you search for product information that increases a product's relevance for you?*

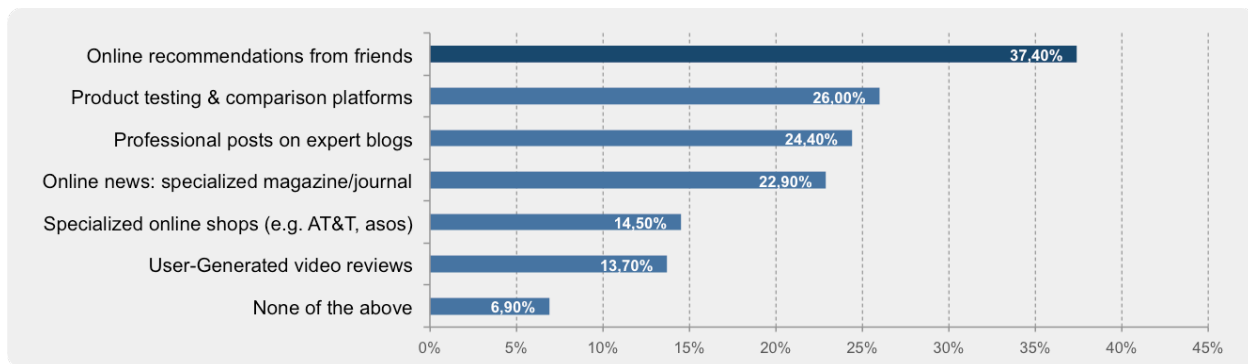


**Figure 8:** Results of quantitative test for 'Relevance' (n=121, conducted on 09.05.2015)

The qualitative explored communication channels for the brand reputation element 'Relevance' were tested with 121 participants. The relatively most important channel in this survey was measured as 'Opinions of experts / brand users in forums' with 41,30% approval.

### 4.2.2.2 Reputation Element: Differentiation

*While shopping online, where and/or how would you inform yourself in order to compare products and brands?*



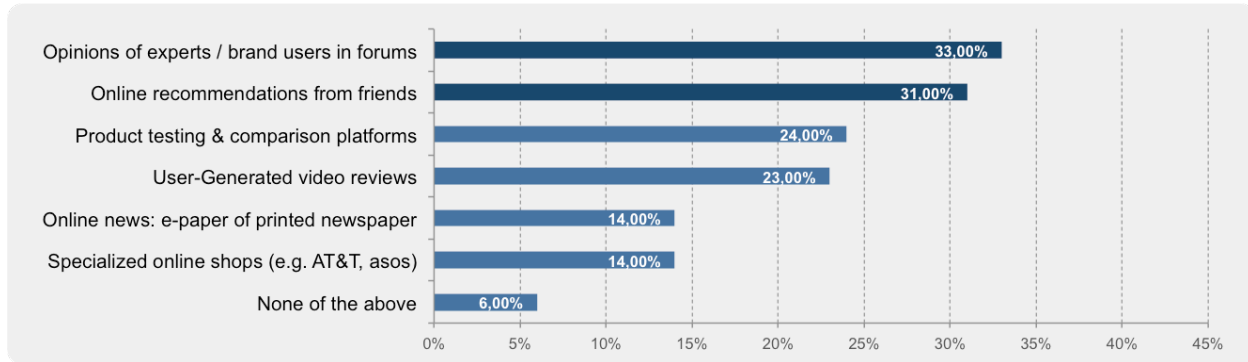
**Figure 9:** Results of quantitative test for 'Differentiation' (n=131, conducted on 11.05.2015)

The qualitative explored communication channels for the brand reputation element 'Differentiation' were tested with 131 participants. The relatively most important channel in this survey was measured as 'Online recommendations from friends' with 37,40% approval.



### 4.2.2.3 Reputation Element: Trustworthiness

*While shopping online, where would you search for information that increases your trust in the product and/or brand?*

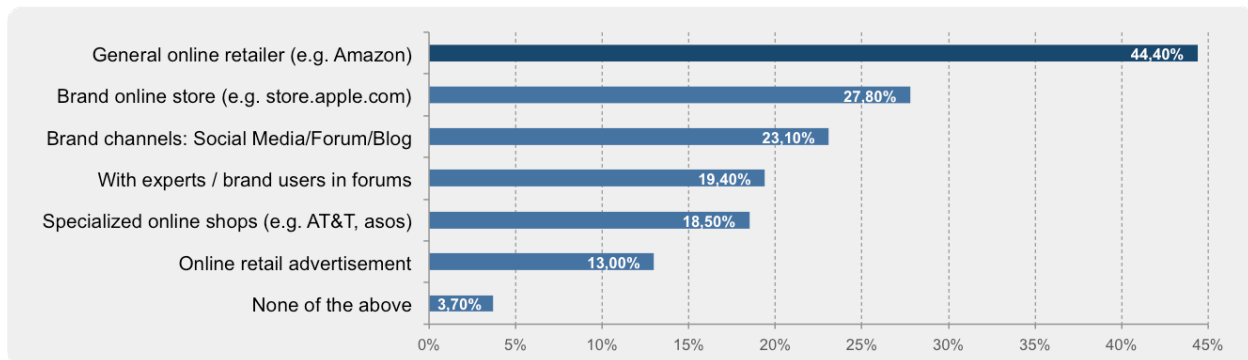


**Figure 10:** Results of quantitative test for ‘Trustworthiness’ (n=100, conducted on 11.05.2015)

The qualitative explored communication channels for the brand reputation element ‘Trustworthiness’ were tested with 100 participants. ‘Opinions of experts / brand users in forums’ show 33,0% approval, while ‘Online recommendations from friends’ exhibit 31,0% approval. Since the relative distance for both approval ratings is below 5%, these two communication channels result as relatively most important in this survey.

### 4.2.2.4 Reputation Element: Recognisability

*While shopping online, I would interact with a brand or communicate with other brand users in / through...*



**Figure 11:** Results of quantitative test for ‘Recognisability’ (n=108, conducted on 11.05.2015)

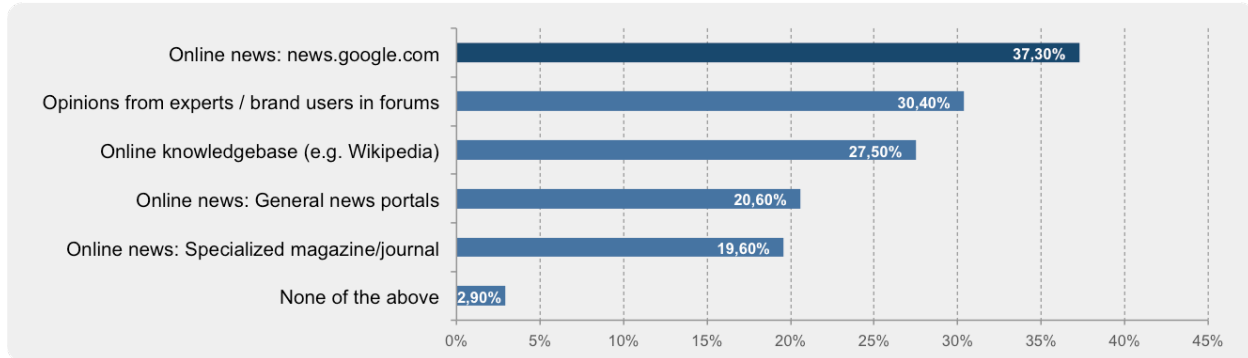
The qualitative explored communication channels for the brand reputation element ‘Recognisability’ were tested with 108 participants. The relatively most important channel in this survey was measured as ‘General online retailer’ with 44,40% approval.





#### 4.2.2.5 Reputation Element: Willingness-to-support

*While shopping online, where would you inform yourself about what a company or brand stands for?*

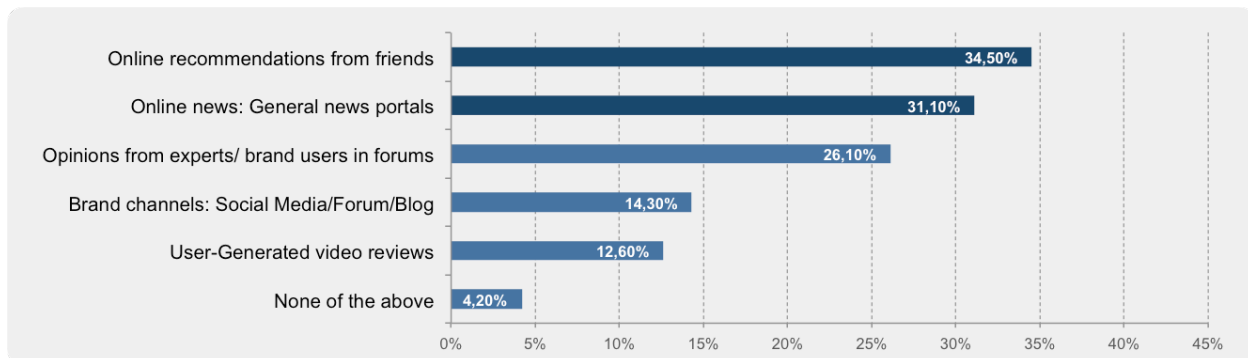


**Figure 12:** Results of quantitative test for 'Willingness-to-support' (n=102, conducted on 11.05.2015)

The qualitative explored communication channels for the brand reputation element 'Willingness-to-support' were tested with 102 participants. The relatively most important channel in this survey was measured as 'Online news on Google' with 37,30% approval.

#### 4.2.2.6 Reputation Element: Responsibility

*While shopping online, where would you inform yourself about what a company or brand stands for?*



**Figure 13:** Results of quantitative test for 'Responsibility' (n=119, conducted on 11.05.2015)

The qualitative explored communication channels for the brand reputation element 'Responsibility' were tested with 119 participants. 'Online recommendations from friends' exhibit 34,5% approval, while 'Online news: General news portals' results in 31,0% approval. Thus the relative distance for both approval ratings is below 5%, these two communication channels are the relatively most important channels in this survey.



#### 4.2.2.7 Reputation Element: Reliability

Which online channels have an influence on your personal opinion or perceived values about a brand?

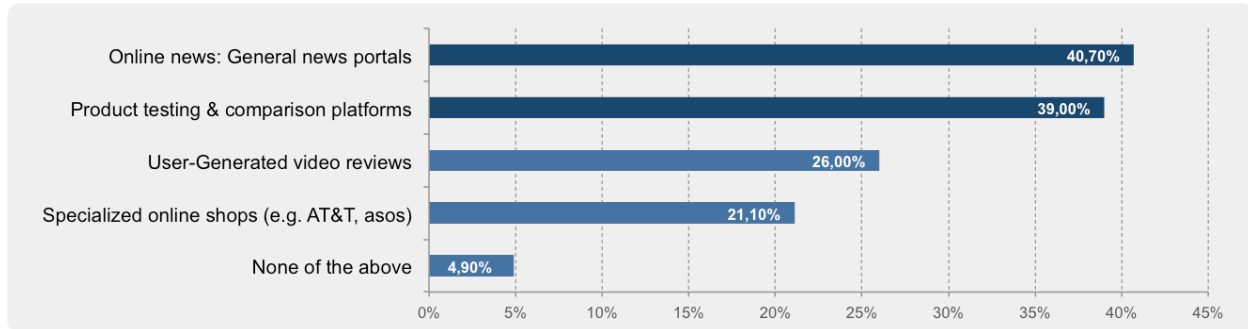


Figure 14: Results of quantitative test for 'Reliability' (n=123, conducted on 11.05.2015)

The qualitative explored communication channels for the brand reputation element 'Reliability' were tested with 123 participants. 'Online recommendations from friends' shows 35,3% approval, while 'Online news' exhibits 31,0% approval. Since the relative distance for both approval ratings is below 5%, these two communication channels result as relatively most important channels in this survey.

#### 4.2.2.8 Reputation Element: Credibility

Which online channels have an influence on your personal opinion or perceived values about a brand?

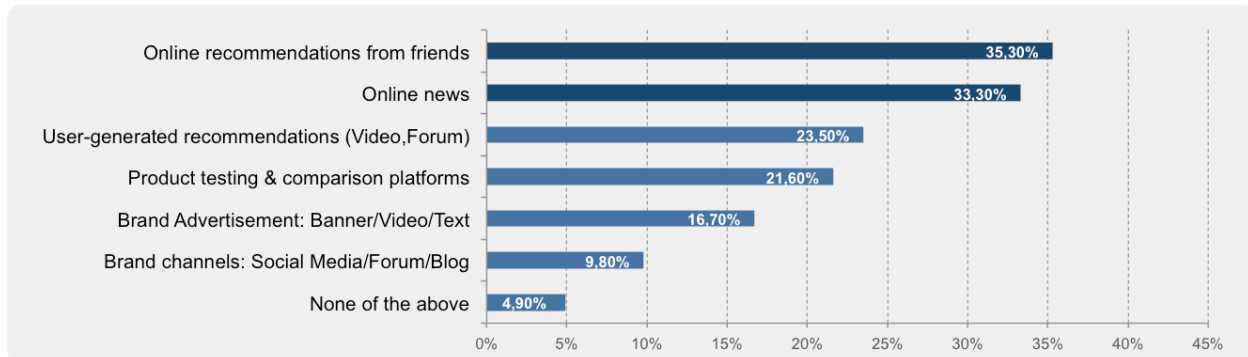


Figure 15: Results of quantitative test for 'Credibility' (n=102, conducted on 11.05.2015)

For the quantitative survey for the brand reputation element 'Credibility', two special examples were created, as too many single online communication channels were discovered during the qualitative research (only 6 possible answers per question battery). First, the two online channels 'User-Managed Forum' and 'Media-Sharing



Platform' were combined to the special example 'User-Generated recommendations (Video, Forum)'. This approach was chosen, as these two channels represent communication from a more neutral perspective, compared to the channel 'eWOM', which represents a more personal communication channel. Secondly, the same approach was applied for the online channel 'Online news', which consists of the two channels 'News Portal' and 'Online version of Print Magazine'.

The qualitative explored communication channels for the brand reputation element 'Credibility' were tested with 102 participants. 'Online recommendations from friends' sum up to 35,3% approval, while 'Online news: General news portals' results in 31,0% approval. Thus the relative distance for both approval ratings is below 5%, these two communication channels are the relatively most important channels in this survey.

## 5. Evaluation of Research Findings

### 5.1 The adapted cluster model

In order to evaluate and discuss the findings from the preceding chapter, all measured relative importance values from a consumer’s perspective are put into the developed cluster model (see chapter 3.3.4). Due to the explored online communication channels respectively to the final category scheme, the authors decided to adapt the already developed cluster model. In detail this means, on the vertical axis the three levels of influence by a brand were extended to five levels, ranging from ‘ZERO’ to ‘FULL’ influence by a brand. This means that now the level ‘OWNED’ equals the level ‘FULL’, whereas both ‘SHARED’ and ‘EARNED’ were split into two levels of different influence by a brand each (see Figure 166). This was mainly done, in order to rank online communication channels in a more distinguished way, which otherwise would possibly belong to a same level, e.g. ‘SHARED’ communication.

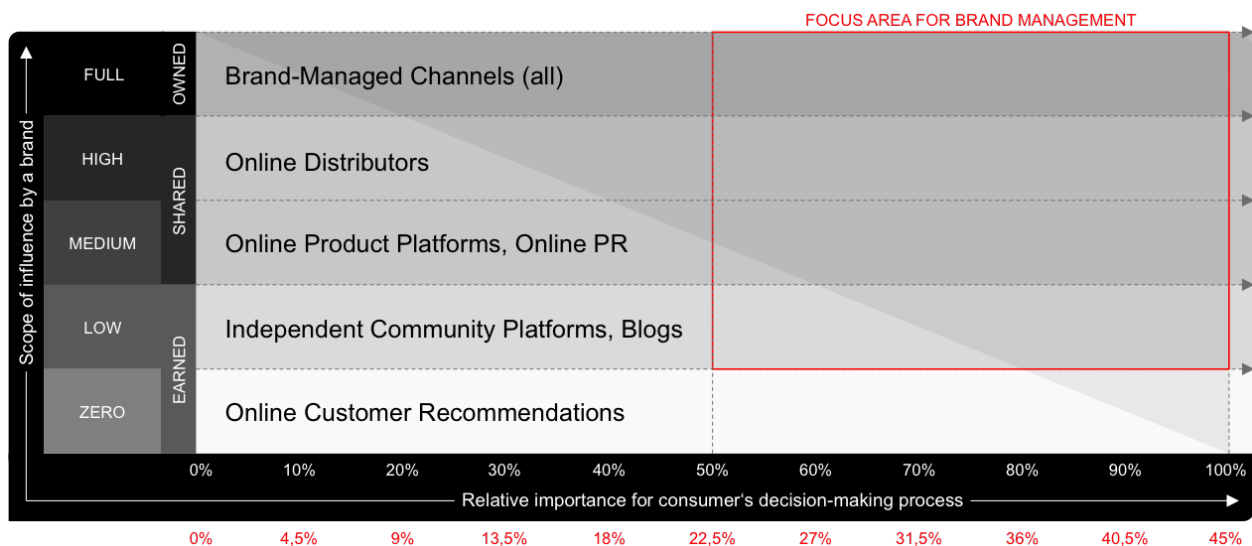


Figure 16: The adapted cluster model

On the horizontal axis, the measured maximum value for approval within the quantitative surveys (ca. 45%) is now equal to 100% importance (see figure 16, values marked in red). This was done, because the quantitative survey was conducted in a multiple choice question style, therefore the results represent a relative importance between all possible options per reputation element. Due to the new ‘Scope of influence



by a brand’, the relevant area for brand management was defined by the authors for the levels FULL, HIGH, MEDIUM and LOW ‘Scope of influence by a brand’ in the range of 50% up to 100% of ‘Relative importance for consumer’s decision-making process’ (every second consumer). This relevant area is marked as a red rectangle, named ‘Focus Area for Brand Management’ (see figure 16).

For the clustering, all tested communication channels were transformed back from the easy communicable example to the corresponding name of the communication channel, which was initially explored in the qualitative research (see table 3).

## 5.2 Evaluation of Online Communication Channels

The following paragraphs will present the clustering of all communication channels for every reputation element and finally summarizes them in one overall evaluation, in order to derive theoretical and managerial implications in chapter 6.

### 5.2.1 Brand Reputation Element: Relevance

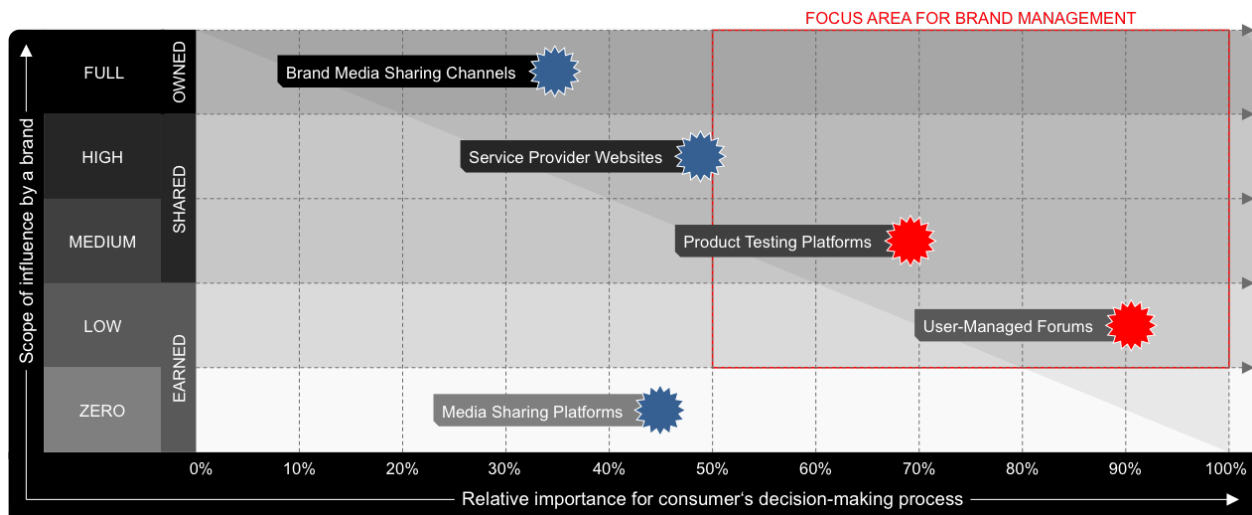


Figure 17: Evaluated online communication channels for brand reputation element ‘Relevance’

In terms of relevance of a brand and its products, which means “how appealing and meaningful (...) the [offered] value [of a brand and its products is]” (Urde & Greyser, 2014, p. 23), two online communication channels play a major role during a consumer’s



decision-making process. These two specific online communication channels were identified as ‘Product Testing & Comparison platforms’ and ‘User-managed Forums’. These identified channels show that consumers actively search for information during their decision-making process on more neutral (‘SHARED’, ‘EARNED’) sources, which have a medium and even low scope of influence by a brand but still can be managed proactively by brands.

### 5.2.2 Brand Reputation Element: Differentiation

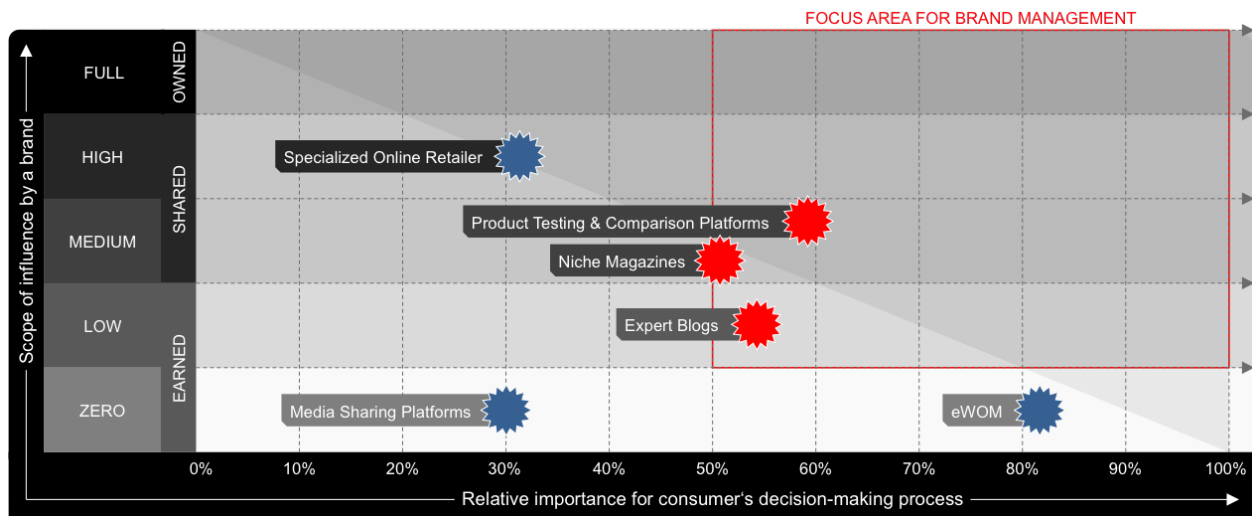


Figure 18: Evaluated online communication channels for brand reputation element ‘Differentiation’

Regarding “how distinctive [a brand and its products are positioned] (...) in the market” (Urde & Greyser, 2014: p. 23), three online communication channels were discovered, which are ca. all of the same importance in a consumer’s decision-making process: ‘Product Testing & Comparison Platforms’, ‘Niche Magazines’ and ‘Experts blogs’.



### 5.2.3 Brand Reputation Element: Trustworthiness

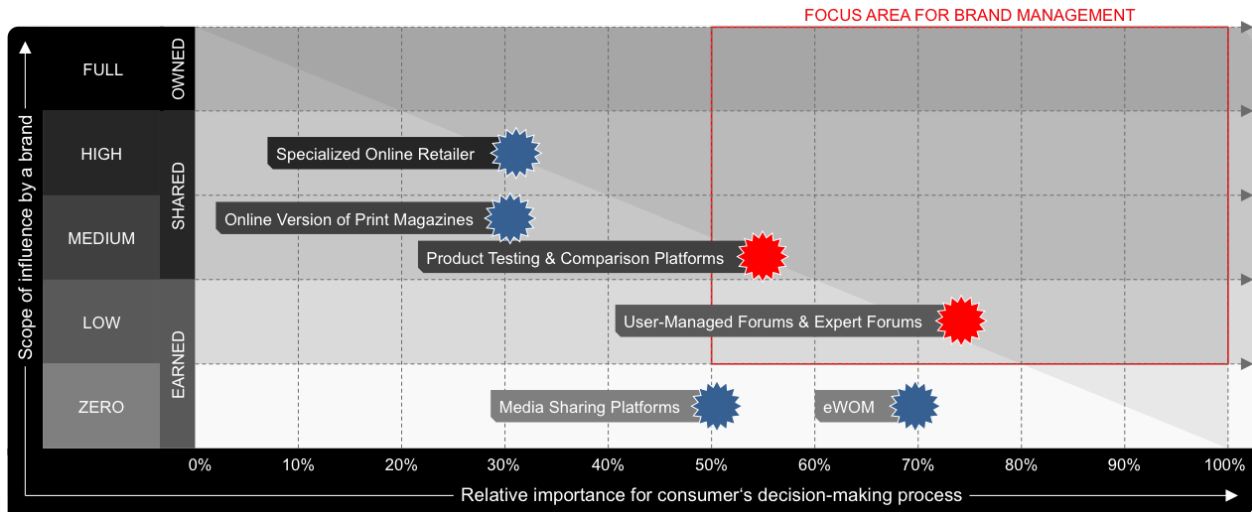


Figure 19: Evaluated online communication channels for brand reputation element 'Trustworthiness'

In the context of 'Trustworthiness' of a brand, which refers to "how dependable are (...) [communicated] words and deeds", (Urde & Greyser, 2014: p. 23), the most important online communication channels were identified as 'Product Testing & Comparison Platforms' as well as 'Expert Forums' and 'User-Managed Forums'.

### 5.2.4 Brand Reputation Element: Recognisability

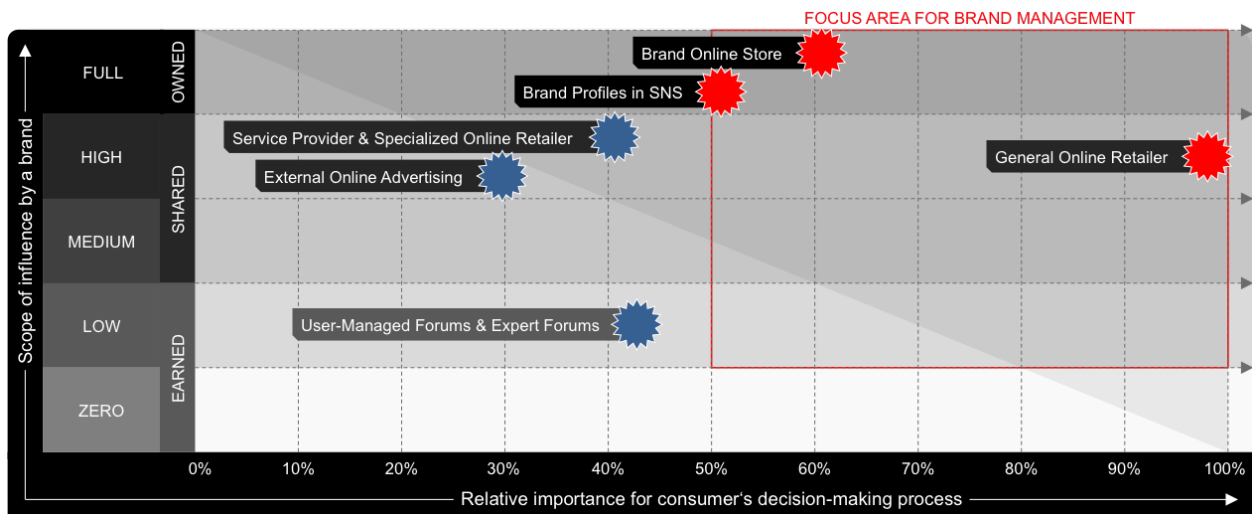
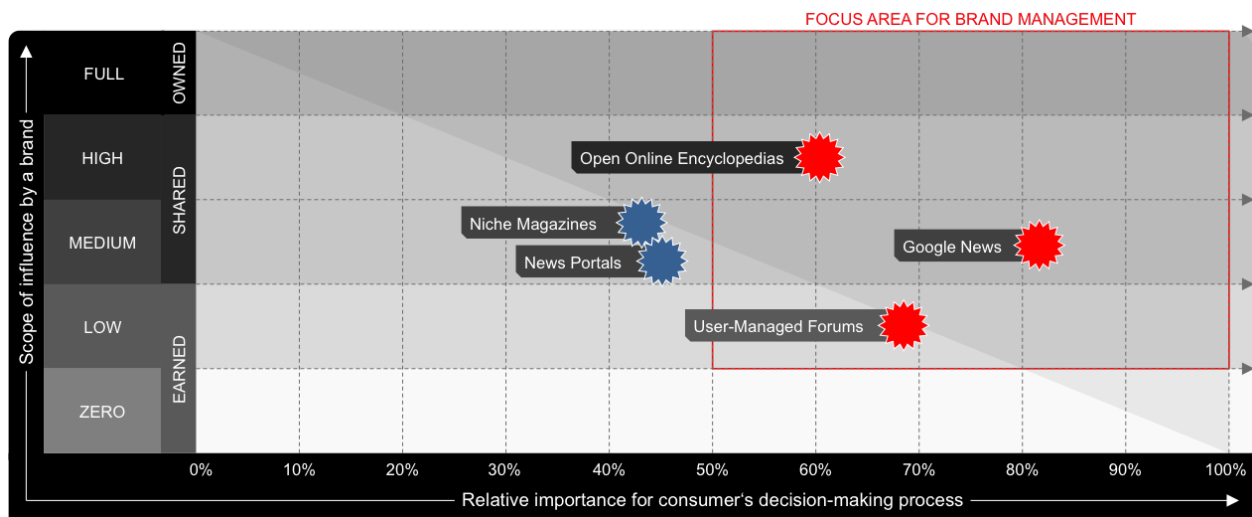


Figure 20: Evaluated online communication channels for brand reputation element 'Recognisability'



'Brand profiles in SNS', 'Brand online stores' and 'General Online Retailer' are the important online communication channels that were identified in the context "how distinct, visible and consistent (...) [a brand's] overall communications" (Urde & Greyser, 2014: p. 23) are. These most important online channels for 'Recognisability' were revealed and tested on the supporting question where consumers interact with a brand or communicate with other brand users in the online environment.

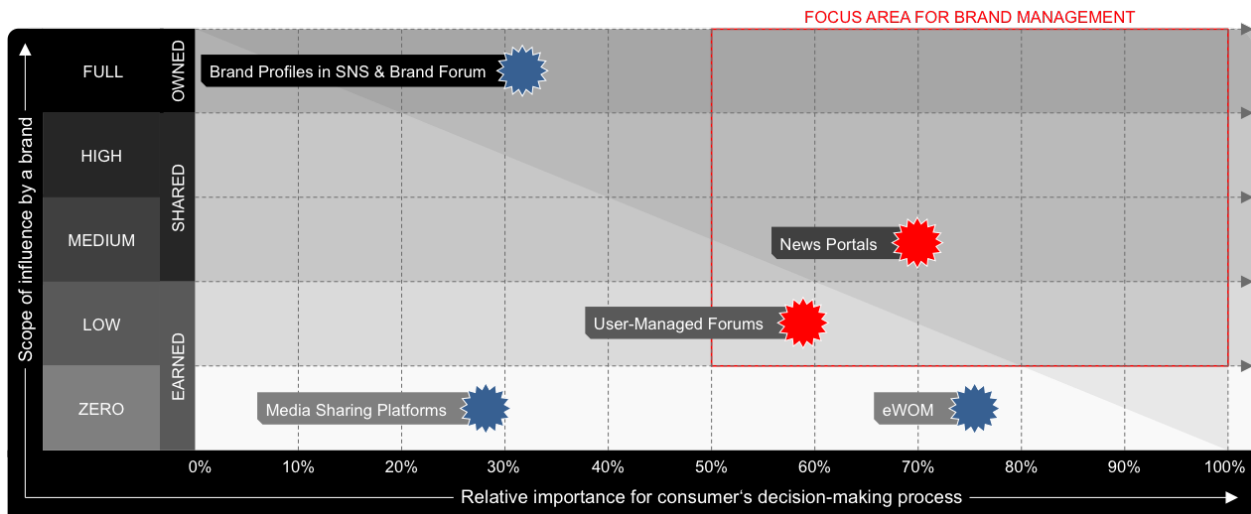
### 5.2.5 Brand Reputation Element: Willingness-to-Support



**Figure 21:** Evaluated online communication channels for brand reputation element 'Willingness-to-Support' Regarding "how engaging and inspiring are [a brand's] (...) purposes and practices" (Urde & Greyser, 2014: p. 23), three online communication channels were identified, which are important in a consumer's decision-making process: 'Open Online Encyclopaedias', 'Google News' and 'User-Managed Forums'.



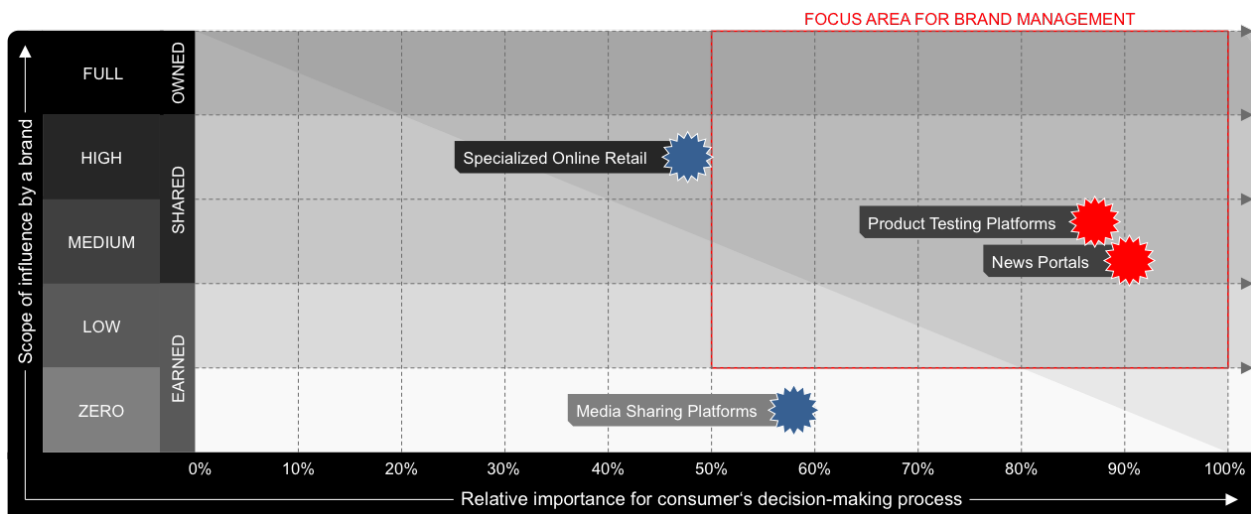
### 5.2.6 Brand Reputation Element: Responsibility



**Figure 22:** Evaluated online communication channels for brand reputation element ‘Responsibility’

In the context of ‘Responsibility’ of a brand, which means “how committed and accountable (...) [a brand is]”, (Urde & Greyser, 2014: p. 23), the most important online communication channels were identified as ‘News Portals’ and ‘User-Managed Forums’.

### 5.2.7 Brand Reputation Element: Reliability



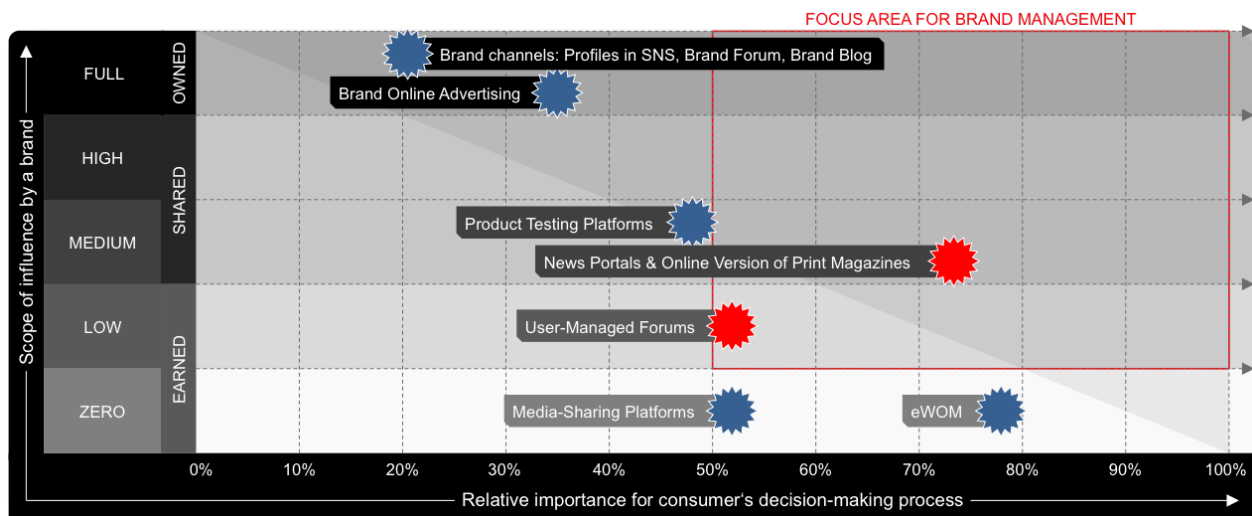
**Figure 23:** Evaluated online communication channels for brand reputation element ‘Reliability’

In terms of the reliability of a brand and its products, that means “how solid and consistent [is the] (...) quality and performance [of a brand and its products]” (Urde &



Greyser, 2014, p. 23), again two online communication channels are of major importance in a consumer's decision-making process. The two revealed online communication channels are 'Product Testing Platforms' and 'News Portals'. Again, both channels show that consumers actively search for information during their decision-making process on neutral ('Shared') sources, where a brand has only a medium scope of influence.

### 5.2.8 Brand Reputation Element: Credibility



**Figure 24:** Evaluated online communication channels for brand reputation element 'Credibility'

For the quantitative test of the brand reputation element 'Credibility' the online channels 'User-Generated video reviews' and 'Opinions from experts / brand users in forums' were tested in a combined example (due to limited answer possibilities within the online survey, see 4.2.2.3), but were evaluated separately. These two channels were combined, as both deal with more neutral sources, whereas 'eWOM' represents a more personal communication channel. For the evaluation, both channels were separated again and as a result the online channel 'User-Managed Forums' lands in the focus area for brand management. Also the online channels 'News Portals' and 'Online version of Print Magazines' were evaluated for having major importance within a consumer's decision-making process.



## 6. Implications

The findings of the three research questions have obtained new knowledge within the identified research gap, namely which online communication channels can effectively transform strategic brand identity into positive brand reputation, particularly in the digital environment. These effective online communication channels are used to deliver an extended conceptual model that provides theoretical contributions for the academic field as well as managerial implications for practical brand management in the digital context.

### 6.1 Theoretical Contributions: The Brand Identity-Communication-Reputation Matrix

The study at hand delivers two main theoretical contributions to the research field of strategic brand management. Firstly, the literature review and conducted research in this study proof that brand identity can successfully be transformed to brand reputation through effective brand communication, which acts as a catalyst. Derived from this, the second theoretical contribution is the delivery of an extended theoretical model that closes the identified research gap, by delivering specific online communication channels for each brand identity and brand reputation element pair, based on the CBIRM (Urde & Greyser, 2014).

Since this extended model is based on existing knowledge for 'brand identity' as well as 'brand reputation' and constitutes newly discovered insights to it for 'brand communication', the developed model is called 'Brand Identity-Communication-Reputation Matrix' (Brand ICR Matrix). The inner layer 'brand identity' and the outer layer 'brand reputation' are adapted from the equivalent parts of the CBIRM by Urde & Greyser (2014). The brand identity layer still consists of the 'brand core', the 'brand promise' and variable 'brand values', but is enhanced with circular arrows, in order to better visualize the interconnectedness between all brand identity elements. The same applies for the brand reputation layer, which is adapted analogously from the CBIRM. The 'Brand ICR Matrix' can be seen in figure 25.



Within the brand communication layer, certain explanations are necessary. The 'Brand Website' was already identified through the qualitative research as the most important online communication channel, on which a brand has also full influence. Since this channel was discovered as a very important and effective catalyst for every brand identity and reputation pair, it is not incorporated in particular into the extended model, due to redundancy. However, a 'Brand Website' should always be considered as the number one communication channel for effectively transmitting strategic brand identity into brand reputation in the long-term. Therefore, the red dotted ring around the brand identity layer visualizes this online communication channel.

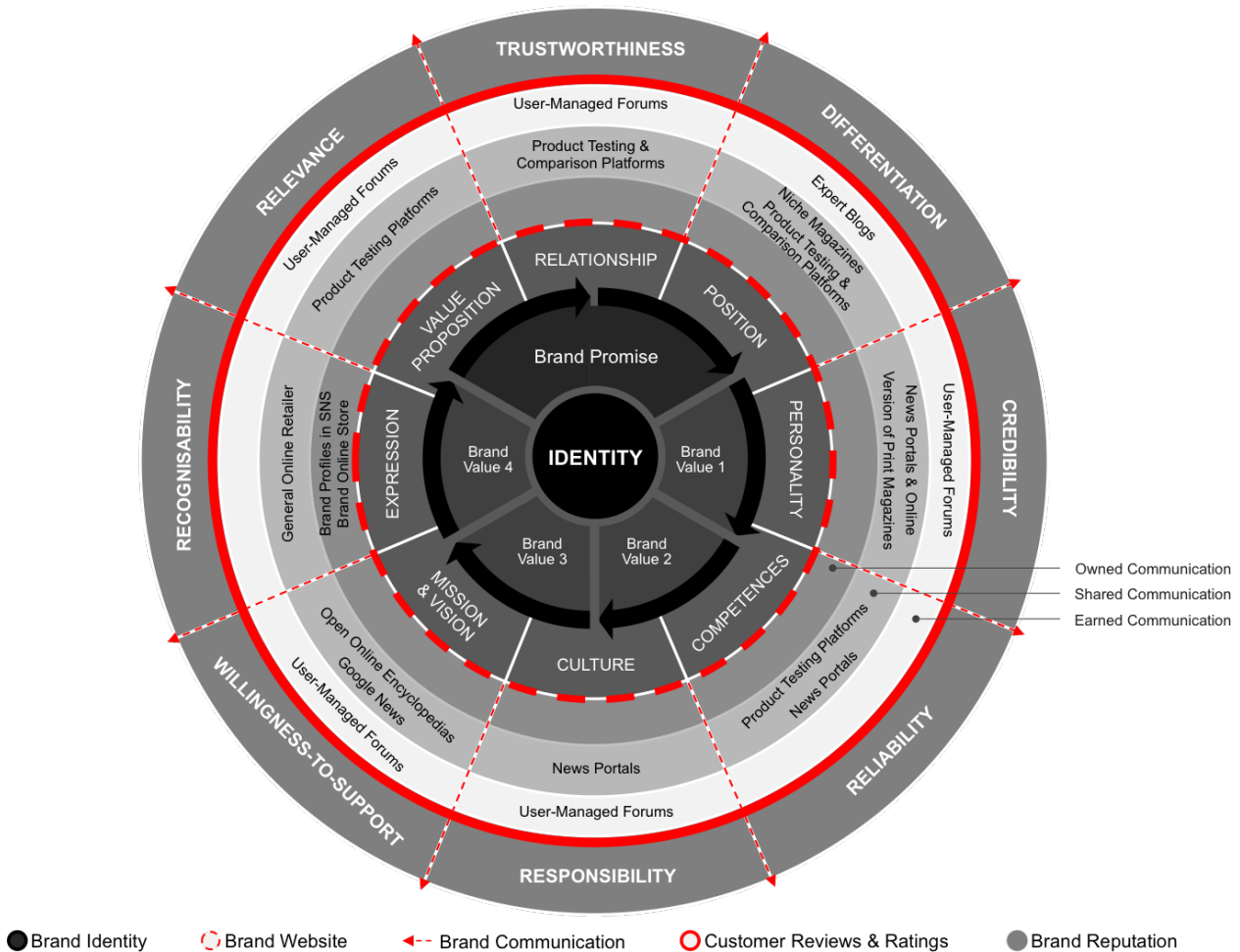


Figure 25: Brand Identity-Communication-Reputation Matrix (adapted and extended from Urde & Greyser, 2014)



The red solid ring visualizes the user- respectively customer-generated communication within the most important channel from a consumer's perspective: 'Customer Reviews & Ratings'. Within this communication channel a brand has zero influence, which means that these channels can only be managed reactively, since the brand respectively its brand ambassadors cannot take part in any dialog actively.

Between these two extreme points, all proactive manageable online communication channels are incorporated in the model, where a specific brand identity element can be transformed into positive brand reputation, since a brand respectively its brand ambassadors can actively participate in dialogs. The channels are sorted after their scope of influence by a brand within the three subordinate classes of 'Owned', 'Shared' and 'Earned communication'. In detail this means, the closer a communication channel is located to the brand identity layer, the more influence a brand has on this particular channel. Certain communication channels will be presented in the context of managerial implications.

To conclude, 'the fusion of the corporate [brand] and product [brand] reputation has only reached its tipping point today (...) [and are therefore] becoming nearly invisible" (Weber Shandwick, 2012: p. 3). Thus, it is also important to derive managerial implications from the Brand ICR Matrix in the next chapter, which actually help to measure and manage brand reputation, particular in the online environment.

## 6.2 Managerial Implications

From the extended conceptual model presented above, managerial implications will be derived, which will depict strong relevance for brand managers of different branches, since the online-presence of brands is an ever-increasing phenomenon. In today's complex decision-making processes within a consumer journey, the extended Brand ICR Matrix can help to build and sustain positive brand reputation in order to win the moment of truth in the online environment.



### 6.2.1 Owned Communication

Effective online communication channels that can be assigned to owned communication are 'Brand Website', 'Brand Online Store' and 'Brand Profiles in SNS'. As already mentioned above, 'Brand Websites' are not incorporated in the extended framework, since they reflect full scope of influence by the brand and therefore involve the imperative necessity of being strategically managed in addition to the relevant channels, which were empirically found. However, the qualitative data analysis shows that 'Brand Websites' are indeed relevant regarding consumers' decision-making process and therefore require a proactive management on the part of the brand.

With regards to 'Brand Online Stores' and 'Brand Websites', brand-related information can be fully controlled and presented convincingly in order to reinforce brand reputation and consequently influence consumer's decision-making process. Both online communication channels are proactively manageable. In detail, the extended matrix exhibits that the efficient management of 'Brand Online Stores' especially results in enhancement of the brand reputation element 'Recognisability'. However, often one encounters rather static constructs, which do not facilitate an interactive way of communication. Brand websites are also likely to leave the impression of only reflecting commercial purposes of marketers (Kozinets et al. 2010). This indicates that a well-designed 'Brand Website' respectively 'Brand Online Store' is not enough to boost a positive brand perception and consumers' buying inducement. It is rather essential to provide an online communication channel that is not only simple to use but also informative and of high quality. Furthermore, in times of information overflow, consumers expect an entertaining online experience with comprehensive opportunities to interact with the brand, for instance through the possibility to instantly communicate with the brand respectively its employees via online chatting applications (Flores et al., 2008; Cheung & Lee, 2005). In addition to that, since consumers are likely to purchase products from brands they trust, it is crucial to establish sustainable consumer relationships. Through periodic electronic consumer magazines, which are published on the 'Brand Website' or a 'Brand Blog', the brand can evolve into a relied source of



information that is visited frequently (Flores et al., 2008). Moreover, previous studies prove that the integration of customer recommendations on a 'Brand Website' enhances a consumer's positive assessment of the helpfulness of the site. Apart from that, respective reviews induce consumers to revisit the website and boost the time spent on the 'Brand Website' (Kumar & Benbasat 2006; Mudabi & Schuff, 2010). Therefore it is recommended to incorporate a customer recommendation section as it leaves an authentic and open-minded impression on consumers while allowing the brand to strictly control the published reviews.

Apart from that, brands can take advantage of establishing 'Brand Profiles in SNS', which especially affects the brand reputation element 'Recognisability' in a positive way and can be managed proactively. Consumers can become fans or follow these pages and might share, like or comment on brand-generated content. This brand-generated content can consist of anecdotes, videos, images or other brand-related content (de Vries, Gensler & Leeflang, 2012). Brand fanpages to some extent depict a consumer's relationship to a certain brand since he or she can impart fascination for the brand on the page. Apart from that, brand fanpages represent an information source for consumers as they might also include informative content about the brand (McAlexander, Schouten & Koenig, 2002; Dholakia, Bagozzi & Pearo, 2004). This indicates that brand managers shall consider this online communication channel as influential when it comes to the consumer's decision-making process, especially in the digital context. In detail, through the efficient management of this proactively manageable online communication, brands can build interactive relationships to consumers, which may enhance favourable brand reputation and influence consumers' final brand choices.

With regards to 'Paid Communication', which is covered by 'Owned Communication', 'Brand Advertisement' was evaluated as a relevant online communication channel by four probands (30%) during the qualitative research process. This result has been confirmed by the quantitative evaluation. The authors deduce that although this channel may not be of high importance for consumers, 'Paid Communication' supports the



process of establishing a favourable brand reputation more than solely relying on a social media presence. In this context, 'Brand Advertisement' can be seen as push communication whereas 'Brand Profiles in SNS' rather represent pull communication.

### 6.2.2 Shared Communication

This class of communication refers to proactively manageable online communication channels, which range from medium ('Online Product Platforms'/'Online PR') to high ('Online Distributors') scope of brand influence by a brand.

As shown in the Brand ICR Matrix, the efficient management of 'General Online Retailer' tends to result in enhancement of the brand reputation element 'Recognisability'. The reason for this is that the monopoly-like position of online communication channels, for instance Amazon.com or Ebay.com, are highly relevant with regards to the perceptibility of a brand. Since 'Recognisability' is directly linked to the brand identity element 'Expression', it is recommended to instruct a 'General Online Retailer' about the usage of brand design elements (very good product visualizations, brand design conform layouts, images and colours). Thus, the brand reputation can be strengthened through the efficient transmission of this brand identity element by means of online communication measures.

Further, it can be highlighted that five out of eight brand reputation elements can be strategically strengthened through the proactive management of online communication channels covered by the superordinate communication category 'Online PR'. Accordingly, the authors suggest keeping active contact to journalists and providing them with best quality range of products for testing. Since fast response times play a critical role regarding the successful coordination of 'Online PR', certain employees shall be in charge of regular communication with relevant public relations contacts. This holds true for E-mail correspondence as well as entering into dialogues with respective people on external blogs or social networking sites.

'Product Comparison & Testing Platforms', which feature medium scope of influence by a brand, can effectively transmit brand identity into brand reputation (four out of eight





reputation elements). In order to utilize and profit from this online communication channel, the authors recommend to provide up to date information about products combined with further background information about the brand. Additionally, high-end product visualizations and brand key visuals/imagery can be offered in order to sustainably enhance brand reputation.

### 6.2.3 Earned Communication

Depending on the particular online communication channel, earned communication allows low respectively zero scope of influence by a brand. This indicates that the strategic management of channels like 'Expert blogs' and 'User-Managed Forums' is rather restricted. Nevertheless there are possibilities to proactively manage them and thereby influence consumers during their decision-making in these channels of relative high importance.

One can derive from the Brand ICR Matrix that 'Expert Blogs' are especially relevant in the context of the brand reputation element 'Differentiation', which is related to the brand identity element 'Position'. Within this online communication channel, consumers have the possibility to comment or ask questions on entries, which facilitates discussions among visitors and the author of a blog entry (Zerfass & Boelter, 2005). This implies that a brand shall frequently monitor relevant 'Expert Blogs'. Thereby negative brand-related content becomes detected and measures can be taken against it. Further, typically early adopters and lead users interact and engage in these discussions about brands and brand-related innovations. Therefore it is recommendable to actively address and attract respective online users to post blog entries about brand-related content. In this context, free product samples could serve as appealing incentives to attract experts.

The same applies to independent community platforms, such as 'User-Managed Forums'. Even though relevant forums can be monitored frequently, authors are relatively flexible concerning the possibilities of posting entries and comments. Since

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five out of eight brand reputation elements are connected to 'User-Managed Forums' as relevant communication channels, their relative importance during a consumers' decision-making process shall not be underestimated. As Aaker states, monitoring the digital channels "can augment the offering [by] adding functional benefits" or "encourage new applications and provide mechanism to improve the offering [of a brand]" (Aaker, 2014, p. 107)." Accordingly, the authors recommend that brand managers can use independent community platforms as sources for product improvements or even product development. It is also suggested that brand managers should actively take part in discussions with consumers respectively brand fans, as this authentic and open dialog can help to build positive brand reputation in more than one brand reputation element.

Further, 'Customer Reviews & Ratings' are integrated in the extended matrix in the form of a red circle, which illustrates that related online communication channels could solely be managed reactively. In detail, consumers have the possibility to evaluate purchased products through ratings (e.g. 5 star evaluations and short reports) and share product reviews on retail websites like Amazon.com. This indicates that there is no scope of influence on the side of a brand, whereas consumers generate and manage the entire brand- and product-related content within these online channels.

However, it has to be underlined that respective channels have a very high impact on consumers' decision-making process, which has been proven during the qualitative research stage. Therefore an efficient reactive management in the form of frequent monitoring of respective online communication channels is decisive.

To conclude, the newly developed Brand ICR Matrix aims at building a coherent understanding among managers respectively brand managers that the establishment of solid brand reputation requires a well-conceived coordination of multiple online communication channels. In this context, the matrix indicates, which channels need to be emphasized in order to successfully translate brand identity into favourable brand reputation. The authors recommend a holistic approach by taking every brand reputation element and related online communication channels into consideration instead of solely focusing on one specific element.



### 6.2.4 Measurement of Brand Performance & Identification of Action Fields

The Brand ICR Matrix as an extension of the CBIRM serves as a theoretical framework that enables brand managers to systematically build brand reputation, since this new matrix clearly incorporates specific communication channels for the eight different brand identity respectively brand reputation elements, which can be tested. In detail, the Brand ICR Matrix enables to identify areas of actions, by comparing own brand performances respectively perceived levels of brand reputation with direct competitors. An illustrative example can be seen in Figure 26, where exemplary performance gaps are circles red.

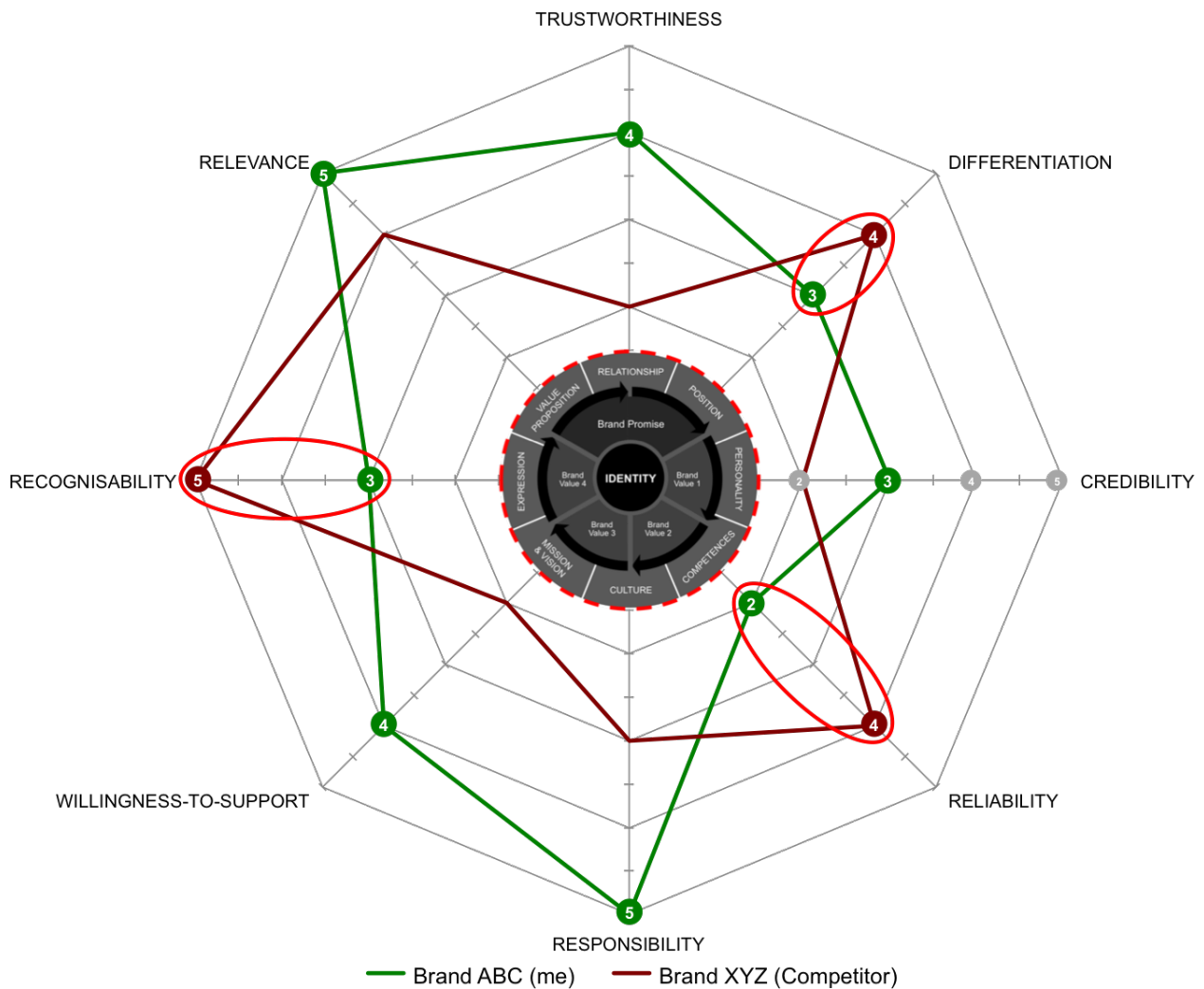


Figure 26: Exemplary results of a 5 point Likert benchmark analysis between two brands, based on extended CBIRM



By using direct comparison techniques, for instance 5 Likert scales, specific action fields can be identified on the base of testing all relevant online communication channels of the Brand ICR Matrix within a relevant target group or segment of a brand. On the base of these action fields, concrete operational measures for improving the own brand performance can be planned and executed systematically. This suggested technique could also be used to frequently test the own brand performance, without comparing it to competing brands.

## 7. Limitations & Future Research

To our best knowledge, the study at hand represents the first comprehensive examination of online communication as a decisive catalyst between brand identity and brand reputation in order to win the moment of truth during a consumer's decision-making journey. However, certain limitations exist, which constitute the basis for more in-depth research within the area under investigation.

First of all, due to prevailing financial and time restrictions, the study at hand can be seen as limited with regards to the quantitative data testing. In detail, the amount of respondents of the online survey (quantitative research stage) is limited to approximately 113 participants for each brand reputation element. However, this decision was made in order to ensure a timely provision of coherent results so that the relative importance of every previously explored online communication channel can be analysed and further interpreted. Apart from that, the quantitative study is limited to participants from the US since the used conduction method of 'Google consumer surveys' only collected data within this geographical area.

Thus, a re-conduction of the quantitative survey in other geographical territories would lead to valuable additional consumer insights and the opportunity to test the results of the study at hand for other cultural backgrounds. Apart from that, the further conduction



of the survey within a bigger scale, for instance through questioning a larger number of consumers, depicts an additional possibility for verification and reaching statistical significance for end results. Further research could also explore different consumer segments (e.g. age, gender or income) in order to derive variants for the rankings of communication channels for specific demographic segments.

Secondly, another intentional limitation of the study at hand can be seen in the focus on a business-to-consumer situation and the related exploration of the consumer's perspective. In this sense, it may be interesting to adapt the underlying research approach to a B2B purchase process respectively to brand communication in a B2B context.

Further, this research has solely been applied to consumer goods and corresponding brands. Thus, the divergent investigation of the service industry and respective brands could result in complementary insights, which could be also valuable for both practitioners as well as scholars. In this regard, specific case studies of different brands could be incorporated in the developed research approach in order to examine 'communication as a catalyst between brand identity and reputation' in various market contexts.

An intentional restriction of the study is the investigative emphasis on the decision-making process of consumers within an online environment. Therefore further research could examine classical online communication channels by equally adopting the research approach of the study at hand. This would result in interesting insights apart from the online context.

However, the focus on online communication also leaves room for further investigation since the World Wide Web is highly dynamic in nature and underlies a continuous development, where new communication channels can appear quickly. Therefore the



authors recommend to reassess relevant online communication channels on a regular basis in order to maintain the 'Brand ICR Matrix' and frequently bring it up to date.

Apart from identifying and evaluating effective online communication channels, it would be valuable to further examine "how, why and in what ways" (Svensson, 2015a, p. 20) online communication can build and/ or reinforce brand reputation, especially in the context of the investigated communication layer of the CBIRM. This additional research, for instance, could deal with exploring effective communicational content respectively "brand messages" (Kapferer, 2012), which are decisive when it comes to consumers' decision-making process and final brand choice. Thereby one could balance brand-generated and consumer-generated communicational content and its impact on the establishment of favourable brand reputation.

For the purpose of generating more in-depth managerial understanding and gaining benchmark information about the establishment of favourable brand reputation through efficient online communication, further research could build upon the presented spider web model. Thereby practitioners could create an eight-step survey, adapted for one specific brand and including a five point Likert scale, which provides the opportunity to compare the status quo of the brand reputation to the relevant competition.

To conclude, the study at hand shall function as a foundation for further research to build upon with the goal to broaden and intensify knowledge in the fields of brand communication with regards to building and enhancing positive brand reputation.



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## 9. Appendix

### Qualitative Research: Interview Guide

Hello, and thank you very much for your interest and participating in our short interview about your personal experience with brand communication in the online environment. The interview will take approximately 25 minutes and consists of only 8 main questions. Please feel free to answer each question as long and detailed if you like, as there is no right or wrong answer. We highly appreciate your personal experiences regarding the following questions, so thank you again for your time!

Before we start, we quickly have to go through some demographic questions, which will be used internally only and will be processed totally anonymous.

#### **Demographics:**

Nationality:

Age:

Gender:

Education/Occupation:

**Before we start with our 8 questions, I want to give you some background information that is supposed to help you to get into the topic quickly.**

Please think about the last time you searched and/or purchased a product online.

Maybe you realize, that nowadays you go back and forth, if you do your own research about products you have interest to buy. You generally search for products online, compare product criteria on comparison platforms, read reviews of other customers or follow advises from specialized blogs or product review websites and videos. Maybe you also mix your online research with offline product testing in a local retail shop.

**So, the first question I have is:**

1. How frequent do you buy physical products online?
2. What physical product (from which brand) have you bought online in the last 6 months after a long and careful consideration and that is of a very high value for you?
3. How did you start your research for this product?



## RELEVANCE

1. Did you search for certain product features of your (product) and the brand (brand) that increased its relevance for you?

### 1.1. YES

1.1.1. (Did you find it?)

1.1.2. **YES / NO:** In which channels did you search and why? **If more than 1:** Which channel was most helpful for finding this information?

### 1.2. NO

1.2.1. Do you think this information is important?

1.2.2. **YES / NO:** Why is it (un)important?

1.2.3. **If YES:** Where would you search for this information the next time and why?

## DIFFERENTIATION

2. Did you search for specific information about your (product) and the brand (brand) that makes it more special for you, compared to others brands or products?

### 2.1. YES

2.1.1. (Did you find it?)

2.1.2. **YES / NO:** In which channels did you search and why? **If more than 1:** Which channel was most helpful for finding this information?

### 2.2. NO

2.2.1. Do you think this information is important?

2.2.2. **YES / NO:** Why is it (un)important?

2.2.3. **If YES:** Where would you search for this information the next time and why?

## TRUSTWORTHINESS

3. Did you search for product information about your (product) that increased your trust in the brand of (brand)?

### 3.1. YES

3.1.1. (Did you find it?)

3.1.2. **YES / NO:** In which channels did you search and why? **If more than 1:** Which channel was most helpful for finding this information?

### 3.2. NO

3.2.1. Do you think this information is important?

3.2.2. **YES / NO:** Why is it (un)important?

3.2.3. **If YES:** Where would you search for this information the next time and why?



## RECOGNISABILITY

4. During your research process, did you recognize something unique or special about the visual appearance of the brand (brand) in online channels? (Product design, Packaging design, Logo, Layouts, Typography, Images, Colours).
  - 4.1. Also during your research process: Have you interacted with the brand in a unique or distinct way? (Way of communication: Online chat, fan page, twitter, brand blog, brand forum, Instagram)
  - 4.2. In this context: Have there been certain online channels, which stand out?

## WILLINGNESS-TO-SUPPORT

5. Did you search for information about what the brand (brand) stands for? For instance, which effects the brand (brand) intends to have on the world around it and its goals to achieve over time (Keyword: CSR or something?).
  - 5.1. **YES**
    - 5.1.1. (Did you find it?)
    - 5.1.2. **YES / NO:** In which channels did you search and why? **If more than 1:** Which channel was most helpful for finding this information?
  - 5.2. **NO**
    - 5.2.1. Do you think this information is important?
    - 5.2.2. **YES / NO:** Why is it (un)important?
    - 5.2.3. **If YES:** Where would you search for this information the next time and why?

## RESPONSIBILITY

6. Did you search for information about how the brand deals with other customers, businesses and how it treats its employees? (Keyword: Different Stakeholders)
  - 6.1. **YES**
    - 6.1.1. (Did you find it?)
    - 6.1.2. **YES / NO:** In which channels did you search and why? **If more than 1:** Which channel was most helpful for finding this information?
  - 6.2. **NO**
    - 6.2.1. Do you think this information is important?
    - 6.2.2. **YES / NO:** Why is it (un)important?
    - 6.2.3. **If YES:** Where would you search for this information the next time and why?



## RELIABILITY

7. Did you search for information about what makes the brand (brand) better than other brands in terms of skills, used resources and quality of its products?

### 7.1. YES

7.1.1. (Did you find it?)

7.1.2. **YES / NO:** In which channels did you search and why? **If more than 1:** Which channel was most helpful for finding this information?

### 7.2. NO

7.2.1. Do you think this information is important?

7.2.2. **YES / NO:** Why is it (un)important?

7.2.3. **If YES:** Where would you search for this information the next time and why?

## CREDIBILITY

8. Imagine the brand (brand) would be a person, which human characteristics come to your mind when you think of (brand) as a human being?

9. Which were the most influential online channels that created this image about the brand (brand) to your mind?

Thank you again for your time and participation in our interview!





## Qualitative Research: Transcriptions

Probands	BRAND REPUTATION ELEMENT	MENTIONED CHANNELS	MOST HELPFUL CHANNEL	IDENTIFIED ONLINE CHANNEL	COMMUNICATION CATEGORY
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Probands	DEMOGRAPHICS				
	<b>Nationality, Age, Gender, Education/Occupation</b>				
1	Swedish, 56, Female, Research Director				
2	French, 23, Female, Intern				
3	Austrian, 25, Male, Restaurant Owner				
4	Swedish, 32, Male, IT Consultant				
5	Portuguese, 50, Female, Doctor of Communications & PR				
6	Swedish, 62, Male, Psychiatrist				
7	German, 25, Male, Masterstudent in Information Systems				
8	Dutch, 26, Male, Masterstudent in Information Systems				
9	German, 29, Male, Masterstudent in Business Administration				
10	German, 26, Male, Account Manager				
11	Iran, 26, Male, Graphic Designer				
12	Austrian, 51, Female, Store Manager (Fashion)				
	<b>1. How frequent do you buy physical products online?</b>	How often per Month?			
1	Twice a month	2			
2	Twice a month	2			
3	Once a month	1			
4	At least 2 to 3 times a month	2,5			
5	Around twice a month	2			
6	Around ten times a year	1			
7	Once a month or once every two months	1			
8	I would say once a month	1			
9	N.A.	1,5			
10	On average once a month	1			
11	On a monthly basis between two and five times	3,5			
12	Maybe in every three weeks, maybe once a month.	1			
	<b>Average</b>	1,625			

Probands	RELEVANCE	MENTIONED CHANNELS	MOST HELPFUL CHANNEL	IDENTIFIED ONLINE CHANNEL	COMMUNICATION CATEGORY
	<b>1. Did you search for certain product features of your (product) and the brand (brand) that increased its relevance for you?</b>				
	<b>1.1. YES</b>				
	1.1.1. Did you find it?				
	1.1.2. YES / NO: In which channels did you search and why? If more than 1: Which channel was most helpful for finding this information?				
1	Yes, I looked up details about the different iPhones available because I was not sure, which model is the best one for me. I was looking for a phone that is suitable and practical for me. For instance, it should not have been too big like Iphone 6. So I searched for details on the website of Apple because I remembered from another purchase that the site is quite informative. Of course, it is a quite well known product so I knew what I could expect. I also searched on the website of my telecommunication provider. Regarding my purchase, the provider's website was most helpful. The reason for this is that the information I found there was already connected to my current contract. So the information was adapted to my circumstances.	Brand Website, Service Provider Website (Telecommunication Provider)	Service Provider Website (Telecommunication Provider)	Specialized Online Retailer	Online Distributors
2	Some visual product features were quite important for me, for instance the colour of the shoes and the occasion. I looked for the casual type of shoes so functional sports shoes like special ones for running or for the gym were not on my short-list. I checked up this product information on Nike's website. They have different categories and everything is easy to find. I searched on this channel because I thought the company itself would present the shoes most detailed. Also I knew the website before- I really love the brand so I check the website now and then. And whenever I want to buy a Nike product, I firstly visit their website.	Brand Website	Brand Website	Brand Website	Brand-Managed Channels
3	I checked up specific product features directly at the MAZZIVO's website. Usually furniture companies describe their products quite detailed on their websites-I knew that already. Therefore I decided to look it up there. I already knew before that I want to have a bed, which is made of wood and maybe some textile/leather parts. With these specifications in mind, I checked the product section of MAZZIVO. I could even select different types of wood and textiles. For instance, I could even select whether the wood shall be waxed or oiled. They were also quite accommodating when it comes to guarantee issues. And I had the possibility to return the bed in case I would not like it (even though it would have been a customized product). I really liked that.	Brand Website	Brand Website	Brand Website	Brand-Managed Channels
4	I checked up some details about the laptop that are important for me on the website of Apple. For instance, I was very interested in the design of the product and Apple has a lot of information about it on its own website. I also searched at forums and review platforms and read about other people's opinions and preferences. It was very important for me to read about other people's view on the specific model and its details. I wanted to find out if it was generally good or bad or if there are any common problems with the product. Well, the website of Apple helped me to get to know the brand and also details about the MacBook. However, I think the forums and review platforms were more helpful because I read about other peoples' preferences. So I could compare them to the things that are important for me.	Brand Website, Forum, Review Platforms, Customer Opinions & Preferences	Forum, Review Platform	User-Managed Brand Forum, Customer Reviews & Ratings	Independent Community Platforms, Online Customer Recommendations
5	First I searched for specific information on the comparison website that I mentioned before. When I could not find it there, I searched for it on their own website. And why? Because I was interested in the technical part of the refrigerator and the company itself was the only source offering this kind of information. MIELE's brand website was most helpful in this case.	Product Comparison Platform, Brand Website	Brand Website	Brand Website	Brand-Managed Channels
6	I was looking for a cleaning set that I can also use for cleaning the little sensors of my camera. That was something very special and only the product from Nikon has all these functions that I personally need. There are a lot of companies, which offer the same product but you need to buy separate components. I searched for this information on the product testing websites. There I found out that Nikon offers all the components unified in one set. This is very practical for me. I also searched on the Nikon website but I they only describe the products in general. So I searched for the details on the product testing sites. As I already said, the product testing websites were very helpful because I could find more detailed descriptions of the product and peoples' experiences with the product.	Product Testing Website, Brand Website, Customer Reports (Experiences)	Product Testing Website	Product Testing Platform	Online Product Platforms

7	<p>Back then I did a lot of research on the different platforms about specifications of the notebooks and also went to their websites where you can actually compare the specs of the laptops against each other and I looked a lot. Normally when I buy I like technical stuff and also, for example, when I think about buying a new phone, then I look a lot of YouTube videos with reviews and stuff. I think the best thing is always when people actually compare two products. So, they take, for example, the Ultrabook and the MacBook and then they compare exactly what has better specifications and what is more appropriate for me and afterwards I basically was really close to my decision if I should buy a Windows Ultrabook or the MacBook. I also went to the store and checked like if the MacBook fits my requirements basically. I spent 30 minutes with it just playing around and then I went back home and ordered it then online at the Apple store directly because I wanted to also configure it the way I wanted with more RAM and all that stuff and you cannot get that in the store and then I just bought it from the Apple store. So, it was basically three stages.</p> <p>I mean, of course branding to some extent influences the decision but what I would also say is that what influenced me a lot was that I was very unhappy with the products I bought before and so I wanted to try something totally different and the specifications, I mean, of course it has to fit my requirements but I knew that an Apple product often has lower specification than, for example, an Ultrabook from another supplier for the same price but in that case I did this decision basically because I was unhappy with the products before and it was like my need to try something completely different that was basically triggering my decision and of course because I also went to the store and I checked it out and I thought, okay, actually it's quite nice and I would like to try that.</p> <p>Normally, I first check of course always Amazon and then, I forgot the name, but here is this one website where you can actually compare the specs. I don't know the name anymore. And then of course I also spent a lot of time actually on the Apple website because I wanted to know how I actually can configure the notebook, what are the possibilities there and then of course, as I said before, the YouTube videos where tech reviewers do this comparison.</p>	Amazon, Brand Website, Technical Product Websites, YouTube Reviews	Product Comparison (YouTube)	Media Sharing Platform	Online Customer Recommendations
8	<p>I think already discovered the brands that that I perceived as being low quality. After that I started to select product features that they had. The features made the brand more interesting for me, yeah. There is like a Dutch site for computer news and also has this price comparison in which you can compare prices from Dutch workshops. Yeah, it's quite known. Sometimes I visited the sites of the vendors directly to see if they offered laptops on their site for lower cost. I would say the portal was more influential because it gives me as a consumer an overview of what's going on in the market and what he market value is for what I am looking for, what price I can expect for the features I want.</p>	Computer News Portal, Vendor Websites,	Computer News Portal	Product Testing Platform	Online Product Platforms
9	<p>Yeah, I did because at the beginning I tried to figure out what I really wanted. So, for example, camera was very important for me from the smart phones. I skipped smart phones that had lower resolution than 10 megapixel, for example. That was a very important feature for me. As I said earlier, I did take a look at these technical websites (chip.de etc.) but also looked for some YouTube videos for unpacking and for the testing and I think it's usually a step to test the camera features from smart phones and they are quite comparable to the others. I think I like videos and YouTube is a video platform but the other websites like CHIP and so on, they also produce videos that you can see how they test a product. I think the technical websites are more reliable than YouTube because everybody can upload a YouTube video especially if the end-user is promoting a product and I don't trust them because maybe they were bought by the manufacturer but if an independent website for technical reasons is promoting this ... I trust third-party neutral platforms.</p>	CHIP.de, YouTube unpacking videos	CHIP.de	Product Testing Platform	Online Product Platforms
10	<p>Something I want to point out as well is on the website of Windows there is also some recommendations from customers as well but I don't care about those recommendations at all because I don't trust those recommendations on the websites of the products and brands. I had some more sources. I just said YouTube as best first because there you see your products and you can hear keyboard and stuff like that because they're normal people and they are making reviews and I hope they're not Windows workers. They are just like neutral. After I checked YouTube, I Googled it. I made like "Windows Surface really pro review tests", whatever. I type it in and I read all about it about the testing, about the product also in English and in German. So, I have English recommendations and German recommendations and also from America. So, I more like the type of person who wants to see the recommendations of American people because they're more like the state of the art people, like they get new stuff immediately and then Germany. It's something like Computer Bild and then CHIP, it's very good. I can't remember all. So, I have to Google. I get reviews from people in America from Engadgets.com and TechRadar.com and something like PC World as well. but when you read almost the same reviews very often, I don't get more into detail then because then I'm like "Yeah, nice, they talk about those recommendations the same way on this website and this website and this website. So, I don't go into details. So, I just read something and then after, I would say, one hour or half an hour I stop it and then maybe in a couple of days I start again because I'm thinking about this product again and I search again and I maybe find a new video about it. I even checked previous models. So, maybe they had some kind of problems with the previous models and they fixed it and fixed it and fixed it. So, they are getting better and there was also a very good video on the Windows website about this product. So, there was this product designer and he was talking about the product very, very straight and honest for, I don't know, like 6 minutes or something and this clip was very, very good as well because the way he talked and described the product was so neutral. So, I trusted this clip more than some YouTube clips. It was very good as well. Then the next step for me would be going into something like Media Mart to check the product, the hardware. I was talking to my brother because he is working as a system administrators and I was talking about this product and he was like "Okay, I don't know but good points, good points, good idea. So, I have Surface as well at my workplace. It is looking good and it's cool" and he wanted to bring it at home so I could test it like a couple of days.</p>	Brand Website, YouTube (user generated), Technical Product Review Websites, YouTube Brand Channel	Youtube (brand generated)	Brand Media Sharing Channel	Brand-Managed Channels
11	<p>As a big Apple user and as a fan of Apple, most of the things were known already what the iPhone could do and would give to you but of course still you will check it before you buy it again and you will compare it. Actually, I just checked it or compared it to the new iPhone if it's worth to buy still when another one is out.</p> <p>The channels I used was YouTube of course and I had checked it on Google at least because it's the easiest way to find out what you're looking for.</p> <p>I think I was only comparing different sites to each other. That's the only thing beside YouTube. There are not so many different things which are up-to-date and like so flexible and full of range. So, so it's really hard to find something like YouTube.</p> <p>YouTube was the most helpful source for this because you could see in real life watching it and how they look like in real. So, you have on the one site information and on other sites you have the video. I mean, you combine these things.</p>	YouTube (brand generated), Google	Youtube (brand generated)	Brand Media Sharing Channel	Brand-Managed Channels
12	<p>Yes, I started with Google, for sure and I found shops that I didn't know before. Customer review, in this case of the refrigerator, I found it in the shop because the shop showed me the video of this product and I did find on YouTube. The review was made by the shop and not by the customers.</p>	Google, Customer Reviews in online Shop, YouTube	Reviews in online Shop	Customer Reviews & Ratings	Online Customer Recommendations
<b>1.2. NO</b>					
1.2.1. Do you think this information is important?					
1.2.2. YES / NO: Why is it (un)important?					
1.2.3. If YES: Where would you search for this information the next time and why?					
1	X				
2	X				
3	X				
4	X				
5	X				
6	X				
7	X				
8	X				
9	X				

10	X					
11	X					
12	X					
Probands		DIFFERENTIATION	MENTIONED CHANNELS	MOST HELPFUL CHANNEL	IDENTIFIED ONLINE CHANNEL	COMMUNICATION CATEGORY
		<b>2. Did you search for specific information about your (product) and the brand (brand) that makes it more special for you, compared to others brands or products?</b>				
		<b>2.1. YES</b>				
		2.1.1. Did you find it?				
		2.1.2. YES / NO: In which channels did you search and why? If more than 1: Which channel was most helpful for finding this information?				
1	X					
2	X					
3		I tried to find out what sets MAZZIVO apart from other companies directly on their website. I did that because I expected the company itself to describe best what is special about their products and which advantages I would have when I buy a product from them. I could find out that MAZZIVO uses solid wood, which made it very special for me. As a bed is a very valuable product for me, I searched a lot for quality aspects. It was a real investment for me and I intend to have the bed for a longer time so I really liked the idea that MAZZIVO offers solid wood beds. Another aspect that brought me to buy the product was the outstanding design of the bed. I did not use any comparison websites because I was already quite sure that I would like to buy a bed from MAZZIVO.	Brand Website	Brand Website	Brand Website	Brand-Managed Channels
4	X					
5		When I was searching on the comparison platform (Why? I chose this one because many different brands are compared and contrasted there), I quickly found the most special product for me.	Product Comparison Platform	Product Comparison Platform	Product Comparison Platform	Online Product Platforms
6		I searched for this kind of information on product testing websites and review sites. Often I find reviews written by photographers with very similar preferences to mine. Some of them used sets from other brands before and compared them in their reviews. And in this texts they also wrote that the cleaning set (all-in-one) from Nikon is very practical. So that's what made the product special for me then as well.	Product Testing Website, Review Website	not mentioned	Product Testing Platform, Customer Reviews & Ratings	Online Product Platforms, Online Customer Recommendations
7		Okay, nowadays it's changed a little bit but back then it was, I think, still one of the thinnest and lightest Ultrabook that you can actually buy. Of course, the operating system also played a role but I was also aware that course it has certain drawbacks, for example, the different plugs that you need to have all these kind of adapters which was kind of annoying but I was not so aware at that point. So, that didn't doesn't influence my decision back then so much and of course I had also to do something with the brand because normally you perceive Apple products, they have quite a high quality but what I was also considering was the price that when I wanted to get rid of it that I could resell the product at a stable price or a higher price than, for example, the normal notebook. Because of that in one or two years I had lost a lot of value just because it's not an Apple product. I discovered it during the research, I would say most of it. The most influential were mainly the tech reviews on YouTube and this stuff. And maybe also some stuff from the forums. I mean I think the most important channel for me at least is always Amazon reviews. So, I always check like the most negative Amazon reviews and when I see like certain patterns that, for example, 20 people in a row wrote that the display broke because of something like in their pockets or they didn't drop their phone, for example, then I always make my decision and say "Okay, I won't buy this." So, I would say the Amazon reviews are really important at least for me to make a buying decision. Generally, I would say so in terms of electronics at least. I mean like for clothes and stuff I don't really care about the reviews but for buying electronic phones, monitors, smart phones, I normally always check the negative Amazon reviews and I consider them personally for me as very important.	Tech Reviews on YouTube, Forums, Amazon	Reviews on YouTube, Reviews/Ratings on Amazon	Media Sharing Platform, Customer Reviews & Ratings	Online Customer Recommendations
8		I think I always try to get a short list of like three or four or five models that I really like which are almost equal in price and specification probably. Then I just look up the specification of, for example, the superior processor which is like a little bit faster than the other ones. I mean, it's quite specific but, for example, in my opinion a laptop is almost the same technically and I see two different processors, I look at, for example, the Intel site and other site so you can see the difference between the processor technically. I got to the corporate websites of the manufacturers to see the specific parts. For example, for graphics card, I mean, they are generally like a code which you never know what the specifics are like the clock speed and stuff. So, just for graphics cards I look at other sources to see what exactly the speeds are to make a better judgment. If it's available, my preference goes out to the information on the corporate websites but sometimes they are not available and then you have to refer to third-party sites for information like review sites or benchmark sites. I would say corporate websites are most influential because third-party sometimes also writes down things that are not entirely validated because they just want to write an article or something.	Website of Manufacturer / Partner / Ingredients, Brand Website, Review / Benchmark Websites	Brand Website	Brand Website	Brand-Managed Channels
9		I would say I have a specific relevant set of the smart phone manufacturers in my mind. So, there was a start there. I looked for my top three – Samsung, Apple and, for example, Blackberry at the beginning – but starting with the research process, I finally came to Sony which was not in my relevant set but I was convinced from the testing results and the price-performance ratio, for example. I was focused in the beginning on specific brands but later on I moved away from my relevant set because the testing results convinced me. And it's the first time that I picked a Sony. For example, the Sony smart phone is waterproof and also resistant against scratches and so on. I think it's also a special feature but because not every smart phone is waterproof. I can throw it in toilet and nothing will happen, for example. Yes I do remember where I got this information and, as I stated earlier, the most influential channel was these technical websites and everything was published in a comprehensive way there, from every feature to the technical data to testing video. So, nothing was left with questions at the end. The only thing I did then was to check this information with some consumer experience and some tests and retailers. And the other way around is probably I read something came maybe the display has some problem. So, I tried to find information in these websites about the display. I would say that if even one customer is worrying about one thing, is complaining about only one feature, I have really high attention for this issue but because even one customer has a bigger than the information I read on one website and if it is a negative thing, I am more aware compared to when I read this information on only one website because they are journalists or just private testers or whatever but the users, they have no business interests in publishing his opinion.	Technical Website, Consumer Reviews, Testing Platforms	Consumer Reviews	Customer Reviews & Ratings	Online Customer Recommendations
10	X					
11		Yes, I was always thinking about the worth of it. So, if I want to re-buy after a few years, how much will I get and of course Apple was on the top. I got it from different ways. So, at the end I looked for it on the internet but also people told me that they were trying to sell their phones and they said "Yeah, that's the price" and I was wondering how high the price still is. So, at the end I was just sure. I knew these people at my work, people who try to sell the iPhone 4 and iPhone 5 and had still to pay like 100 or 200 Euros for it. So, I was wondering the first time. So, that was the point. I have to mention that I'm working with Apple since 2007. So, besides I phone I have other products of Apple like iPod, the first MacBook and also iMac. So, there was the connection of the devices playing a big role. I don't know anything about Apple, I would say, I would just start at the brand page like Apple. I mean, that's the first thing you do. You go on the website of the brand or at least where the devices are mentioned and you take the journey and get the image of the company and of the brand and once you get caught by the image or by the thing they are selling to you, you either or take it or don't take it and of course as a designer or whatever or artist or whatever you can call me, the way Apple shows itself and produces the world, creates the world, it's more appealing. Besides the corporate website, I would search for it on Amazon and also customer reviews.	eWoM, Brand Website, Customer Reviews (reviews)	eWoM	eWoM	Online Customer Recommendations

12	Yes, it was very helpful. At that time I bought two things from the same shop. I bought the refrigerator and I bought a new mixer-blender and the video from the blender, I found in clients' videos, not in the shop where I bought the blender. It was very funny for me because I had to search for a long time in YouTube videos and for the refrigerator it was this video from the online shop. Very different. From the same shop I bought both articles but the videos are from other sites, from different sites. I brought a survey for electronic articles and I found it in the same online shop that sold it. So, I started a new research especially for this blender and what I can find because I wanted to look at, for example, Media Mart for the price.	YouTube, online Shop	Electronic online Shop	Specialized Online Retailer	Online Distributors
<b>2.2. NO</b>					
2.2.1. Do you think this information is important?					
2.2.2. YES / NO: Why is it (un)important?					
2.2.3. If YES: Where would you search for this information the next time and why?					
1	I used mobile phones from other brands such as Samsung or HTC before. So I do have experience with other companies that sell mobile phones. To be honest, I was not very satisfied with these products. I also used products from Apple before I bought my new Iphone. I generally liked the brand so there is no need for me to check up details about other similar brands. If I would decide to buy a mobile phone from a brand I do not know at all, I would probably check other people's opinion about the product. And the company, of course. So I would visit review sites.	eWoM, Brand Website, Review Website	not mentioned	eWoM, Brand Website, Customer Reviews & Ratings	Online Customer Recommendations, Brand-Managed Channels
2	I did not compare the shoes or Nike as a brand to other similar brands, which offer the same type of products. I already knew that I would like to buy Nike sneakers because I love the brand and I simply prefer it to others like Adidas or Reebok. If I would, for instance search for running shoes, and I would not have Nike as my favourite brand, I would check blogs about running. Maybe there I could find some nice recommendations for good running shoes- sometimes these bloggers even compare different brands. I would also check up online running magazines. Maybe there were some models tested and they are presenting the results online.	Specialized Blogs, Online Magazines	not mentioned	Expert Blogs, Niche Magazine	Blog, Online PR
3	X				
4	I find it very hard to compare a MacBook with, for example, a Windows laptop because I was especially after the brand Apple, the user interface and the operation system. So I was pretty limited to Apple and its MacBooks. I did compare their different products, such as MacBook Pro and MacBook Air but it was not necessary to compare them with other laptops from Sony, LG etc.	Brand Website	Brand Website	Brand Website	Brand-Managed Channels
5	X				
6	X				
7	X				
8	X				
9	X				
10	No, I was not searching because I already know it because I also in this business. So, I know the difference between Apple and Windows products. I saw that this product is so unique and I saw some product of Acer and Toshiba also on the Windows website and I talked to another colleague and he is like 20 years in this system administration business and I was talking to him and he was like "Yeah, it's nice but I will tell you next week because I will check it as well." So, he was checking in this website and Computer Bild and magazines. Then he tried to force me to get something like Toshiba or Acer "Look at this. It's nice looking as well" but the product was almost the same but was different because of the design, not how it looks but designed function of the product is different like you have to clip the keyboard into the monitor and the Windows is more magnetic and better design. The colleague who recommend this product to me is such a expert and he is also the co-founder of my company where I work and he's in this business for 30 years. So, I trust him so much that I don't look for another product but if I would buy something else, for sure I would compare all product types.  Google is the best website to find anything. So, I would just type in the product and something like versus or texts or whatever and then you find something like YouTube channels again where they compare different products with even a product I don't know right now. So, I get to know those products in this new video clip or on a website like TestDE or whatever. So, there you see the price, you see the difference, you see maybe recommendations from other customers, so on and so on and so on but I would never say I would go offline to have something like a recommendation or a review or whatever. I just use Google and that's it and, yeah, for sure before I buy it, I go to the shop or I ask friends or people I know who already got so much information about this specific product that I want to buy. So, I ask them because they have already done the work for me. So, I don't have to find the stuff.	Brand Website, eWoM, Technical Product Testing Websites, Google, YouTube channels, Test.de, Customer Recommendations	eWoM	eWoM	Online Customer Recommendations
11	X				
12	X				
Probands	TRUSTWORTHINESS	MENTIONED CHANNELS	MOST HELPFUL CHANNEL	IDENTIFIED ONLINE CHANNEL	COMMUNICATION CATEGORY
<b>3. Did you search for product information about your (product) that increased your trust in the brand of (brand)?</b>					
<b>3.1. YES</b>					
3.1.1. Did you find it?					
3.1.2. YES / NO: In which channels did you search and why? If more than 1: Which channel was most helpful for finding this information?					
1	I visited some review sites and I read a lot of positive statements about the mobile phone, I wanted to buy. I searched on this kind of sites because I wanted to get information that does not come from Apple or Telia. So I mean more independent and objective information. Also the people discussed about Apple and general and said that the customer service is very good and they are satisfied with it.	Customer Review Website	not mentioned	Customer Reviews & Ratings	Online Customer Recommendations
2	Before buying a product online, I always read a lot of customer reviews. And if they are positive and good I feel that I can trust the brand. Before I ordered the Nike shoes on Zalando.de, I also checked other people's opinion about the comfort of the shoes and their views on the different sizes. In the past I sometimes read negative reviews about shoes on Zalando and I decided not to buy them.	Customer Reviews on Zalando	not mentioned	Customer Reviews & Ratings	Online Customer Recommendations
3	I did search for customer reviews about MAZZIVO products on Google in order to see whether the company is generally reputable and trustworthy. First of all, there is a reference section directly on MAZZIVO's website, which is quite helpful. I also found forums online, in which users shared their experience with their MAZZIVO products. I generally wanted to find out whether other customers were satisfied with the product or not. I think it is very helpful to read about other peoples' opinions. In general, I found a lot of other positive reviews about MAZZIVO products. When I searched via Google I also found an article about MAZZIVO on the online sites of the magazine "GQ". They described the brand in general and also underlined the good quality of the products. I really liked the "GQ" article and I think it increased my trust in the brand. As I read the paper version of the GQ magazine now and then, I know that they only report about renowned companies and brands. Otherwise they could damage their own reputation as a high quality magazine.	Forum, Customer Reviews on Brand Website, Online Version of GQ Magazine	Online Version of GQ Magazine	Online Version of Print Magazine	Online PR
4	I think when it comes to trust it is always helpful to check up other users' opinion and experience with a product. The reviews you can find for me seem to be a bit more believable than the information from the company itself. So I only searched for this kind of information on review sites and brand forums.	Customer Review Platform, User Group Forum	not mentioned	Customer Reviews & Ratings, User-Managed Brand Forum	Online Customer Recommendations, Independent Community Platforms
5	I searched on websites where people write about their personal experience with the brand. Other people's positive opinion/ user's words about the product and the brand made me trust in the brand. These review sites were very helpful and the information seems credible.	Customer Review Website (positive Customer Reviews / Statements)	Customer Review Website	Customer Reviews & Ratings	Online Customer Recommendations

6	Since I am pretty much into photography, I checked up other photographers' opinion about the product. I read through a lot of reviews and also searched for the information on photography community sites. I feel that if a lot of other well-experienced photographers trust in the product and Nikon, I can also trust in it. The photography community sites were very helpful because I found opinions from people, who are interested in exactly the same things. That makes the information very trustworthy for me.	Customer Reviews, Photography Community Site or Platform / User Group Forum	Photography Community Site	Expert Forum	Independent Community Platforms
7	I wouldn't say that my research really increased my trust in that case because you also read a lot of negative stuff of course nowadays of Apple products. I mean, normally when you buy such an expensive product, you also expect certain quality of course and of course I was assuming that when I bought an Apple product but also when you do your research of course you find a lot of stuff which says "I don't know, the laptop broke" and, for example, what's really negative was that the warranty claims are really low compared to other manufacturers like it's only one year. So, actually that had quite a negative impact on my buying decision. I still made the choice then for Apple but that was like at least hindering or made me think a lot more if I really wanted to buy this product. It didn't really increase my trust in the brand, I would say. It's of course during my research on YouTube and reading the reviews on the forums and also reading the ratings on Amazon, for example. I mean it's always a pro and con but when I think about it, I would say that in the end, I would say I encountered negative stuff than actually positive stuff. At least this is how I perceive it.	Amazon Customer Ratings, Forums, YouTube Reviews	Reviews on YouTube, Forums, Ratings on Amazon	Media Sharing Platform, User-Managed Brand Forum, Customer Reviews & Ratings	Online Customer Recommendations, Independent Community Platforms
8	X				
9	Yeah, I did take a look at previous models of Sony smart phones and how they were tested and what the people were saying how satisfied they were to get the feeling if the brand is reliable in quality, for example, but I also got to know Sony you previously from other products. So, we have here some kind of spillover effect because I had a Playstation for a very long time and I was very satisfied with their electronic products. So, I knew Sony is kind of a quality brand. I didn't really experience their smart phone. So, I tried to find information that their smart phones are also reliable like the Playstation. I also try two channels, the technical platform for the previous smart phones and the customer recommendations a retailers for these products like online retail stores like Amazon and eBay or other private retail, smaller ones. I would say the customer recommendations or reviews were more influential because and I think they had higher reputation at this point.	Customer Reviews, Technical Product Testing Platforms, Customer Reviews on different retail shops	Customer Reviews	Customer Reviews & Ratings	Online Customer Recommendations
10	X				
11	You're asking me about different things and trust. So, there was this T-shirt I was going to buy and I wasn't really sure because I had different experience with this brand. So, I read all the customer reviews and compared it to different sites and Amazon and all this stuff and once I got the T-shirt, I mean the trust increased and I have now more trust in the brand like S Oliver, that was T-shirt of S Oliver. I was on the S Oliver site, found the same T-shirt on the model picture and product details site but there was no mention of model sizes, what is he wearing and all of this stuff. So, I found the bottom of live chat, clicked on it, it took me like not even 5 minutes, like 2 minutes and there was this live chat, asked the person what is this model wearing, what size and blah, blah, blah. I got the answer doing like 10 seconds and that was all. That was of course another point that made me buy this T-shirt, another reason of course.	Customer Reviews, Brand Website	Brand Website	Brand Website	Brand-Managed Channels
12	I searched on other platforms on the internet because it's a very old brand of refrigerator. It's from my childhood and I remember that their electronic products and systems. So, I knew the brand but I didn't remember that they made refrigerators as well. That for me was really new. And then I searched in the internet for really long time what clients tell and where I can find it, where the product's made. So, I found it here in the surrounding of <<inaudible>>. At last it was the price, for sure, because compared to other brands and in this case refrigerator, it was a good price and it was exactly what I wanted. I actively searched for the guarantee aspect. I read so many recommendations and reviews. I think the video on the internet was for me the main thing that made me buy this refrigerator and I read all the information like how much electricity it needs and how it fits the economic situation these days. I read this on the online shop I bought it from. That was the main source. You can buy this refrigerator in a lot of shops but where I bought, it was the lowest price of the same product. So, I took it from this shop and it was very close area. So, if I have a problem in service, because one piece was broken in the inside of the refrigerator, so I called the service and in 2-3 days they said to bring that to the site. So, this is very important. If I buy on the internet, I want to have the service like <<inaudible>>. So, it's not far away. In this case, in this product it's very necessary for articles like washing machine and all these things. I think it's connected to the brand because I got a list from this brand where you are sitting so you can call this or this or this shop. The guarantee information was written on the internet, on the website of the brand. I think this is the main thing when you buy something which is in the downstairs of the shipping conditions or something like this. It's important and it was written there very clearly it takes 2 days. They have a good website shop. There were two websites – the website of the brand and the website of the internet shop. There were some other online shops with the same product and then I went to the original website of this brand and there was really the best review but you couldn't buy on this website. So, for me, I decided it was really a good video for me. I saw every detail of this product very clearly. So, I decided now to search this product in the Best Buy's online shop and this online shop has two weeks' delivery and other online shops had 3 days. I read a lot of recommendations of clients and this was very helpful. I think it was on this online shop, the clients' page, not in the Google or something.	Brand Website, Price Comparison Platforms, online Shop	Electronic online shop	Specialized Online Retailer	Online Distributors
<b>3.2. NO</b>					
3.2.1. Do you think this information is important?					
3.2.2. YES / NO: Why is it (un)important?					
3.2.3. If YES: Where would you search for this information the next time and why?					
1	X				
2	X				
3	X				
4	X				
5	X				
6	X				
7	X				
8	No, I already had Sony before and I had good experience with it and now for Windows laptops. Sony was perceived as one of the best brands qualitatively. So, that's actually why I chose Sony. I think I will do two things. I will go to the price comparison site which also often shows you what the most popular products are at the moment that are being bought but you can't always trust them because they are often paid to be able to put a personal website. The other one is to very actively look for review sites that are independent and they know about products and also they have responses of users under the article, what they think about it.	Price Comparison Website, Product Testing Website	not mentioned	Product Comparison Platform, Product Testing Platform	Online Product Platforms
9	X				
10	I wouldn't buy it now because this product got the Windows 8 on it. So, I wouldn't buy it now because I'm waiting for Windows 10 because I trust Windows and I hope that Windows will change to 10 to a better Windows program than the 8. So, I would say just because I know it or I saw some reviews that new product will have the 10 on it, this increased my trust and I want to buy it, feeling much more. I wouldn't buy the 3 now because I found websites they were like "Yeah, the new Pro is coming out in May." So, I was like "Nice. I don't want to buy now the 3 because I will wait" and if they say "Yeah, it will come out in September or November, I will wait as well." Also, I know reviews about this new Windows system and it's getting better and better and better because also my colleague told me all the stuff. I didn't read it on my own because I'm not that interested. I am just interested when I buy something. So, he was telling me all this stuff about the new system. So, this increased my trust in this product and this brand. This was TechRadar.com. It's like a blog.	Customer Reviews, eWoM	eWoM	eWoM	Online Customer Recommendations

11	X				
12	X				
Probands	RECOGNIZABILITY	MENTIONED CHANNELS	MOST HELPFUL CHANNEL	IDENTIFIED ONLINE CHANNEL	COMMUNICATION CATEGORY
	<b>4.1 During your research process, did you recognize something unique or special about the visual appearance of the brand (brand) in online channels? (Product design, Packaging design, Logo, Layouts, Typography, Images, Colours).</b>				
1	Yes, I did recognize their special design a lot. For me, Apple stands for quality. Both the logo and the colours etc. really show that. I could especially recognize all of that on the website of Apple.	Brand Website	Special Brand Design, Logo, Colour Scheme,		
2	Oh yes, the brand logo was totally eye-catching. I can remember that it was huge on Zalando and it caught my attention. I really liked the way in which the products are presented both on Nike's website and on Zalando. Especially on Nike's website the shoes are shown in a very colourful way and the images are very true-to-life.	Brand Website, Zalando	Brand Logo, Product Visualization, Images		
3	The brand and in particular the logo/ typography is nothing special, to my mind. Even though I think the brand name shows the company's specialization in solid wood quite well. However, the website was quite professional and the products are shown in an appealing way. For instance, the product images are presented from different angles/ sides and the light is pretty good. MAZZIVO's website left a very good impression on me.	Brand Website	Word Mark, Product Visualization, Images		
4	I had the general impression that Apple stands for something clean, tidy and modern. I think they put a lot of effort in the product design and the packaging as well. The images and all the colours they use, fit well together. And I think the logo is tempting. I realized all of that on the website of Apple.	Brand Website	Logo, Product Design, Packaging Design, Imagery, Color Scheme		
5	I did recognize the concise typography of MIELE. It was kind of eye-catching for me. I especially recognized it on the corporate website of MIELE.	Brand Website	Typography		
6	I already saw the packaging design online. I think it was on the website of Nikon. It looked very practical and perfectly designed for my photography trips. So when I saw the images, the product itself and the packaging, I thought: "This is the one I need."	Brand Website	Imagery, Product Design, Packaging Design		
7	I mean, of course the websites are done really nice. I mean, they're really good at presenting their products and of course their advertisement campaigns are like visually really well done. Of course it also influences your buying decision somehow if they have a nice website and they are able to have a nice product placement.	Brand Website	Product Visualisation, Advertisement Campaigns		
8	What else I like from Sony is that they are also known for being nice designs for notebooks more than other manufacturers of Windows notebooks. They are usually like better materials and stuff and they are more premium segment of the Windows notebooks. I think they are not so aggressive with their marketing or advertising campaigns but they do have their own online channel which I also actually think adds some value. They sell notebooks directly from their site like Dell or Apple, who also do the same.	Brand online shop	Product Design	Brand Online Store	Brand-Managed Channels
9	After I found the specific product itself, I did take a look at the design, for example, and I was pretty surprised at the model because the size was perfect for my needs and especially its surface. I like that it looks very luxurious in black and the simple brand logo on it. The product itself looked nice but at the end I picked a mobile phone retailer for buying this brand because they were promoting a special package from Sony and they had the best price ratio. It was a bundle with a selfie stick and it was cheaper price including delivery costs. So, I had additional product I can use with my smart phone and there is the best price. So, I chose this one and I found it via advertising.	Service Provider Website, 3rd party online Advertisement	Product Design, Logo	Service Provider Website, External Online Advertising	Online Distributors
10	In a negative way because the website of Windows, it's nice and good looking but I would say if you're not the type of person who visits websites like this every day or every week, you're like "What the fuck! Where should I go? Where are the products? How can I find this product?" And if this product is not in the main page like a header, then have to find it and I don't want to find a product when I go to the website. I want to see it and see it immediately. So, when I click on the tabs 'PC and Tablets' and I would be looking for another product, I would be scrolling all the time and then I just stopped after like, I would say, 5 to 10 seconds and I used the search bar and I typed the product into the search bar and then I found some sort of negative and also negative points were pictures of this product were three because of course it's not out here and there were pictures and they showed some aluminum on the side like the thing where you can twist the <<German>> and when you zoom in little bit, you see some scratch marks ... not scratch marks but it's not clean aluminum. I would say, yeah, it's good because they are honest and this is an honest picture because they didn't Photoshop it or stuff like that but you have to make a perfect design and the perfect usage of material. So, this was a negative point. Positive is when you find this product, then all the information you want are very easy to see and especially when you compare Windows to Apple products, you see the real specifications, you see the hardware, you see which chip, very fast because people who Windows or Microsoft products are mostly from this business, from this computer hardware stuff. They also had some logos of different test websites they wanted to test. That's also, I would say, very positive because then you can click on the logo, you go directly to the test results. Web design of Microsoft is, I would say, state of the art and they used the best colors and pictures to point out their own image because they want this more younger image now for the younger people, whatever the younger generation and I would say they hit it very good but I'm not from this marketing area.	Brand Website	Website usability / design, Realistic Product imagery (not photoshopped), color scheme, use of logos of neutral 3rd party testing platforms	Brand Website	Brand-Managed Channels
11	I went back to the gate, as you said, and I typed it in Google, went first to the shopping part. So, I had different comparisons, clicked on the different prices or compared the prices, went to the lowest one. So, I had the same price as Amazon but that was also the reason why because I bought it from Amazon because it had lowest price. First I wanted to see it on different people so I could make the best choice of the size. I was going to buy a very blank white T-shirt that I can wear not only beneath shirts like also just straight in summer with shorts and pants. So, it had to have like a specific thickness and once I have read customer reviews, they were mentioning "Yeah, it's not that thin. It's thick enough" and other stuff, I just typed it in did a detailed research.	Brand Website	Product Visualisation	Brand Website	Brand-Managed Channels
12	I would say the videos or the visualization a sign of the product was better compared to other products. The video was made by the brand because I saw it on the brand website too. The corporate design sure influenced me. As I started the research for the refrigerator, I really didn't remember this fact. Suddenly, it came to me and I went for the brand first and then I looked at the whole story about this brand, where it came from. So, for me it's an old brand and it must be good and after that I researched for what I can find it. So, I think this was the main thing why I bought this refrigerator because there were a lot of other brands.	Online shop	Product Visualisation (Videos and Images), Corporate Brand Design		
	<b>4.2 Also during your research process: Have you interacted with the brand in a unique or distinct way? (Way of communication: Online chat, fan page, twitter, brand blog, brand forum, Instagram)</b>				
1	No, I didn't. Before buying the Iphone, I had no very specific questions about the product. Everything was quite clear for me and I could find all the necessary information on the websites that I mentioned before. Maybe if I would have a problem with the Iphone, I would use an online chat. But otherwise not. I am only a common user, you know. I would not go to Apple's Facebook page to look up news about them or something like that.	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.
2	No, I did not visit any of Nike's social media sites before I bought the shoes. It was not important for my decision to buy the shoes or not.	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.
3	Unfortunately, the company did not offer an online chat. This would have been very useful because I had some very specific questions, which I wanted to ask them immediately. So eventually I had to call them. I did check out their Facebook page, where I could find some general information about the company and a number of appealing product images. Apart from that, I visited MAZZIVO's Instagram page. There I noticed that they do not post images on a daily basis but I still found some nice images there.	Social Media Profiles of Brand (Facebook, Instagram)	N.A.	Brand Profile in SNS	Brand-Managed Channels

4	No, I didn't. At least not for this specific purchase. As I mentioned before, I only checked up some brand forums to find out about other users' opinions. But I do know that Apple has all kind of social media sites- I came across them before a lot of times because I am generally interested in the brand.	User Group Forum, Social Media Profiles of Brand	N.A.	User-Managed Brand Forum, Brand Profile in SNS	Independent Community Platforms, Brand-Managed Channels
5	I did not engage so much in MIELE's social media sites. But I did visit a brand forum and posted a question there. I wanted to find out about specific information that I could not find somewhere else. I got a lot of positive answers. That was one of the reasons why I bought the fridge in the end.	Brand Forum	N.A.	Expert Forum	Independent Community Platforms
6	Yes, I visited some brand forums and read through posts and comments of other photographers. I think some discussions can be very helpful because often a lot of people had the same question about a product as I do. And the answers support me to decide whether or not to buy the product. For instance, if a lot of photographers say that a certain product is "garbage" than I rethink my idea of buying the product.	Brand Forum (User posts & comments as own channel?)	N.A.	User-Managed Brand Forum	Independent Community Platforms
7	Maybe I talked when I was like in the in the store like at Media Markt. I don't remember which store it was. Maybe I talked there shortly with them. I remember now I was in Beijing in the Apple store and I asked the guy about the MacBook Air like if I should buy the 4 gig or the 8 gig version of the Air but actually he couldn't really answer my question. So, that was kind of funny. So, it didn't influence me in a positive way. I was quite disappointed from that perspective.	only offline	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.
8	To some extent. I mean, you can configure a laptop. I can you can perceive some kind of dialogue with the manufacturer to be able to choose your components which you want to add in the notebook. No real live communications.	Brand Online Shop	N.A.	Brand Online Store	Brand-Managed Channels
9	After I was convinced that I wanted to buy this product, I tried to find the specific advertising through price comparable machines and also from Google by just entering buying product that get a lot of advertising. Then I checked the prices of the packages. I wanted to get in touch first with the advertising. I didn't check the corporate website. It's funny now when you imagine it.	Price Comparison, online Advertisement	N.A.	External Online Advertising	Online Distributors
10	No.	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.
11	For S Oliver, I mean, the thing they are using of course the like live chat, I wasn't really expecting it because usually you have the live chat stuff on sites for technical devices and things people really want to know things and have questions. So, I wasn't really expecting it from a clothing brand.	Live Chat on Brand Website	N.A.	Brand Website	Brand-Managed Channels
12	No.	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.
<b>4.3 In this context: Have there been certain online channels, which stand out?</b>					
1	I think the website really stands out. It is very simple, easy to understand and precise. I got the feeling that they promise things, which I can really rely on. At the same time, it shows the special design of Apple with all the nice images and colours. I really like the site.	Brand Website	not mentioned	Brand Website	Brand-Managed Channels
2	Yes, Nike's own website as well as Nike's brand page on Zalando.	Brand Website, Brand Page on Zalando	not mentioned	Specialized Online Retailer	Online Distributors
3	As already said before, MAZZIVO's website left a very good impression on me. All the other sites, such as their Facebook or Instagram site, were nothing special.	Brand Website	not mentioned	Brand Website	Brand-Managed Channels
4	I think the website of Apple stands out because it also shows this nice and straightforward design.	Brand Website	not mentioned	Brand Website	Brand-Managed Channels
5	No, not really. Maybe their own website a bit.	Brand Website	not mentioned	Brand Website	Brand-Managed Channels
6	No, not really.	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.
7	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.
8	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.
9	I didn't have any communication with the brand but only with the dealer.	Retail Shop	not mentioned	General Online Retailer	Online Distributors
10	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.
11	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.
12	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.
<b>Probands</b>					
<b>WILLINGNESS-TO-SUPPORT</b>		<b>MENTIONED CHANNELS</b>	<b>MOST HELPFUL CHANNEL</b>	<b>IDENTIFIED ONLINE CHANNEL</b>	<b>COMMUNICATION CATEGORY</b>
<b>5. Did you search for information about what the brand (brand) stands for? For instance, which effects the brand (brand) intends to have on the world around it and its goals to achieve over time.</b>					
<b>5.1. YES</b>					
5.1.1. Did you find it?					
5.1.2. YES / NO: In which channels did you search and why? If more than 1: Which channel was most helpful for finding this information?					
1	X				
2	Yes, as I really like the brand I wanted to read about Nike as a company. I found this information on their website. When I was looking up the details for the shoes, I thought they have a very good website so I looked through it a bit more. So eventually I entered the page about the company itself. I read through a lot of sections and it was quite interesting. But I think the information did not really affect me buying these sneakers.	Brand Website	Brand Website	Brand Website	Brand-Managed Channels
3	X				
4	X				
5	I wanted to find out about what MIELE as a company does for the environment as I intended to buy an eco friendly refrigerator. So I searched for information if they are using products, which damage the environment or not. I did not really check what the brand stands for though. That was not so important for my decision. I searched for this information on the corporate website and I found it quickly. It was easy to understand and the information was very helpful.	Brand Website	Brand Website	Brand Website	Brand-Managed Channels
6	Yes, I searched for this kind of information on the website of Nikon because usually a company describes information like that in detail on the website. Nikon is a very renowned brand. The company cooperates for instance with "National Geographics". I got the impression that Nikon is not only focused on making profit and does a lot for poor countries. I also frequently read online photography magazines. They are very specialized and only inform about photography. They sometimes publish articles about Nikon and the company's initiatives. The online magazines are quite helpful because they tell you something about the company but it is very neutral. So you do not have the impression that someone wants to make profit in some way. They report about all kinds of brands. Sometimes they have articles about what the companies do for the nature and the environment. And if I would find a lot of negative articles about Nikon, I would probably switch to another brand.	Brand Website, Articles in Online Photography Magazine	Online Photography Magazine	Niche Magazine	Online PR
7	X				
8	X				
9	X				
10	X				
11	X				
12	I got information in Wikipedia <<inaudible>> where it came from. I just remember I was a child but I remembered the name. I read all the stories in Wikipedia because I remembered that they made radios as a child. I didn't remember that they made refrigerators. Everybody asked me where it came, this refrigerator and I told them it's an old German brand. I read about the stories on the website of this brand and then I went back to Wikipedia. It was very well written on the brand website, everything, normally. You didn't need the Wikipedia for this brand. I still went back to Wikipedia to see if there is something left that I didn't know. I wanted to have the complete picture.	Wikipedia, Brand Website	Wikipedia	Open Online Encyclopedia	Brand-Managed Channels



	<b>5.2. NO</b>				
	5.2.1. Do you think this information is important?				
	5.2.2. YES / NO: Why is it (un)important?				
	5.2.3. If YES: Where would you search for this information the next time and why?				
1	I do think this is important information because if you buy a product from a special company you want to identify with it somehow. Otherwise I would not buy any products from them. For example, I would look this information up when I do not know a brand at all. But the brand Apple is so well known that I did not feel I need to check what it stands for etc. I would search on the website because they usually describe this kind of information quite well. Of course, they want people to know about all their positive characteristics. However, I would also try to find more information in online articles because the authors are more neutral and not connected to the company.	Brand Website, online articles	not mentioned	Brand Website, News Portal	Brand-Managed Channels, Online PR
2	X				
3	It was not so important for me to explicitly search for this information because MAZZIVO made a good impression on me from the beginning. If I would have doubts about the company itself, I would have searched for more details about their production etc. However, I got to know before that they build customized products according to customers' request and it seemed that they are not focused on the mass market. This indicates sustainability for me. I did not research about the company goals etc.	Brand Website	Brand Website	Brand Website	Brand-Managed Channels
4	To my mind, this pretty much depends on the product and the industry. For this specific purchase it was not important for me to find out about what Apple stands for or if it is an ethical company. I trusted the brand from the beginning so it was not necessary for me to look it up. And to be honest, I also did not really think about it a lot. I would search for online articles and brand forums to check up what people think and write about Apple as a corporation. On the website I would maybe find out about what Apple stands for. But I would personally go for the more hidden information.	online Articles, User Group Forums, Brand Website	"Hidden Information"	User-Managed Brand Forums	Independent Community Platforms
5	X				
6	X				
7	I didn't research about social responsibility and those stuff but of course at least for Apple you hear a lot of stuff concerning Foxconn and how they actually produce their stuff. I mean, of course to a certain extent I would say, for instance, here but still if you think that their product is somehow superior to others, this is always more important than environmental considerations and social influence of the company or whatever. I mean, those are nice perks of course but it's not so important for my buying decision. I didn't actively research for it. Generally newspaper articles at that time like only they had some articles about how they produce at Foxconn, for example, but that was the only thing.	online Articles	News Portal	News Portal	Online PR
8	No. It's hard to say but I have a feeling with Sony that they are a brand that generally wants to be a bit better than the mainstream stuff in the markets. If you look at a lot of professional lines, I think that's nice. I think it helps. It's not the final determinant but it helps if you're more sympathetic with a brand, it can definitely help. I think I will consult news articles and user responses on the web especially when it's quite new, when not so much is known about the product. I think my experience is that it's always best to just look at independent resources and user reviews that might be biased but at least you have some data, especially for user experience about/with a product. For a brand I will stick to websites. I also do this for Raspberry. It's actually a brand that tries to make to go to that place by offering cheap small computers for children, to program. I mean, I like the concept and it also makes me more sympathetic towards the brand. So, this is also the reason why I bought it. I mean, I like to support such causes. I visited their official site and read a bit about the company and their profile just out of personal interest but I also check news sites and some comments sites just to get a more complete image, I guess. So, to get this information took about 10 or 15 minutes.	News Articles, User reviews / comments, Brand Website	User Reviews	Customer Reviews & Ratings	Online Customer Recommendations
9	Maybe if you go away from my example like the smart phone, yeah. Let me think about when I bought a washing machine. I found also some brands that I did not know before. So, this was maybe the initial point when I started to have a look at the corporate website about what kind of brand it is, where does it belong, what does it produce and then it matters to me. Because I just want to know what kind of brands it is. If I don't have any kind of image or information, I want to know. I think my first starting point would be the corporate website to have a look at what the brand itself is presenting, what are their products, where are they made and then I would check the technical websites again for rankings about washing machines from Whirlpool or whatever.	Brand Website, Technical Product Platforms	Brand Website	Brand Website	Brand-Managed Channels
10	Everybody knows Microsoft, so I don't want to search for it again but if I would buy some other products of other brands or whatever, I would for sure review the brand if I don't know it already because, I would say, you can buy so many stuff online and it doesn't matter which product it is. Also every time there is another brand with something similar, you decide on different features. So, I would say, yes I would review the brand when it's other products. If brand is big enough, I would search Wikipedia. For sure Google will give you some information. For example, I bought years ago a Blackberry smart phone and I bought it and my boss also wanted a Blackberry because he's like "Yeah I want something, blah, blah" but we had the information that Blackberry is like getting weaker and weaker and looking for investors and we were like "Should we buy Blackberry or should we not buy Blackberry because maybe in one year or two years Blackberry is out of the market and we have phones and we have no services and stuff." So, yeah, that's also a point but it all depends on the product you buy but, yeah, for sure I'm looking for the brand, what brand. No, I already knew it. It was in the media all the time like this was the moment where everybody was talking about Blackberry. We bought Blackberries because there were investors who were investing in this company. So, we were like "Yeah, fuck it and if the Blackberry brand is gone in a couple of years, then we are a little bit screwed but then we buy some new phones." We based our decision in the end on some news platforms. It was on TV and big media.	Wikipedia, Google, General Media,	News / Media	News Portal	Online PR
11	No, not really because I knew it already. Nowadays it's not really difficult to find that out with the internet. So, of course everyone knows they're from Connecticut in the US and they earn a lot of money each year and make more and more every year. I mean, these are things you get from the news at least. I would just also click on Google News. I would type in "Apple" and go to News. This would be the most reliable source for this kind of information. I mean, you obviously are not going to get original things and the real things from the Apple site.	News, Google News	Google News	Google News Gatekeeper	Online PR
12	X				
Probands	RESPONSIBILITY	MENTIONED CHANNELS	MOST HELPFUL CHANNEL	IDENTIFIED ONLINE CHANNEL	COMMUNICATION CATEGORY
	<b>6. Did you search for information about how the brand deals with other customers, businesses and how it treats its employees?</b>				
	<b>6.1. YES</b>				
	6.1.1. Did you find it?				
	6.1.2. YES / NO: In which channels did you search and why? If more than 1: Which channel was most helpful for finding this information?				
1	Yes, I think it is important to know if a company is fair when it deals with all kinds of people around it. I knew before that Apple treats its employees very well. I mean it is a very popular company to work at. The company has a very good image and I think it is because they are working on it so hard. I could find this information almost everywhere online. For example, in different news articles or on the website of Apple. I think the website was very helpful because I could get a good insight in the company. Also, the information was not shown in an exaggerated way. So I felt I could believe them when they inform about different things.	News articles, Brand Website	Brand Website	Brand Website	Brand-Managed Channels

2	<p>I really knew that I would like to get a pair of these new, trendy Nike shoes. Regarding this decision, I did not think about whether or not Nike has good business relationships with other companies. Or, to be honest, I was also not interested in how they treat their employees. And if I would not be satisfied with the shoes, I would just send them back to Zalando. I knew the process already from other purchases.</p> <p>Therefore I also did not think a lot about their customer service etc.</p> <p>But next time I would maybe search for these aspects too. I would just "google" it because then I have the broadest search results. Maybe I would then find online newspaper articles about it. I would also search on Nike's social media sites, for instance Facebook, to see how the company itself reports about it. And of course, I would also search on their website, to check up how the company presents itself.</p>	(Google) Online Articles, Facebook Fanpage, Brand Website	not mentioned	News Portal, Brand Profile in SNS, Brand Website	Online PR, Brand-Managed Channels
3	<p>I called the company in order to find out about specific product details. Through the conversation with the employee I realized that MAZZIVO is very service-oriented and believable. Therefore I did not check up online how they treat other customers- I experienced it myself. To be honest, I did not think about searching for information about how MAZZIVO deals with its employees or other businesses. It was not relevant for me. But I would check it up on their own website if it would be important for me.</p>	Brand Website	Brand Website	Brand Website	Brand-Managed Channels
4	<p>I already knew before that Apple has a professional customer support. For instance, if you visit an Apple store, the employees quickly help you. So you get the impression already in the store that Apple deals with its customers professionally. And I also think I got influenced through other users' reviews. For example, I read one review of a person that had troubles with a laptop but he/ she got help very soon and Apple fixed the problem in an uncomplicated way. That was proof for me that Apple has a great customer service. However, I did not inform myself about how Apple treats its employees or how the company works together with other business partners. That was not important for me because I was more focused on my purchase and all the aspects involved.</p> <p>I think the reviews were again very helpful in this case.</p>	Customer Support, Customer Reviews	Customer Reports	Customer Reviews & Ratings	Online Customer Recommendations
5	X				
6	<p>I only search about how they deal with other customers. I tried to find out about it on review sites because I wanted to hear other peoples' opinion about their customer service and so on. For instance, I searched on a website called "Pricerunner" and sometimes you can find comments there like: "I have ordered the product 3 weeks ago and still it has not been delivered". Through that you can find out a lot about how Nikon treats its customers.</p>	Review Websites	Review Websites	Customer Reviews & Ratings	Online Customer Recommendations
7	X				
8	<p>Yes, I think I found some information, I was looking for some service related stuff and I read some personal experiences of people I know and the experiences actually were very often negative and I also experienced myself actually when I once made a call when I had to talk directly with somebody from Sony, it was quite negative experience. I think it's quite hard to find neutral information because it's always about experiences, right? And definitely I would say online forums, the most helpful / influential channel was online forums.</p>	eWoM, online Forums	online Forums	User-Managed Brand Forum	Independent Community Platforms
9	<p>Yes, I tried to find out the recommendations from the customers but my main source were the retailers. I also typed in Google something like "testing of product X and brand Z" to find some forums or blogs where the people were talking about this product and that's also a very important source for me because they were talking about problems. For example, when I bought my laptop, they were talking about the battery performance. Yeah, this was also very important to me to see if the problem is still existing and what does it look like. The most reliable things are the technical magazines or websites, the independent ones. It differs mainly from the specific research question, for example, for a specific problem. So, then I think maybe the customer reviews are more important than the testing itself but I don't have any preference if a blog or a forum or retailer website is the most reliable. I think it's equal. Everything that's said by the customer is very important for me. Magazines are more important when I want to get a general overview about the product itself because everything is in compact stages and also mostly there is a video that you can see how they tested and see the test results. I would say it is the customer forum. For example, maybe Sony products. I know there are the corporate forums with customer chats and so on but I would say they can delete some information if they want. Most of the keyusers have their own forums and they are more independent. So, I think there are more reliable than the corporate forums.</p>	Customer Reviews, Retail Shops, Forums, Blogs, Technical Magazines,	User-Managed Brand Forums	User-Managed Brand Forum	Independent Community Platforms
10	X				
11	<p>Yes.</p> <p>When I was going to order my iMac, I was at this contact actually and it was not really easy to get this contact and at least to get a phone call to someone. So, it was not that easy.</p> <p>I searched for this kind of information on the Apple site but I actually didn't really find it. It was kind of irritating.</p> <p>I think I just typed in my question on Google again and there were several people who had the same question. So, I just find it on some different sites.</p> <p>Maybe I was looking for the phone number to contact to order iMac and I just typed "how can I get the contact of Apple".</p> <p>You can only customize it online.</p> <p>It's kind of illegal actually but my girlfriend is student still. So, I wanted to save a little bit of money and I made it with her name.</p> <p>There was the first upgrade after iPhone 6 came out and I had the same issues with my phone and I just typed it in and there are so many complaints about it and so many people complained about contacts are not working, they do not get back to them, not answering their questions. So, that was that was one thing I recognized. So, there was no point for me to do it and getting in contact with Apple. I was just like "Fuck it. We just wait for the next upgrade."</p> <p>I had this wi-fi problem like a lot of people. I searched for information on how I can solve this problem and there were people complaining about the same and at the end that was only like we just have to wait for it because there's no point in getting in contact with Apple because they are not going to get back to you anyway.</p> <p>I got this information on Google, again. I think it was different third-party forums. That was not an Apple site.</p>	Brand Website, Google, 3rd party forums	User-Managed Brand Forum	User-Managed Brand Forum	Independent Community Platforms
12	<p>I found some reports about this product and on the other site I found some reports about the online shop. So, I had to filter what is written about the product because for me the main thing is the product. After this I decided where I should buy it from, online shop or go to the shop. For me it doesn't matter if it's an online shop or &lt;&lt;inaudible&gt;&gt; shop. It depends on the product.</p> <p>I think at the moment the reports of the customers are very helpful but it's different because employees think this product is very good, others tell a completely different story. So, it's really hard to find out if it's true or not true.</p> <p>I really have no idea where to find the information exactly. It's just by chance. If you search for a product, by chance you find maybe a shop. If this is the case, I don't know if you can trust this source or you can't trust because there are so many different meanings from very good to very bad for the same product. It's hard to trust. No, it's not really important for me because I don't know how to find out how the brand managed to deal with other shoppers. I don't know. You never will find out how they manage. This is very important.</p> <p>I think I found it on Google or in this online shop. A lot of reports of customers who bought this product mostly are 100% positive. I read this report on different online shops but you can't find it on the website of the brand. I didn't check reviews on Amazon or something.</p>	Customer Reviews in certain online Shop	Customer reviews	Customer Reviews & Ratings	Online Customer Recommendations
<b>6.2. NO</b>					
6.2.1. Do you think this information is important?					
6.2.2. YES / NO: Why is it (un)important?					
6.2.3. If YES: Where would you search for this information the next time and why?					
1	X				
2	X				
3	X				
4	X				

5	Yes, I think it is important because it shows how fair/unfair the company acts towards others. Especially regarding the treatment of employees is a very important aspect. Yes, it is a reasonable point and next time I would probably search for it. I would look for this kind of information in a forum. Because maybe I would find out about opinions of people who work there. I might rethink my decision if I would find negative statements about working conditions etc.	Brand Forum	Brand Forum	User-Managed Brand Forum	Independent Community Platforms
6	For me it always depends on the brand. Perhaps if I would buy another product, I would be more interested in that. For example, when it comes to clothes, child work is a big issue so I would research about that before I buy a product from a certain brand. But Nikon is part of this high- technology world and is producing in Japan. So I think the employees are well-paid and they do not have children to do the work.	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.
7	I didn't research that. The only thing I remember I found was that Apple has this open forum basically where people often post their problems when they have issues with the hardware or the software and back then my impression about it was mixed. I mean, I know that a lot of companies don't do anything in that direction but I also felt that Apple is at least not as strong as I perceived it before in that area. So, I think that at least how I perceived was that the customer support at Apple was getting worse and worse. Before I researched it actually I had a better impression about Apple, because of course you talk a lot about this with your friends like when they have an iPod or whatever and you hear a lot of stories that they exchange, for example, the hardware, if you have a problem with it, but when you research it online, I had a rather negative perception about the topic. No, I didn't actively research about it. It came across during my research in the apple owned forum. Yeah, I think it's important. I mean, now I perceive it as more important as before I bought it. I mean, if I search for it, I would just Google it but I cannot name you a certain website or something where I would know I could find that information. I would just Google for some terms, I guess, and that's it.	Open Brand Forum	Open Brand Forum	Brand Forum	Brand-Managed Channels
8	X				
9	X				
10	Yeah but no, I didn't really research this kind of topic but in our company we buy from local distributor and this guy gets the service and when something's not working or broke or whatever, you send it to him and he's taking care of it. I would ask friends and people that are already in contact with this brand. When I'm not totally clear after I asked my people, then I would say I would use Google again or some YouTube clips as well.	eWoM, Google, YouTube	not mentioned	eWoM, Media Sharing Platforms	Online Customer Recommendations
11	X				
12	X				
Probands	RELIABILITY	MENTIONED CHANNELS	MOST HELPFUL CHANNEL	IDENTIFIED ONLINE CHANNEL	COMMUNICATION CATEGORY
	<b>7. Did you search for information about what makes the brand (brand) better than other brands in terms of skills, used resources and quality of its products?</b>				
	<b>7.1. YES</b>				
	7.1.1. Did you find it?				
	7.1.2. YES / NO: In which channels did you search and why? If more than 1: Which channel was most helpful for finding this information?				
1	I knew that I want to buy a mobile phone from Apple so I did not really compare it to other brands. However, I checked up the quality of the iPhones online. I could find a lot of aspects on Apple's website. Additionally I searched for product reviews, written by other people. I think it helps a lot to read about what others think about the products. The review sites that I read through were quite helpful for me. If a of other people are happy with a product, there is a high chance that I will like it as well. Maybe if a lot of others would write negative comments about the quality of the iPhones, I would be unsure if I shall buy it or not.	Brand Website, Customer Reviews (on Review Platforms)	Review Website	Customer Reviews & Ratings	Online Customer Recommendations
2	X				
3	I tried to find out about the resources they use (type of wood) as well as about the product quality. I searched for this information on the website of MAZZIVO because I thought the company itself would describe all the advantages in a compact way. And I pretty much found the answers to my questions. I was also searching for a bed in local furniture stores but I never found a similar bed there. The bed from MAZZIVO is very special regarding the design and the solid wood.	Brand Website	Brand Website	Brand Website	Brand-Managed Channels
4	The quality of the product was a very important aspect for me. So first of all I visited an Apple store to get an impression of the quality and as I am very much interested in the IT world, I asked the staff in the store about technical details. My impression was very good so I decided to go for an Apple MacBook. I also tried to find out about the overall quality of the laptops online. So I read through reviews and forums and the good quality was confirmed there. The reviews from other users were again very helpful in this case.	(offline Apple Store), Customer Reviews/Reports, User Group Forums	Customer Reviews / Reports	Customer Reviews & Ratings	Online Customer Recommendations
5	I especially looked for information regarding the quality of its products. And I found it on the website of MILEE and on review platforms, where other people talk about quality aspects and compare them to other brands. As I mentioned before, I also searched for information about what kind of resources they use and if they are harmful for the environment. Regarding the quality of the product, the customers' reviews were very believable. Therefore the review sites were most helpful for me.	Brand Website, Customer Reviews	Customer Reviews	Customer Reviews & Ratings	Online Customer Recommendations
6	X				
7	I mean it came across of course in all the reviews where people also test the products more on a long-term vision. I think they also do that quite on Amazon where they say like "Come after half a year or a year" and then they say "It's still working well. I'm quite happy with the product." I would say this comes mainly from Amazon reviews also. I mean, that's not so much part of the tech reviews. There are mainly taking just a new product and then they compare it to something else and tell you about the specs.	Long-term Customer Reviews on Amazon	Customer Reviews	Customer Reviews & Ratings	Online Customer Recommendations
8	Reviews again and forums. I mean, the reviews on this Dutch technology site. There are a lot of reviews. Maybe some American reviews sites to just cross check a bit if they have the same findings or similar interaction and often the responses are on these articles or just some forums that I read. The most important for me, I would say, are these tests because I assume the people are less biased, like an article in a tech site that reviews this model of a notebook that I just bought.	Technology News Platform, Forum, online Articles	Online Articles	Product Testing Platform	Online Product Platforms
9	Not really. I think maybe it's important how the general situation of the company itself is where the brand belongs but through daily newspapers and so on I think I was already informed about a situation, for example, at Sony and so on. Let's go back to the technical websites at first because they determined my first impression of the product and I think also some product features like the designs and I also create a specific opinion about the brand itself, is it more style orientated brand or not, is it more functional brand or not because I just assumed or transferred the product features to the brand itself. If there is shitty design, I think the brand is shitty too most likely. It's everything from the packaging and design of the smart phone or the product itself. Everything counts here. So, that's the first point where I start to research at the place with the most reliable and biggest kind of information, the websites but again the technical forums made by customers or the reviews by customers at retailer shop are also very important to get to know if the brand is reliable or not.	News Portal, Technical Review Website, Expert Forum, Customer Reviews	Technical Review Website	Product Testing Platform	Online Product Platforms

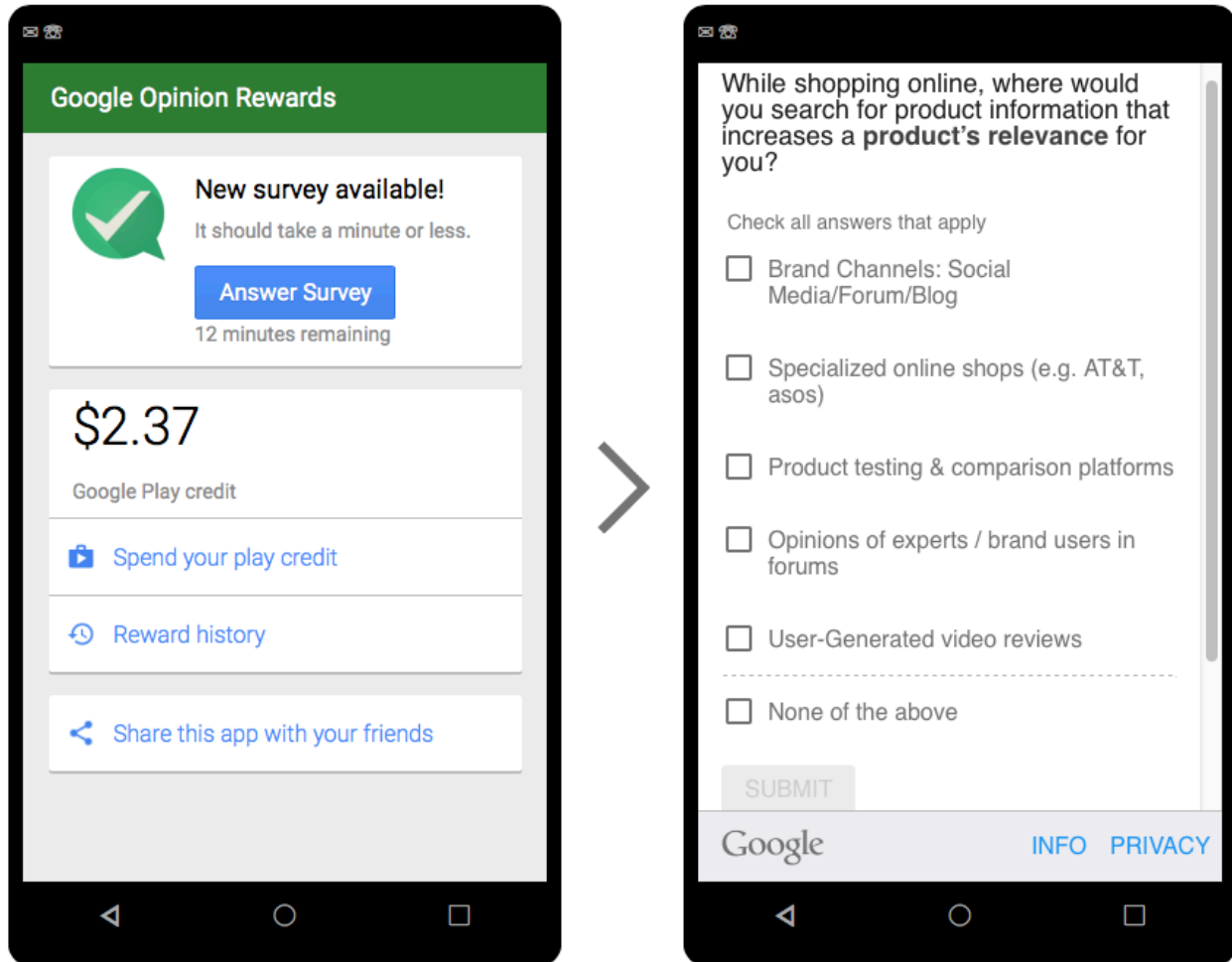
10	<p>I would say I was searching for the "Vorgängermodelle". So, after this I just saw the increase in quality, increase in hardware resolution, whatever, whatever because they directly compared it with Apple. So, you see the design and everything to quality similar to Apple. I have Apple products as well. So, I was like "Yeah, I can now trust this product more because I know how high the level of quality is in Apple products" because Windows or Microsoft can't afford to be weaker than Apple because the price is almost the same.</p> <p>No, I just saw it on the price range because the price range is almost similar to Apple products because first of all I thought "Yeah, the product should be something like 1000 Euros, the highest hardware like 1000 Euros." Then I saw that when you want to buy the best Windows Surface product like the best hardware, you will have to pay something like 2000 Euros. I was like "Damn! Okay, that's the same level of Apple."</p> <p>I don't have to search more because I saw it like it was so obvious for me to see the price, to see the design, to see the pictures, to see the reviews on YouTube to realize "Okay, that's the product at the same level of Apple." So, there's nothing better than these brands. Maybe there is but I didn't search for it now. It was the website of Microsoft because they got the price range, the pictures are very good and when see the YouTube videos of the products, you realize "Okay, that's a nice and good product" and then after I had the hardware test just like when I got this product for a couple of days I could test it and after this I could say or I could not say it's the same level then Apple.</p> <p>Windows website was the main source.</p>	YouTube, Brand Website	Brand Website	Brand Website	Brand-Managed Channels	
11	X					
12	<p>Well, in the beginning you start to give this name of the product and then you will find a lot of different shops. Then you can search, for example, how much electricity you need with this and important things for electronic products and I compared it with other brands and I write it down things like "This product needs so much electricity."</p> <p>I went to a shop in my area and asked for such product. They couldn't give me the best product that I wanted to hear. So, I went back to my internet shop and found everything I wanted to know about this product and I wanted a special height, I wanted a special color, I wanted a special economic efficiency. All the information that I got from the online shop was enough from me. So, I didn't consider any other source. This is actually the shop I bought it from in the end. The name of this shop is Cyber Port.</p>	Specific online Shop for electronic products	Specific online Shop for electronic products	Specialized Online Retailer	Online Distributors	
7.2. NO						
7.2.1. Do you think this information is important?						
7.2.2. YES / NO: Why is it (un)important?						
7.2.3. If YES: Where would you search for this information the next time and why?						
1	X					
2	<p>I knew from the beginning that I wanted Nike shoes so I did not check up what makes Nike better than other brands. I was completely focused on Nike as a brand. Of course, I looked up the quality of the sneakers by reading through customer reviews etc. but I did not compare it to other brands, for example Adidas.</p>	Customer Reviews on Zalando	Customer Reviews on Zalando	Customer Reviews & Ratings	Online Customer Recommendations	
3	X					
4	X					
5	X					
6	<p>I think that this information is very important. And I know that other brands like Canon and Sony also produce brilliant products. But I simply trust the brand Nikon as I am using my camera now for so many years and I am very satisfied with it.</p> <p>Therefore I do not need to search for information about quality etc. before I bought the cleaning set. I would probably search for the information on the website of Nikon and on product testing websites. On the website- to get a general impression. And on the product testing sites- for instance to learn about the product quality in more depth. Also I like the fact that it is a neutral source.</p>	Brand Website, Product Testing Website	not mentioned	Brand Website, Product Testing Platform	Brand-Managed Channels, Online Product Platforms	
7	X					
8	X					
9	X					
10	X					
11	<p>Sometimes I just type the money they earn and the money they make compared to other phone brands just to prepare it like how they are going now, did they improve, did they not improve, do a lot of people like them still or not.</p> <p>I'm not sure. No, not really. Sometimes I just learned on tech blog or tech news site, something like EnGadget or something.</p> <p>Of course I always go to read as much as I can because the more you have that, you can compare. I visit YouTube and also the reviews about what is called technical and mobile fairs because that's the first time they are bringing out the new devices. I mean they show three different fairs. They have this one at Barcelona each year in spring and there is always at least one of two brands of mobile phones bringing out at this time.</p>	Tech Blog, Technical News Site, YouTube, News about Fairs	News Portals, YouTube	News Portal, Media Sharing Platforms	Online PR, Online Customer Recommendations	
12	X					
Probands		CREDIBILITY	MENTIONED CHANNELS	MOST HELPFUL CHANNEL	IDENTIFIED ONLINE CHANNEL	COMMUNICATION CATEGORY
<b>8. Imagine the brand (brand) would be a person, which human characteristics come to your mind when you think of (brand) as a human being?</b>						
1	Apple as a person would be very clever, entertaining, service-minded and creative. I would also describe the person as a great entrepreneur and an innovative guy.					
2	Athletic, open-minded, trustworthy and straightforward.					
3	I would describe MAZZIVO as a reliable, honest, cool, modern and stout.					
4	I think Apple would be very trendy as a person- a bit like a hipster. But also professional and trustworthy.					
5	I would describe MIELE as a very reliable, solid and competent person. In general, the company seemed to be credible. I really felt I could trust this company/ person.					
6	I would describe Nikon as a very reliable person. Someone that you can count on when you have problems.					
7	<p>I mean, if I would imagine it as a person, it would probably some kind of young person, innovator but y not so technical, more like an artist personally, the designer and I think that's also the first reason why most people buy Apple products because they think that the design is great and how it looks like. Technical specifications are less important. For me it was rather that I thought that the product is more reliable. Price was more secondary, I would say, in that context and of course also I would say it has something to do but that is less important for me with a brand and of course the design of the product. Brand was for me, I think, less important but I think also made my decision towards buying it was also the design, that it looks good.</p> <p>I didn't own it but of course during my work I was working a lot with Apple products. So, I was quite familiar with it before but I didn't own it. Oh yeah no, I had my iPhone before. I had two iPhones and Apple PC before from work.</p>					

8	I think it will be a beautiful pretty person. I think he or she will have a fucked up character, an ugly character. I would say maybe the person is also good-looking, muscled, big breasts. I think the appearance is good and physical part is good. Also, performance part is good. When it comes to Sony products in general, you can trust it will be a good person but the service and the thought behind is less good. So, if I think about Sony's corporate statement, I don't get a warm feeling about Sony because they want to make the world a better place but it's a quite hard company that just wants to make profit but they make nice products and the service is quite bad, but fortunately I don't have to make too much use of it.				
9	Yeah, Sony for me as a person is a Chinese person or a Japanese person because it's a Japanese brand. I got in my mind that Japanese person, a male one. I don't know, it's a male person and he is very ambitious to fulfill his personal goals and it's kind of the Japanese culture. They are smiling all the time, they are very polite and they want to satisfy their friends. So, I think they are very polite and want to serve their customers. Maybe they are also a little bit reserved in terms of spelling out loud their emotions or what they think. I think this person won't do that, a good brand. Japanese are also very experienced with electronics because a lot of electronic brads are from Japan around the Asian market and this person is well experienced in the field of business. Yeah, I think he is generally friendly to everyone and he teaches his surrounding with respect and it's also trustworthy.				
10	Hipster nerds. Very hardcore hipster nerds and honest people. And naive maybe because for me those people are naive because they are so honest.				
11	Ignorant, fashionable. I mean, it's like a skinny guy, bearded guy maybe but only bearded nowadays like not because he was growing the beard 10 years ago as well, very, very trendy. Creative, of course. Sometimes too creative. It's only just pleases people now. Fresh of course, passionate, very enthusiastic, strong believing, structured.				
12	X				
	<b>9. Which were the most influential online channels that created this image about the brand (brand) to your mind?</b>				
1	I think Apple manages to show this image in a lot of different channels. I would not say it is only their website or social media sites. This person I just described appears everywhere online. In every online article I read about Apple as well as on their Twitter and Facebook site.	Brand Website, online Articles, twitter, Facebook Fanpage	N.A.	Brand Website, Brand Blog, Brand Profile in SNS, News Portal	Brand-Managed Channels, Online PR
2	I think I got influenced because of their online advertisements. Sometimes I click on the videos and watch their advertisements. They pop up quite often on my Facebook wall. There are also a lot of Nike teasers on the Zalando homepage.	Online Advertisements (Facebook), Brand Teaser (Zalando)	N.A.	Brand Online Advertising, Brand Profile in SNS	Brand-Managed Channels
3	I think the website of MAZZIVO as well as the online article by "GQ" led to this image.	Brand Website, Article in GQ Magazine (Online)	N.A.	Brand Website, Online version of Print Magazine	Brand-Managed Channels, Online PR
4	I read a lot of online articles about Apple. Therefore I know that a lot of trendy people use Apple products, for instance art designers or creative people in general. However, I think also the website of Apple and, for instance, their Facebook page show this great design and the trendiness.	Online Articles, creative Lead Users, Brand Website, Facebook Fanpage	N.A.	News Portal, Brand Website, Brand Profile in SNS	Online PR, Brand-Managed Channels
5	The website of MIELE already made the impression on me that I can trust in their products. But I think the reviews by other customers kind of gave evidence that it must be a reliable person/ company. I searched for these reviews on Google, as I always do.	Brand Website, Customer Reviews	N.A.	Customer Reviews & Ratings	Online Customer Recommendations
6	The online advertising also stayed in my mind. I really like the advertisements of Nikon because they are never "screaming". Instead they are authentic so I always take it seriously. Also when I want to buy something, I try to check "everything" so I read a lot about brands and products. It's never like "wow I saw something nice on the website, I take my credit card and buy the thing- never". For example, I would even check the Youtube site of Nikon because I usually find very interesting videos about their products there.	Online Advertisement, YouTube Brand Channel	N.A.	Brand Online Advertising, Brand Media Sharing Channel	Brand-Managed Channels
7	I would say that it's more related to the YouTube tech channels.	YouTube Technology Channel	N.A.	Media-Sharing Platform	Online Customer Recommendations
8	Personal experience, experiences from friends and coworkers, because we use Sony at our job as well and our colleagues and media, internet, just experiences online. Most important still is personal word of mouth, I think, for most people. If my colleagues says to me like "I ordered two laptops last week and those guys never responded to what I want and they never ...", that makes a bigger impression than what I read on the forums because that was closer, I guess. I would say I always try to find two different sources online, subjective sources, of course that are well respected and try to see if there are some kind of similarity between them so you know, okay, if your people are saying this, there must be some kind of truth in it because I think the most important thing for me, for example, is to read responses on product reviews.	eWoM, Forum, Product Testing Platform	N.A.	eWoM, User-Managed Brand Forum, Product Testing Platform	Online Customer Recommendations, Independent Community Platforms, Online Product Platforms
9	I think in general the advertising of Sony is itself in terms of TV commercials or online banners or some posts in websites like forums and so on and the logo and visualization itself is well planned and also the written brand itself, it's just the specific image that they have. I can't separate. The whole appearance of the whole promotion contain marketing. So, it's shaping my image. They are always consistent most like and it doesn't matter if we are talking about the smart phones, the PC or the TV. In general, there is a common sense of promotion, brand communication. There is no specific channel. The general communication, if I sum it up from all the channels I get a common picture.	Brand Online Advertisements, Brand Forum	N.A.	Brand Online Advertising, Brand Forum	Brand-Managed Channels
10	Corporate design of the website and the pictures and also this corporate thing about this product because the products now show those kinds of people in the pictures. So, this created the image of this product. It's connected to me at the product level.	Brand Website	N.A.	Brand Website	Brand-Managed Channels
11	I mean, of course the customers, the people you see with these devices, the adverts on TV, the image of Apple, how they place themselves, how Tim Cook is always talks, what is he wearing and the people who in the crowd and the way they choose the places of the adverts like the panels and posters. Also, the print media; you won't find them in every magazine. Very targeted. I mean, online, besides their site, you don't really find Apple, do you?	Brand Advertisement, Brand Website	N.A.	Brand Online Advertising, Brand Website	Brand-Managed Channels
12	Again, I got this image from the website and through all these customer reports in this online shop, I really read a lot of them before I actually purchased the fridge.	Brand Website, Customer Reviews in online Shop	N.A.	Brand Website, Customer Reviews & Ratings	Brand-Managed Channels, Online Customer Recommendations



## Quantitative Research: Example of Online Survey ('Relevance')

In web browser of mobile devices:





## Quantitative Research: Example of Online Survey ('Relevance')

In web browser of desktop computer:

Please complete the following survey to access this premium content.

While shopping online, where would you search for product information that increases a **product's relevance** for you?

*Check all answers that apply*

- Brand Channels: Social Media/Forum/Blog
- Specialized online shops (e.g. AT&T, asos)
- Product testing & comparison platforms
- User-Generated video reviews
- Opinions of experts / brand users in forums
- None of the above

[Show me a different question](#)

**or**

You can skip the survey for now and be prompted again next time.

[Skip survey](#)

Google™ [Learn more – Privacy](#)