Fostering Engagement in Private Online Customer Community: Case YIT Plus

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AALTO UNIVERSITY SCHOOL OF BUSINESS   **ABSTRACT**

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Objective of the Study: The objective of the study is to explore different communicative actions the case organization can use in a private online customer community YIT Plus. The focus is on the challenges of the customer community that may prevent engagement as well as on the specific features, which can in turn enhance customer engagement by providing after-sale added value. The study also seeks to explore the privacy aspect of the online community and changing stakeholder roles in a three stage construction project of an apartment building. The main research question is: *How can communication foster engagement in a private online customer community and create the sense of community among the customers?*

Methodology and Theoretical Framework: The research uses a qualitative approach in a single-case study where YIT Plus is selected as the case online customer community. The main source of data is gathered from eight semi-structured interviews. The netnography method is used to observe YIT Plus over the time span of six months. The theoretical framework represents how different aspects of the private online customer community can provide value, create customer engagement and enhance the sense of community.

Findings and Conclusion: Important findings of communicative actions in a private online customer community are identified. The results help to identify salient features of YIT Plus that create value and to which communication should focus on. Challenges of the community are also discussed, especially in terms of unclear stakeholder roles in three identified stages of construction. As a result a project communication schedule is created, in order to answer five W's and How; *who, what, when, where, why and how?*

Keywords: Project communication, private online community, customer community, stakeholder, value communication, social network

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1. INTRODUCTION

Organizations have widely recognized different benefits and possibilities social Web 2.0 has to offer. Online customer communities are web-based places for like-minded people to gather to discuss about relevant topics, problems, and engage with one another about a companies' services, products and brand. Online world has plenty of different types of social media sites, and most of the hype concerns public online communities such as; Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, and the ways these sites can draw customers and additional revenue. Due to this hype, private online customer communities have not received enough attention.

The present study attempts to fill this gap by exploring how communication can foster customer engagement in private online customer communities. These intimate online venues are perfect places for organizations to collaborate with the customers and design their communication for the needs of the customers. This study is exploring a private online customer community, YIT Plus, which is designed for the purposes of new home owners and those living in the apartment built by YIT.

Buying your own apartment and eventually moving into a new neighborhood can be a hectic process. There is plenty of important information to be learned from the new apartment building and the neighborhood, as well as all kinds of different documents related to the apartment. Usually a new resident does not know anything about the neighbors he or she lives with. After all, the only thing that residents of the apartment building knowingly share is the decision to settle in the same neighborhood (Hampton & Wellman, 2002). YIT Plus is a private online customer community, designed to answer these customer needs.

Despite the good intentions behind YIT Plus, the challenge is the lack of interactivity and customer engagement in the community, and unclear stakeholder roles of communication in different stages of construction of an apartment building. This study aims to explore different communicative actions, which can help to foster engagement in a private online customer community and enhance the sense of community. Tam (1999, 107) points out

that construction is one of the most information-dependent industries and the amount of information generated during a project is enormous.

Ludford, Cosley, Frankowski and Terveen (2004) mention that the main reason why some online communities fail is due to inability to generate enough social capital to sustain continued participation. In order to stimulate interactivity in the present online customer community, this study explores different ways YIT Plus can create value for the customers. In addition to researching the role of communication, this study aims to build a project communication map or a schedule, based on the existing literature and recently gained empirical evidence. This project communication map is created in order to answer the important five W's and How; *who, what, when, where, why and how?*

This study's data and research approach is derived both from inside the organization as well as from outside the organization. Eight semi-structured interviews enable investigation on different communicative actions on fostering engagement in a private online customer community. The netnography method is used to observe the online community and confirm some of the findings from the interviews.

1.1 Background of the thesis

Competition of gaining new customers and keeping old customers satisfied is intense in today's business world. New innovative ideas are created almost every day, therefore it is no surprise that reaching customers can be a challenging task for any organization. Especially if the customer communication is taking place in a 'faceless' manner; online. Communication occurring online is often referred as computer-mediated-communication. CMC is defined as the way we use computers in order to communicate our objective (see e.g. Haythornthwaite & Wellman, 2002).

Private online customer communities are the result of Web 2.0 era. Web 2.0 is a term created to define World Wide Web sites that use technology in order to enhance previously static Web 1.0 pages (see e.g. O'Reilly, 2007; Alexander, 2006). Web 2.0 sites allow its members and nonmembers to interact and collaborate with each other in a social media. Examples of Web 2.0 sites include; social networking sites, blogs, wikis and

podcasts (O'Reilly, 2007; Chui, Miller & Roberts, 2009; Alexander, 2006). This study focuses on a private online customer community, which is both interactive and informative.

Consumers' online behavior is constantly changing. Consumers are taking part in various activities ranging from knowledge sharing, participating into discussions and content consuming (Heinonen, 2011). Organizations have realized the benefit of internet and online communities as a medium for gaining a better connection with the customers. Cothrel and Williams (2000) state that the ability to successfully manage online communities will be a key aspect to every organization, and realizing the potential of internet can come in any form.

This thesis is focusing on a private online customer community, which is very specific in nature. It has limited number of members, limited access and very specific content. Tedjamulia, Dean, Olsen and Albrecht (2005) point out that successful online communities are beneficial for both members and the businesses. Online customer communities engage their members to knowledge sharing activities to stimulate dialogue, respond other member's inquiries, build strong ties with other members, and to develop a long-term relationship with the community. It is researched that by providing organization's key stakeholders a chance to communicate online with each other and with the company, a deeper and more meaningful relationship with the customer can be acquired (Armstrong & Hagel, 2000).

The question is; how to build this deeper and more meaningful relationship with the customer? It is important to listen to the customer and pay attention to the customer engagement and certain communicative activities, which can help to acquire this objective. Bowden (2009) views customer engagement as a "psychological process" comprising cognitive and emotional aspects. In other words, successful customer engagement should generate consumer loyalty, satisfaction, empowerment, connection, commitment and trust.

The case company created a private online customer community, called YIT Plus. The purpose of this community is to provide additional value for the customer, especially in the after-sale phase. When providing this additional value, the goal is to foster customer

engagement and enhance the sense of community among residents of the apartment building. From an organizational point of view, this type of a community is an excellent approach to stay in touch with the customer (source: YIT).

The sense of community is particularly an important topic for online customer communities. Without the feeling of the sense of community, no community can exist. The sense of community is widely researched in different academic disciplines, mostly in psychology and educational studies (see e.g. Sarason, 1976; McMillan & Chavis, 1986; Talen, 1999). Perhaps the most famous researches are McMillan and his collaborators. McMillan and Chavis (1986) introduce four key elements that form the sense of community. The first element is membership; meaning a sense of belonging and identification. The second element is influence; meaning that members need to feel they have some sort of influence to the group and the group has some influence on the individual. The third element is integration and fulfillment of needs; meaning that members feel somehow rewarded of belonging to the group. The last element is shared emotional connection; meaning that the members share a history and participation to the group.

This study aims to research different ways corporate communication can foster customer engagement in a specific private online customer community and enhance the sense of community among members of the online community. Engagement is viewed from the content and feature point of view of the community, that the customers value the most. Another focus, in terms of engagement, comes from researching the challenges the community is currently facing, which might be interfering or preventing the engagement process.

From a corporate communication perspective it is important to research the role of communication in this type of an online customer community, because the community is very recently launched and it is very unique in nature. The community is rather inactive at the moment, with no clear communicative roles for each key stakeholder. Cornelissen (2011) suggests that managers and communication practitioners should begin by identifying the key stakeholders, their influence and interest in the organization. Since the customer engagement begins before the construction of an apartment building has even

started it is important recognize three key stages that work as a backbone for creating the project communication model. These communicative stages are:

1. *Before the construction of an apartment building has started.*
2. *During the construction of an apartment building.*
3. *After the apartment building is finished.*

This study provides new insight to a situation where the key stakeholders and the needs of the key stakeholders change in every stage of project communication schedule. In other words, this study views the communicative strategies of customer engagement and building of the sense of community in three stages of project communication, which has clear sections; beginning, middle and finishing point.

Friedman and Miles (2002) argue that organization and stakeholder relations change and that change can occur in any direction. In this study it is important to understand that the needs of the users change in every stage as well as the responsibility of communication and content provider. Therefore this study aims to map out communication processes during each stage and gain a better understanding of the important and interesting content from the point of view of the customer.

Despite the fact that there are three clear stages of communication, this study is mainly focusing on communication in the first two stages, because the role of the case organization is the most significant in these two stages. Although this study is mainly focusing on activities occurring online, it is important to keep in mind that customer engagement activities occurring in real life before entering the online customer community are equally important parts when building the sense of community online and increasing stakeholder engagement.

YIT Plus is an interactive private online customer community, designed for different stakeholders' needs, primarily for the customers who have bought an apartment or are living in an apartment built by YIT. This means that the user can either be the owner of the apartment, a family member or someone with a rental agreement.

The community is designed for communication purposes of content related to the apartment building, its nearby surrounding and other topics relevant to construction and apartment living. In other words, YIT Plus is similar to a traditional announcement board of an apartment building, but with several online features and elements of interactivity.

The objective of YIT Plus is to create the sense of community among the residents, enable two-way communication and further engage key stakeholders to YIT. YIT aims to provide after-sale value for the customers and stay in touch with the customer, so that when it comes time for the customer to buy a second home or a holiday home they would automatically consider buying it from YIT. For organization like YIT managing online communities becomes critical when there is a shift from simple transactional online functionality to which customer's active interaction and integration is part of the product (Ganley & Lampe, 2009).

The aim of YIT Plus is to provide for the user an access to important documents and data regarding an apartment or an apartment building. For example the user can access the floor plan of his or her apartment, discuss with neighbors, gain more information about the neighborhood and its offerings, follow water and electricity consumption and keep all relevant documents in a secure virtual folder. The goal is to answer the needs of the users more efficiently by providing interesting content, discussion board and chance to interact. As Hampton and Wellman (2002) point out that it is essential for "virtual community" to fill in some missing need of the user, if this is not executed, then the level of social interaction is most likely going to be low.

YIT Plus works as a discussion board, where anyone can create content to the site. Therefore the online customer community enables two-way communication between the key users, which are the following; customers, YIT, housing company or deputy landlord, and YIT's partners. The online customer community is created to reinforce better communication during a life cycle of an apartment and the apartment building.

When creating YIT Plus it was important to keep in mind the customer focus, especially in term of easiness of the use. Szmigin, Canning and Reppel (2005) present a model where customer bonding and creation of a successful online customer community revolves around three key elements; interactivity, technical infrastructure and service value. These

three key elements also play a crucial role in the success of YIT Plus and highlight components that the communication should pay attention to. This study is especially focusing on the communicative part of YIT Plus and the ways communication can create engagement and the sense of community among members of the community.

1.2 Research objective

The purpose of the present study is to research how different communicative actions can foster engagement in a private online customer community. Therefore the focus of the research is on the challenges of the customer community that may prevent engagement as well as on the specific features that can in turn enhance customer engagement by providing after-sale added value. The study also seeks to explore the privacy aspect of the online community and the extent and importance of this aspect from both customer and organizational point of view.

The study pays attention to the key three stages of apartment building life cycle and how communicative actions and key stakeholders and their needs change in each stage. The aim is to gain clarity on the unclear stakeholder roles, especially in terms of addressing the responsibility of communication in the online customer community. YIT Plus is selected as the case online customer community and its key stakeholders are the focus group of this research.

The study addresses above issues arising from engagement in a private online customer community through the main research question:

How can communication foster engagement in a private online customer community and create the sense of community among the customers?

In order to answer the main research question in the best possible manner, the following sub-research questions are exploring how customer engagement can be fostered through communication:

What type of added value the private online customer community provides for the customer?

What are the challenges of customer engagement in the private online customer community?

As the goal is to explore the phenomenon behind a private online customer community and its different aspects related to customer engagement, there are several contributions to corporate communication theories. In this case study, corporate communication is viewed as the key function in engaging customers to become members, who actively participate in the community.

This study combines psychological approach of the sense of community to the stakeholder theory as well as to important literature on online customer communities. In addition, the present study compliments stakeholder theory by exploring communication in three distinct stages of an apartment building life cycle, where key stakeholders and their needs change in each stage.

This research is positioned in the field of Corporate Communication, which is according to Cornelissen (2011, 5) "a management function that offers a framework for the effective coordination of all internal and external communication with the overall purpose of establishing and maintaining favorable reputations with stakeholder groups, upon which the organization is dependent."

1.3 Structure of the thesis

The present research is divided into six chapters. Chapter 1 introduces the study and the motivating background factor for the study, and general information of the private online customer community, YIT Plus, used for the purposes of this research. Chapter 1 also goes over the research questions and relevance to the Corporate Communication. Chapter 2 provides theoretical background for the study in a form of a literature review. This chapter will go more into detail of theoretical background behind online customer communities and its members, the sense of community, stakeholder theory and ways to

engage stakeholders in an online customer community. Chapter 3 presents research data and methods used for the present study. Also the credibility of the study is discussed. Chapter 4 focuses on the findings and results of the study, this chapter ultimately answers the research questions. Chapter 5 discusses the most important findings and the importance of the project communication schedule. Finally, chapter 6 concludes the study, provides practical implications, limitations of the study and suggestions for the future research.

2. STAKEHOLDER COMMUNICATION IN PRIVATE ONLINE CUSTOMER COMMUNITY

The purpose of this chapter is to gain a better understanding of a phenomenon behind fostering engagement in an online customer community. The first subchapter introduces why online customer communities are relevant from the organizational point of view. The focus is also on Web 2.0, which enables creation of social communities, such as YIT Plus. Different types of members of the online customer community are discussed, since they play a crucial role in creating the sense of community among the members. The theory behind the sense of community is also discussed in this subchapter.

The second subchapter focuses on the stakeholder theory and stakeholder engagement as well as different communicative strategies. Consumer value is also a relevant part of this subchapter. Based on the relevant literature and drawings from empirical research, the research framework is constructed and explained in detail in the last subchapter of this literature review.

2.1 Elements of private online customer community

This section focuses on key elements that are relevant for maintaining successful online customer communities, where customers actively participate and interact. First, the focus is on online customer communities in general and its different types of members, who play a crucial role when it comes to functionality of a private online customer community. Next section focuses on Web 2.0 and its features. The last section discusses the importance of the sense of community and its role in engaging customers in online network.

2.1.1 Online customer communities

The term 'community' has a long history and the word we know today is derived from French word *comunete,* which is derived from Latin word *commūnitāt,* meaning a joint

possession or use, participation, sharing, social relationship, fellowship, organized society, shared nature or quality, kinship, obligingness (source: Oxford English Dictionary). The concept of online community has roots in several areas. Kauffman (1966) proposes a concept of electronic data interchange (EDI) and inter-organizational systems. In his article Kauffman states:

"Even before companies have achieved "total systems" for themselves, they must think beyond that concept, to data systems that cross company boundaries"

What does 'thinking beyond concept' actually mean? An online community can be defined as groups of people who engage in many-to-many interactions online. These community interactions occur whenever and wherever people are connected over computer networks, it does not matter whether these people are buying, selling, collaborating or merely seeking diversion (Cothrel & Williams, 2000). Wellman (2005) conducted a study regarding an online residential community called Netville. According to his research, those neighbors who connected to the online community recognized neighbors almost three times more, talked with nearly twice as many, and have been invited or have invited one and half times as many neighbors into their home compared to neighbors who were not active in Netville.

In addition Rau, Gao and Ding (2008) point out that online communities are not limited to task-orientated communication, but also for personal relevant information sharing, trust and intimacy creation, and social relationships building. Ellison (2007) argues an important notion regarding the rise of social network sites (SNS); while websites dedicated to communities of interest still exist and prosper, SNSs are primarily organized around people, not interests.

Online communities operate to fulfill goals in multiple online spaces. For example, at the commercial level, many organizations that are involved in business-to-business commerce create a community space in which they seek to interact at the personal, functional or entity level; in a similar manner many governmental functions facilitate

community interaction where citizens can directly access and interact with their official entities (Plant, 2004, 52).

Organizations have seen the possibilities and benefits in shifting their operations to the online world. According to Manchanda, Packard and Pattabhiramaiah (2015) organizations operate online customer communities because there is a belief that customers who join online communities, become more engaged with the firm, and/or its products and services. Organizations can provide their customers a chance to communicate with each other and with the company. Therefore, a new and deeper relationship with the customers can be created (Armstrong & Hagel, 2000)

Szmigin et al. (2005) point out that online customer communities provide an opportunity for interactivity and the building of consumer relevant community. In addition, by understanding the nature of these communities, organizations can better address the needs of the community members. Szmigin et al. (2005) also argue that internet can enable and reinforce bonding of those who participate in an online community. From an organizational point of view organizations can facilitate bonding not only with individual customers, but with groups of customers. As a results, if a meaningful relationship is created then both parties, the organization and the customers, should gain value.

Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) identify three traditional markers of community:

1. Consciousness of kind: a strong connection between the members of the community, also described as "we-ness".
2. Rituals and traditions: the mutual experience in the community and the presence of shared rituals and traditions, which in turn create community's history, culture and consciousness.
3. Moral responsibility: a sense of duty towards the community and its members.

These three components suggest that a successful community requires a strong involvement of its members and responsibility to make the community work. Although Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) focus especially on brand communities, the same theory is applicable in different types of communities as well. According to Szmigin et al. (2005)

online communities provide opportunity for interactivity and creation of customer relevant community. In addition, by understanding the nature of these communities, organizations can better address the needs of the community members.

In the case study regarding non-profit health maintenance organization Kaiser's online community, Cothrel and Williams (2000, 83) are able to identify critical aspects and guidelines for a management of a successful online community. First, it is important to clarify, but avoid editing and policing, unless someone is personally attacked or if someone is advertising. Second, understanding the participants' needs, even if it means reading between the lines. Third, it is vital to keep the conversation going by using different types of approaches and strategies. Fourth, members need to be put at the center stage and especially focus on the ways how to turn the conversation over to the group. Fifth aspect is concentrating on showing the human side of the moderators, meaning a use of profile photos and personal information. The last aspect is about letting members freely vent, because even unfettered conversation is a valuable way to monitor member satisfaction.

When it comes to making online communities as attractive as possible Armstrong and Hagel (2000) point out certain elements. These elements include a large number of participants and likelihood of frequent use and intensive interaction among participants. Customer's ability to access a broad range of people and resources easily and quickly defines the value of participating in an online community. Armstrong and Hagel (2000) continue that online communities of interest share a higher level of interpersonal communication. In other words, members of an online community interact with each other more intensively and create more content themselves. This content can be used by organization, in order to attract new members.

Online communities face several challenges, especially in maintaining online community attractive to its members. Preece, Nonnecke and Andrews (2004) point out that communities fail if there is insufficient activity to make visiting the community interesting on a regular basis. Some online communities resemble 'ghost towns' due to the lack of interactivity. The dysfunction is so high that the organization has to develop careful strategies to recover failing online communities. This is the first step for gaining

a better understanding on how to create a successful community for both lurkers and posters. When it comes for encouraging lurkers to become active members of an online community it is important for moderators to address lurkers' need for a good environment for communication (Preece et al., 2004). Lurkers and other members of an online customer community are further discussed in section 2.1.3.

The number of a particular type of actors is important. If there is only one protagonist who sets the topic and allows others to reply, then the online community resembles a weblog, directory or a personal homepage. If many people can start discussion and many people can reply then the website might be a message board (Bishop, 2009). Ludford et al. (2004) also suggest that the size of an online customer community is clearly an important factor. According to their research regarding ways of increasing online community participation, the majority of respondents said the groups should have had more participants.

2.1.2 Private online customer communities

Public social network sites such as; Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and LinkedIn, have received a great amount of attention. However, over the past few years also private online communities or private social network sites have gained a momentum. Conti, Hasani and Crispo (2011) define private social network site in a way that member's profile information is not available for outside members and that the information is confidential. Despite being private, the site should still have the same functionalities as public network site.

Andrews (2002) points out the importance of considering the audience-specific design of an online community. Therefore, the design of a private online community and strategies used to attract people into that community, might vary depending upon age, attitude, beliefs and behavior towards the internet.

Private online communities have not received enough theoretical attention, but for example Forbes online magazine (2012) and Social Media Today website (2015) highlight the importance of private online communities by describing these types of sites as "the new black" or as a "tool that organizations need." These websites call after the

benefits of receiving customer related information more efficiently from a single place, a private online community. Forbes (2012) points out that several business-focused private online communities have realized the potential of a small, focused, gated online community compared to a larger public social network.

Privacy concerns of popular social network sites have been researched before. Fogel and Nehmad (2009) point out that the Internet is not a private club, and those users who are posting information about themselves to their social networking profiles tend to be more comfortable of taking possible risks of their information being seen by others. Tufekci (2008) conducted a research on students' behavior on social network sites. According to his research students who are worried about privacy are less likely to start using social network sites. However, once the students start to use social network sites they manage their concerns by adjusting their privacy settings.

2.1.3 Members of private online customer community

Members of a private online community may have various reasons to join the community, therefore it is important to appropriately identify different types of members in the online communities, in order to engage customers and answer consumer needs as efficiently as possible. Members in private online communities can be classified to lurkers and posters, users and lead-users.

Membership is the feeling of belonging or of sharing a sense of personal relatedness. One crucial element of membership comes from boundaries. Boundaries define who is in and who is not, such barriers separate "us" from "them" and allay anxiety by delimiting who can be trusted (McMillan & Chavis, 1986, 10).

Lurker vs. poster. Preece et al. (2004) point out that even in a busy online community, only small number of members usually actively participate and post messages. A lurker is a member of an online community, who has not posted anything to the community he or she belongs to. Lurking is especially a problem when there is little or no message posting in a community, because no one wants to be part of a conversation where no one says anything (Preece et al., 2004). Preece et al. (2004) focus on the reasons why members decide to lurk, instead of participating in the conversation. The biggest reason for lurkers

to participate in an online community is the need for answers. Lurkers may feel like that "just reading or browsing is enough" to fill the need for information.

However according to Rau et al. (2008) people go to social network service sites to satisfy social-emotional need, rather than informational need. Therefore, interactivity is an important part of an online community. However, just like some people are naturally shy in real life, some people are also shy online. The lurkers may first want to find more information regarding the group, its top participators and the way new members are welcomed to the group (Preece et al., 2004). Nolan, Brizland and Macaulay (2007) point out that when the number of lurkers fall to a critical mass, even if for only a short period, trust and confidence held by active members can be eroded as they begin to doubt the motives of others.

Posters tend to have a greater sense of belonging to community than lurkers and posters tend to respect other posters more than lurkers do (Preece et al., 2004). According to Preece et al. (2004) the major difference between lurkers and posters is that posters have a more positive attitude towards belonging in a community. Posters' opinion about other posters and lurkers is also more favorable.

User vs. lead user. When a member decides to participate in a private online community, it is usually due to recognition of a need to solve a specific problem. When a customer begins to search for a solution they will pursue an interactive relationship with the community by posting a comment (Brodie, Ilic, Juric & Hollebeek, 2013). Blanchard and Markus (2004) identify lead users as members who are identified by others as being influential in the group, who identify themselves as leaders, and whom other members identify as leaders. Participants, or in other words users, participate and post messages, but are not identified as leaders by themselves or by other members.

Lead users are defined as users that are "at the leading edge" in terms of a related new product and as a people who are relatively high benefit from solutions to satisfy their needs (von Hippel, 1986 cited in Franz & Wolkinger, 2003). The difference between the lead user and an ordinary user can be distinguished especially on their willingness to pay for tools and services. Lead users are usually willing to pay for typical community tools and services. Lead users tend to be highly involved and can be helpful for future research

in focus groups (Franz & Wolkinger 2003). Tedjamulia et al. (2005) define lead user as a type of participant who not only browses, but who is daring enough to respond to other members' questions and therefore increase social interaction and engagement. As members play a crucial role for building interactivity and increasing customer engagement, table 1 illustrates the main reasons why lurkers stay lurkers according to Preece et al. (2004) study.

The Reason	Explanation
Didn't need to post	Members who think that browsing is enough and also fear that their comments are mocked. General attitude is that everybody lurks.
Encouragement to post	Lurkers may need encouragement to post. In example explicit welcoming comment stating how important their contribution is. Rewards for contributions are often used as a trigger for participation.
Need to find out about the group	Lurking members want to first gain more information about the group, how people comment and the way new member are welcomed.
Thought of being helpful	Some lurkers avoid posting, because in busy communities they don't want to cause extra clutter.
Couldn't make the software work	Some lurkers may experience technical issues
Didn't like the dynamics of the group	Some lurkers may experience that the interactivity is low, fear of being treated poorly, feeling of belonging in a wrong group or the group doesn't add any value for the lurker.

Table 1. Why lurkers decide to stay lurkers based on Preece et al. (2004) study

2.1.4 Customer engagement in Web 2.0

After Web 2.0 took over the internet, different social media sites have been steadily increasing. Sashi (2012) point out that the old paradigms of marketing are still going strong, however they are influenced by new channels of marketing enabled by Web 2.0. Web 2.0 is a term created to define World Wide Web sites that use technology in order

to enhance previously static Web 1.0 pages (see e.g. O'Reilly, 2007; Alexander, 2006). As the popularity of Web 2.0 sites has grown rapidly, also organizations have noticed possibilities to further increase consumer engagement through these new channels (Chui et al., 2009).

O'Reilly (2007) is one of the leading researchers of Web 2.0. In his website he uses the following definition of Web 2.0:

> *"Web 2.0 is the business revolution in the computer industry caused by the move to the internet as platform, and an attempt to understand the rules for success on that new platform. Chief among those rules is this: Build applications that harness network effects to get better the more people use them."*

The popularity of Web 2.0 sites expanded significantly ever since social media sites such as; Myspace and Facebook were created. The Web 2.0 sites allow its members and sometimes nonmembers to interact and collaborate with each other. Therefore, Web 2.0 is also known as 'wisdom web' which takes an advantage of technologies, business strategies and social trends (Murugesan, 2007). Different types of well-known examples of Web 2.0 include; social networking sites, blogs, wikis and podcasts (see e.g. O'Reilly, 2007; Chui et al., 2009; Alexander, 2006).

According to research conducted by Chui et al. (2009) the use of Web 2.0 technologies is not always necessarily a positive matter, because occasionally managers fail to understand the new levers of change, and therefore fail to successfully create value for the customer through Web 2.0. Chui et al. (2009) also point out that organization's Web 2.0 sites may fail, because the managers do not put enough effort into learning how to use these sites, because they are uncomfortable with using Web 2.0 technologies. Because of a failure to understand Web 2.0 technologies managers do not know how to encourage the right type of participation in Web 2.0 sites, which would in turn produce meaningful results for the organization.

When it comes to motivating managers to use Web 2.0 technologies Chui et al. (2009) suggest that participatory technologies should be incorporated into user's daily workflow. A success of Web 2.0 sites comes from the right type of participants. Chui et al. (2009)

point out that users, who can create a critical mass for participation as add value, are the key for success. These users are often enthusiastic early technology adopters who have rich personal networks and will thus share knowledge and exchange new ideas.

O'Reilly (2007) points out that Web 2.0 is not something new, but rather a fuller realization of the true potential of the web platform from Web 1.0 era. Different types of Web 2.0 sites are created after realizing the potential of World Wide Web. One of the most popular genres of web-based community is the bulletin board or a message board, which is the platform that social media sites such as; Facebook and Myspace use (Bishop, 2009). According to Bishop (2009) 24/7 access to post anything at any time of the day and ability to ignore undesirable content can be seen as advantages of using a message board as the base of a web-based community. Disadvantages include the overwhelming length of the message board, which may cause reading through the messages time consuming.

The central principle behind the success of giants born in Web 1.0 era who survived to lead Web 2.0 era appears to be the ability to harness collective intelligence and embrace the power gained from Web 1.0 era (O'Reilly, 2007). Perhaps one of the most widely recognized definitions of collective intelligence is created by media theorist Jenkins (2006). According to Jenkins (2006) collective intelligence can be viewed as "alternative source of media power."

2.1.5 Residential sense of community

The purpose of this subchapter is to find out why the sense of community is important in private online communities and how it can be created. Most theories behind the sense of community stress the same aspects, whether the community exists in real world or online. The sense of community is a concept especially familiar in social psychology. Sarason (1976) introduces the concept of psychological sense of community as a separate concept from clinical psychology. This approach, became an important part of psychological community. Kingston, Mitchell, Florin and Stevenson (1999, 682) define the sense of community as a compelling construct that allows psychologists to examine central

questions about how individuals are connected to and influenced by their most important social settings.

Perhaps the most well-known and widely quoted researchers in this area are McMillan and Chavis (1986) who introduce psychological sense of community (PSC) based on four elements. The theory behind these four elements have been used in different types of studies (see e.g. Burroughs & Eby, 1998). According to McMillan and Chavis (1986) the first element is membership, meaning the feeling of belonging and willingness to share personal relatedness. The second element is influence, meaning the feeling of being able to make a difference in a group. The third element is reinforcement, meaning the fulfillment of individual's needs in order to develop the sense of community. The last element is a shared emotional connection, meaning that members of the community are sharing and will share history, common places and experiences. In the table 2 McMillan and Chavis (1986) illustrate these elements of the sense of community and their hypothesized relationships.

I. **Membership** ———————→ Common Symbol System

    Boundaries ←——————— Sense of Belonging and Identification

    Emotional Safety ———————→ Personal Investment

II. **Influence**
    A. Member openness to influence by community members ←→ power of member to influence the community.

    B. Member need for consensual validation x community's need for conformity = community's power to influence members (community norms)

III. **Integration and Fulfillment of needs**
    A. To the degree that communities successfully facilitate person-environment fit (meeting of needs) among members will be able to develop sense of community

IV. **Shared Emotional Connection**
    A. Formula 1: Shared emotional connection = contact + high-quality interaction

    B. Formula 2: High-quality interaction = (events with successful closure – ambiguity) x (event valence x sharedness of the event) + amount of honor given to members – amount of humiliation
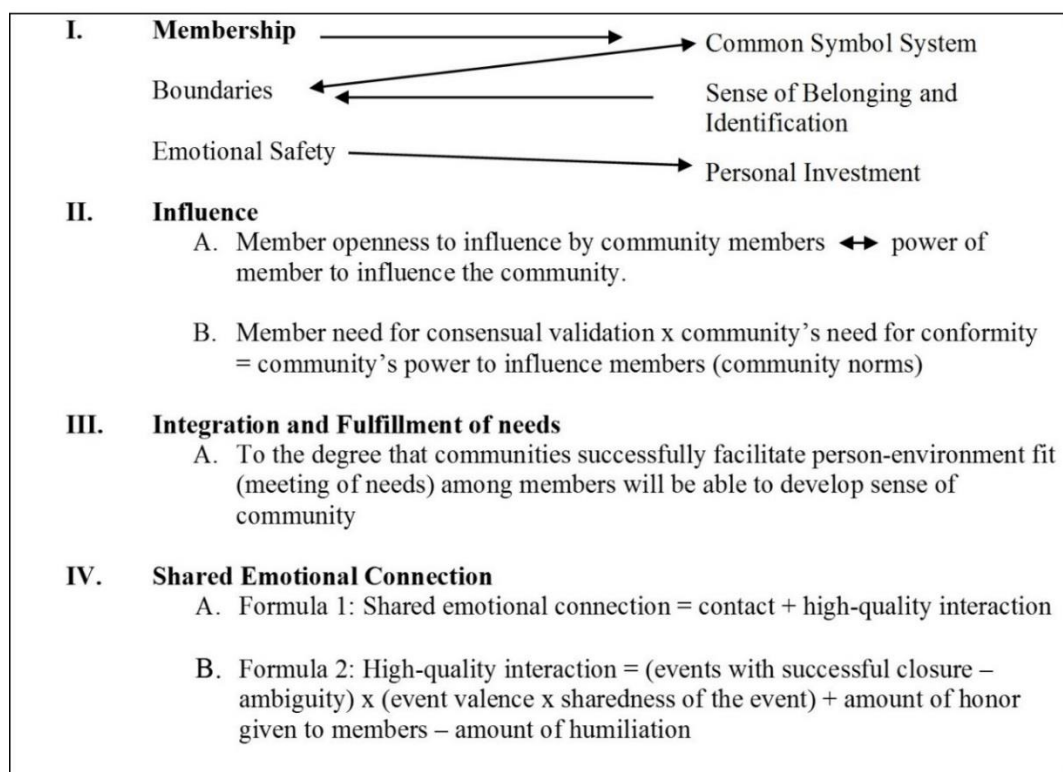
Table 2. Elements of the sense of community and their hypothesized relationships.

McMillan & Chavis (1986) give the following example for illustration of the dynamics within and between these four elements (p. 16):

"Someone puts an announcement on the dormitory bulletin board about the formation of an intramural dormitory basketball team. People attend the organizational meeting as strangers out of their individual needs (integration and fulfillment of needs). The team is bound by place of residence (membership boundaries are set) and spends time together in practice (the contact hypothesis). They play a game and win (successful shared valent event). While playing, members exert energy on behalf of the team (personal investment in the group). As the team continues to win, team members become recognized and congratulated (gaining honor and status for being members). Someone suggests that they all buy matching shirts and shoes (common symbols) and they do so (influence)."

Burroughs and Eby (1998) draw their theory of psychological sense of community from McMillan's and Chavis' (1986) four key elements of the sense of community. First, concept of sense of belonging, meaning a situation where individuals are well known for each other. Second dimension is coworker support, this dimension is concerned with individual's opportunity to work with others. Third dimension is a team orientation which shows concern for social support. Fourth dimension is emotional safety, meaning the extent of contact individuals in a group have with one another. The last element is truth telling and spiritual bond, which is referring to a community that is a safe place for individuals to tell the truth and bond. One of the main findings of Burroughs's and Eby's (1998) research is that individuals with higher need for affiliation appear to have stronger psychological sense of community.

In addition to McMillan's and his collaborators theories, also Talen (1999) calls after a better understanding of actually researching what it takes for the new urbanist vision of the sense of community to be fulfilled. Whether a casual neighboring is enough, or does it call after a deeper social bonding and feeling of; membership, influence, integration and attachment (Talen, 1999). When it comes to new apartment buildings and to the situation where the customer makes a decision to purchase an apartment, the only thing that residents of the apartment building knowingly share is the knowledge that they have

decided to settle in the same neighborhood (Hampton & Wellman, 2000). This physical closeness works as the most available method for the formation of social contacts (Wellman, 2005).

When it comes to urban neighborhoods Talen (1999) points out an important factor that the length of residency is a key variable when it comes to formation of the sense of community. According to Talen (1999) formation of a group is enhanced firstly by passive social contact, meaning a creation of settings which support such contact. Second aspect is proximity, meaning a facilitation of closeness by arranging space appropriately. McMillan and Chavis (1986) claim that force of the sense of community drives people together, however it may also work as a negative factor when it comes to excluding or including people in the community.

Talen (1999) points out key aspects affecting creation of the sense of community. These key aspects are; architecture and design, density and scale, streets, public space and mixed land uses. Although Talen's study is focusing on the sense of community existing in real life, these aspects are still interlinked in shifting the sense of community to an online environment. Researchers argue that it is in fact very difficult to fully define 'the sense of community' (see e.g. Talen, 1999; Kingston et al., 1999; Chipuer & Pretty, 1999).

Talen (1999) adds that it could be that social objectives appear to embrace the notions of resident interaction and the components of the sense of community simultaneously. Thus Talen (1999) claims that the sense of community may be promoted by increasing resident interaction. The quality of this interaction may be limited to brief encounters, however it still promotes the sense of community. In her research about new urbanism and social science Talen (1999) points out that there is no empirical evidence of a direct link between neighborhood form and community and while architecture of residential area may increase frequency of interaction, it is residential interaction that builds the sense of community.

According to Kingston et al. (1999) a neighborhood sense of community can be reported by an individual, but this does not guarantee that the neighborhood itself arises the feeling of the sense of community. One domain that can influence the sense of community are

the physical attributes of a neighborhood. Hampton & Wellman (2002) are able to identify six different factors that create the sense of community:

1. Recognition; members are able to recognize other members.
2. Identification; this goes beyond recognizing. Members are able to identify other member's identities.
3. Support; meaning socio-emotional or informational-support.
4. Relationship; members of a community were able to develop the sense of community, because they developed personal friendships with other members.
5. Emotional attachment; attachment to community, not just individual members.
6. Obligation; the feeling of wanting to 'give back' to the community, because the community has given so much to the member.

2.2 Stakeholders and private online customer communities

This subchapter will briefly go over stakeholder theory and the reason why identifying key stakeholders in any organizational project is important, especially when it comes to designing corporate communication activities. The second part of this subchapter focuses on different ways stakeholder engagement can be created or enhanced in private online customer communities. Third part of this chapter discusses stakeholder communication and different types of communicative strategies. The last section focuses on stakeholder value.

2.2.1 Stakeholder theory

Perhaps the most widely acknowledged definition of a stakeholder is created by Edward Freeman (1984, 46):

> *"A stakeholder in an organization is any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organization's objectives"*

Over the past decades several researches have been focusing on stakeholder theory (see e.g. Freeman & Reid, 1983; Clarkson, 1995; Mitchell, Agle & Wood, 1997). Freeman

and Reid (1983, 91) propose an idea where stakeholders can be divided into two main groups:

1) *The Wide Sense of Stakeholder;* which means any identifiable group or individual who can affect organization's objectives and achievements, or who is affected by organization's objectives and achievements. These can be groups such as; public interest groups, protest groups, competitors and worker's unions.

2) *The Narrow Sense of Stakeholder;* which means any identifiable group or individual on which organization is dependent for its continued survival. These can be groups such as; employees, customer segments, certain suppliers and shareowners.

To continue this discussion, Clarkson (1995, 106) define stakeholders as persons or groups who have a claim, ownership, rights, or interests in a corporation and its activities, past, present, or future. Stakeholders with similar interests can be classified as belonging to the suitable, similar group such as; employees, shareholders, customers and so on. When Freeman and Reid (1983) divide stakeholder groups into two main groups, this ideology received addition from other important contributors to the stakeholder theory. Mitchell et al. (1997) divide stakeholders into two groups; primary and secondary. Based on these groups they developed the stakeholder salience model, which measures salience of a stakeholder from an organizational or managerial point of view.

According to Mitchell et al. (1997) stakeholders can be divided into three categories; based on whether they possess power to influence the firm, legitimacy of the stakeholder relationship with the firm, and stakeholder's urgency of the claim. The stakeholders can be either dormant; stakeholders who are lacking an actual relationship with an organization and urgency for their claim, discretionary stakeholders; those who have a legitimate claim, but lack power, demanding stakeholders; those who have urgent claims, but lack legitimacy and power, dominant stakeholders; those stakeholders with claims that are both powerful and legitimate, dangerous stakeholders; those stakeholders whose claim is powerful and urgent, and finally to dependent stakeholders; those who lack power, but have legitimate and urgent claims. In the middle of the stakeholder salience

model are definitive stakeholders, which are stakeholders who possess all three attributes; power, urgency and legitimacy (see figure 1).
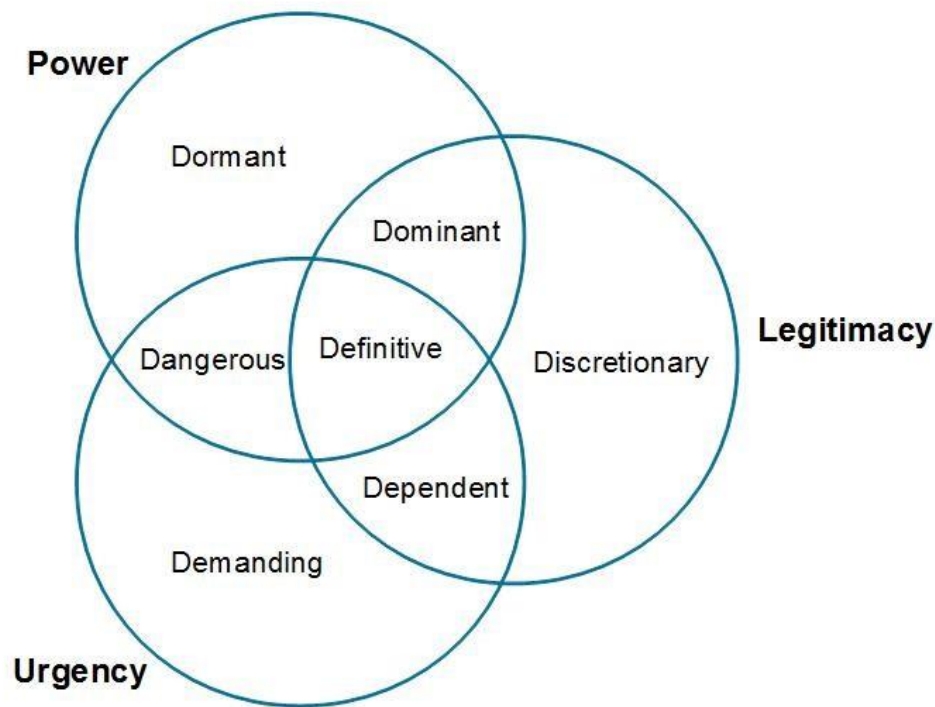
Figure 1. Stakeholder salience model by Mitchell, R. K., Agle B., Wood, D. (1997)

Friedman and Miles (2002, 11) argue that organization and stakeholder relations change and that change can occur in any direction. Generally a realignment could transpire if: (a) institutional support changes; (b) contingent factors emerge; (c) sets of ideas held by stakeholders and/or organizations change; (d) material interests of either side change.

2.2.2 Stakeholder engagement and private online communities

Customer engagement and/or stakeholder engagement are often heard in the business literature. Bowden (2009) views customer engagement as a "psychological process" comprising cognitive and emotional aspects. Stakeholder engagement in an online community stems from feelings of gratitude, empathy, trust, feeling safe and from a sense

of belonging to the group (Brodie et al., 2013). Online communities tend to use different types of strategies to increase members' participation and engagement within the online community. Some online communities have introduced extrinsic reinforcements such as; gifts, social recognition, and feedback (Tedjamulia et al., 2005). However, are these reinforcements enough to keep the online community active and the site worth for member's contribution and participation?

Inactivity of an online community seems to be one of the most important factors, when it comes to evaluating the success of an online community. Ludford et al. (2004) argue that the reason why some online communities fail is the failure to generate enough social capital to sustain continued participation. In addition to this a variety of communities suffer from a deficit of visible contribution. If there is little or no message posting going on in a community, then members who are not active, in other words members who lurk, become a problem in terms of engagement. Internet can be overwhelming and full of interesting things and other online sites that are already active. Members will not therefore return to silent communities, because no one wants to be part of a conversation where no one says anything (Preece et al., 2004).

In order to explore member bonding within online community Szmigin et al. (2005) developed the customer bonding triangle framework illustrated in figure 2. The triangle is significant, because it explores core elements of an online community and the relationship between these elements. In short the figure 2 illustrates that:

> *"Service value is seen as a necessity, which is enhanced with interactivity between participants and is made possible by appropriate technical infrastructure." (p. 488)*

Szmigin et al. (2005) point out the importance of a well-working technical infrastructure. A good technical infrastructure combines speed and reliability as its core components. Without these components online community's service cannot be delivered appropriately and therefore members will not receive value from the online community. Interactivity is created, when technical infrastructure allows communication, in other words interaction can be started by the member as well as the provider. In order to successfully provide service value, the service provider needs to communicate with the users, so that the

member's needs would be appropriately identified and addressed. The potential of delivering solutions to members ultimately leads to customer satisfaction.
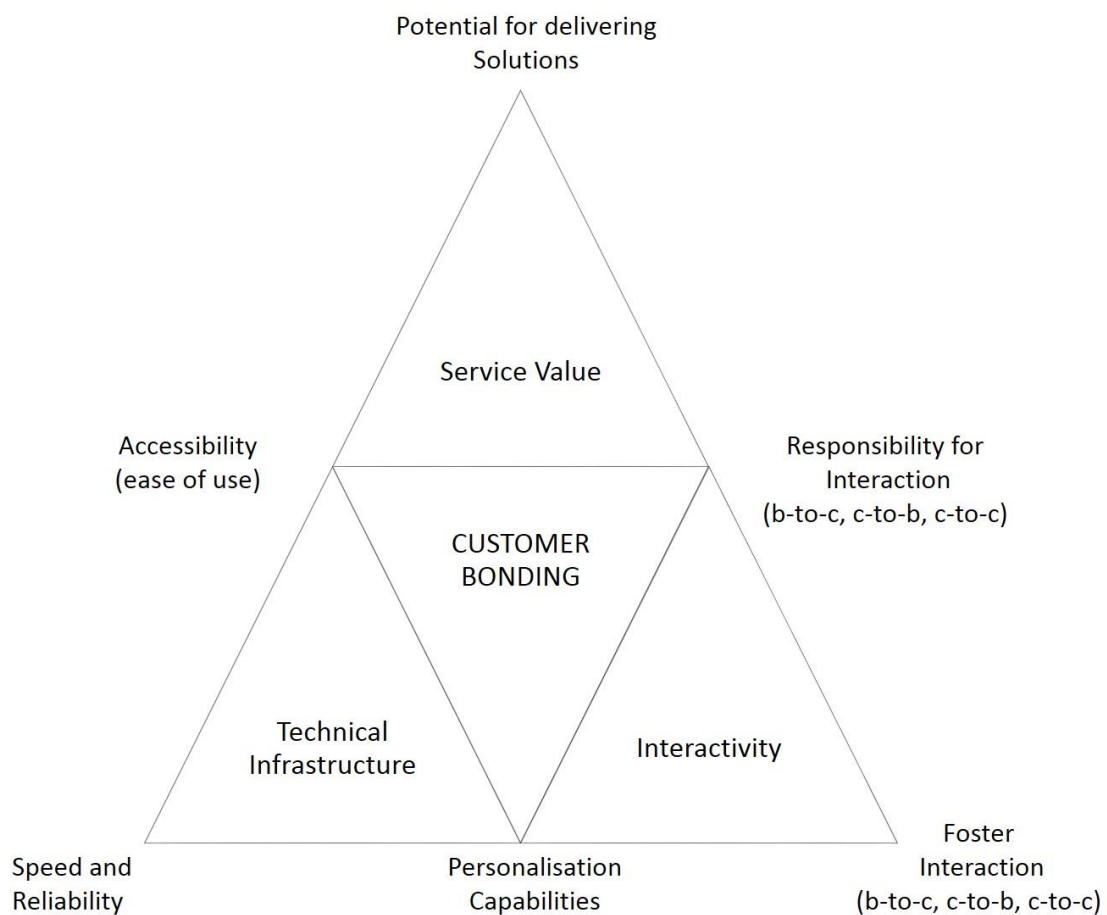
Figure 2. The customer bonding triangle framework (Szmigin et al. 2005)

The customer bonding triangle framework is also significant from the managerial point of view. Szmigin et al. (2005, 491) define managerial implications of the customer bonding triangle in the following manner:

1) Define and develop alternative relationship strategies through the use of online facilities.
2) Develop or enhance existing relationships.
3) Engage customers in a dialogue-orientated communication.

4) Increase the reach and the richness of the dialogue simultaneously.

Engaging members seems to be the key factor for successful online communities. Therefore, organizations are forced to redefine their relationship with customers, because many of them will not accept to be passive audience, instead they wish to actively participate and interact (Plant, 2004). Cornelissen (2011, 53) argues that communication practitioners have developed a focus on the importance of engaging stakeholders in long-term relationships. The emphasis has moved from a focus on stakeholders as being managed by companies to a focus on the interaction with their stakeholders on a continuous and relational basis. According to Preece et al. (2004) it is important for community developers to encourage and engage participation and create interaction. This can be done for example by raising interesting, or even provocative issues to fuel up the conversation.

Successful online communities are beneficial for both members and the businesses. Online communities engage their members to knowledge sharing activities to stimulate dialogue, respond other member's inquiries, build strong ties with other members, and to develop a long-term relationship with the community (Tedjamulia et al., 2005). Figure 3 states three key components of encouraging member contribution in an online community. The three components are:

1) Environmental factors; technology, how easy it is to operate in an online community, the lack of content, a chaotic environment, overwhelming amount of information etc.
2) Personal characteristics; individual expectations of the online community, self-efficacy or attaining a goal, need to achieve and perform better, cooperation etc.
3) Goal setting/goal commitment; members are classified into three subgroups a) users with a desire to contribute, but who do not contribute b) users that have a desire to contribute and do contribute c) users who do not have a desire to contribute, but who still contribute.
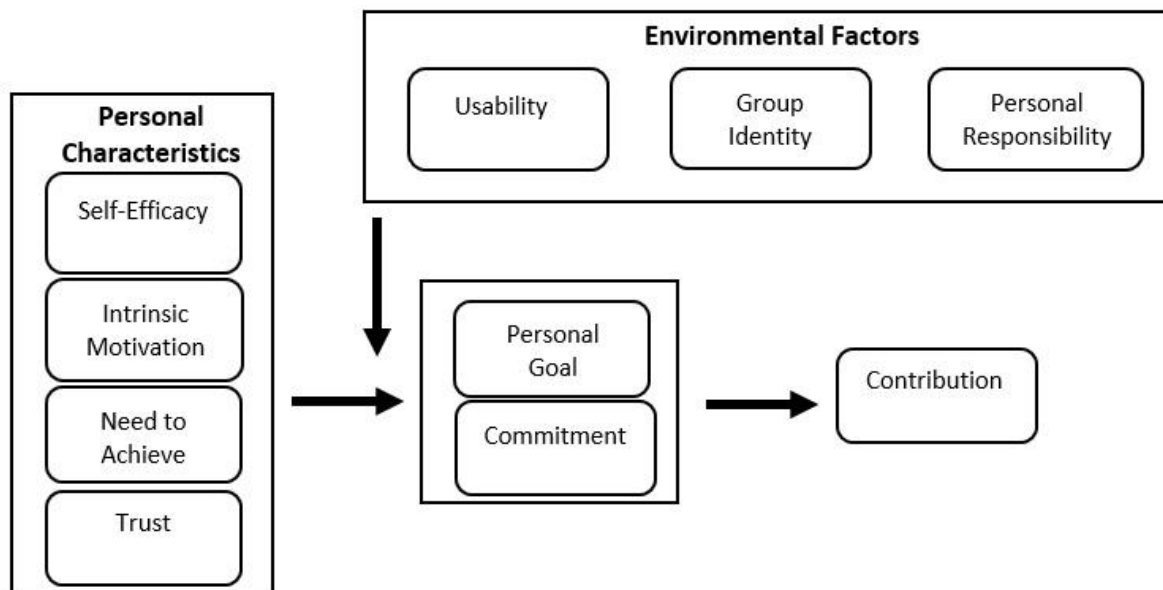
Figure 3. Contribution model based on research by Tedjamulia et al. (2005).

Motivating key stakeholders to engage in the online customer community is one of the most important factors for operating a successful online community. When it comes to creating content that motivates and arouses interest in the target audience Heinonen (2011) argues that organizations can offer various type of information that can be accessed by any member in the group. For example, organizations can offer real-time information on relevant events and thus increase the interest, and most importantly provide a chance for social connection.

Rau et al. (2008) argue that people seem to be less motivated to publicly post intimate or personal articles, if other members of the online customer community are people who he or she seldom talks with or discusses only shallow topics with. These factors hinder people from posting personal feelings and information on Social Network Service (SNS) sites, because they are unsure how other members will react. These members are described in some cases as 'lurkers'. Lurkers who do not feel the need for posting, might be encouraged to participate if there is a policy statement encouraging them to comment (Preece et al., 2004).

According to Heinonen (2011) social connection can be done by initiating discussions about different topics and encouraging customers to create questions and share their experiences. Rau et al. (2008) adds that members who share higher level of affected intimacy are more willing to share even risky information and personal opinion. From an organizational point of view research shows that social media sites such as; Facebook, enable interactive corporate communication, which is more personalized than traditional corporate communication (Lillqvist & Louhiala-Salminen, 2014).

Consumer's social media activities can be conceptualized based on two major dimensions: consumer input and consumer motivation (Heinonen, 2011). In her study Heinonen (2011, 362) presents three main strategies for engaging consumers towards the online customer community. These three strategies are 1) entertainment 2) social connection 3) and information. The strategies are further illustrated and explained in the table 3.

Entertainment	Creating games and online content	Creating creative tools for user's daily practices Enabling different UGC sections based on entertainment practices	Connecting users in real-time games
Social Connection	Enabling interaction between users, creating chat function and online communities	Supporting interactions Demystifying company's image online	Facilitating new social connections, Learning from and adapting to discussions
Information	Providing product information and free downloads, linking company to current happenings	Creating real-time reviews and tests of products. Clarifying the link between company and customer lives	Providing tools facilitating daily practices. Inviting customers in the development of new offerings
	Consumption	**Participation**	**Production**

Consumer Input

Table 3. Companies' possible strategies based on consumer's social media activities (Heinonen, 2011)

When it comes to engaging people in online communities, the characteristics that members share seem to play a crucial role. Ludford et al. (2004) point out that similarity

and uniqueness seem to affect members' contribution. Firstly, people in dissimilar group contribute more. Second, people embrace the feeling of uniqueness within a group, increasing participation. In general Ludford et al. (2004) recommend highlighting the uniqueness of the members within an online customer community, in order to increase members' contribution and satisfaction with the community.
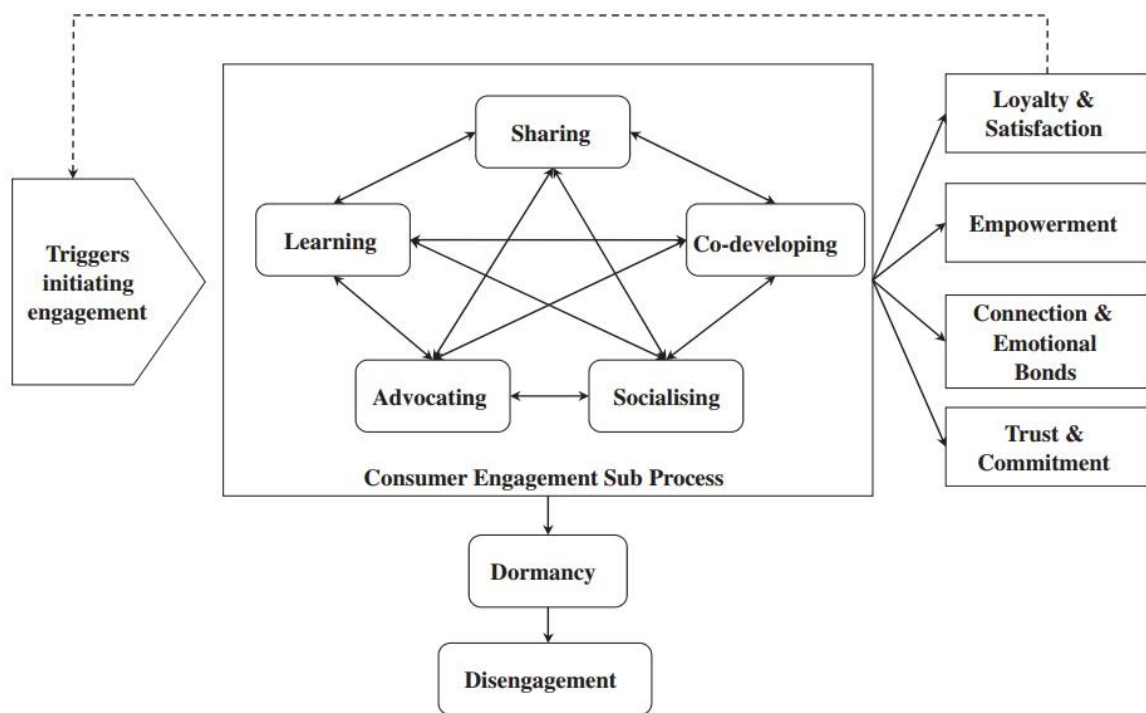
Figure 4. Consumer engagement process in a virtual brand community (Brodie et al. 2013)

Figure 4 illustrates the ways Brodie et al. (2013) identify five specific consumer engagement sub-processes; learning, sharing, advocating, socializing and co-developing. According to their research the consumer engagement process will generate numerous outcomes; consumer loyalty, satisfaction, empowerment, connection, commitment and trust.

Several researches point out that the size of a community is a crucial factor for the success and survival of the online community (see e.g. Armstrong & Hagel, 2000; Ludford et al., 2004). However engaging consumer in a small community is not impossible either. According to Dholakia, Bagozzi and Pearo (2004, 259) maintaining interpersonal

connectivity and social enhancement are noteworthy factors for participation in small-group based virtual communities. In the small-group based virtual communities marketer's objective is to match group member's preferences to interact together. Providing uninterrupted, vivid and enjoyable group interaction is especially valuable in the small customer communities.

2.2.3 Stakeholder communication

Selecting the right type of method or strategy of communication towards key stakeholders can be challenging, when it comes to fostering engagement in a private online customer community. Especially if the organization is faced with a new and unique situation. Hallahan, Holtzhausen, van Ruler, Vercic and Sriramesh (2005, 3) define strategic communication as "the purposeful use of communication by an organization to fulfill its mission."

In figure 5 Cornelissen (2011, 50) provides three possible scenarios for communication between an organization and stakeholders. The first one is seen as one-way informational communication strategy, where information is given from organization to stakeholder and it does not include a chance for a two-way communication. The second scenario is a two-way persuasive strategy where an organization gives information, but leaves room for understanding and communication. The third strategy is a two-way dialogue strategy, where information is received by both parties.

Crane and Livesey (2003) suggest that the two-way asymmetrical models are designed to gather information as much as possible from the organization's publics. By doing this the organization is able to identify messages that will most likely to produce favorable responses and attitudes from the audience. On the other hand, symmetrical models are designed to facilitate understanding and communication between the parties involved in the dialogue. It seems like especially online customer communities tend to use dialogue strategy.

Informational strategy: one-way symmetrical model of communication

| ORGANIZATION | → | STAKEHOLDER |

Persuasive strategy: two-way asymmetrical model of communication

| ORGANIZATION | → ↶ | STAKEHOLDER |

Dialogue strategy: two-way symmetrical model of communication
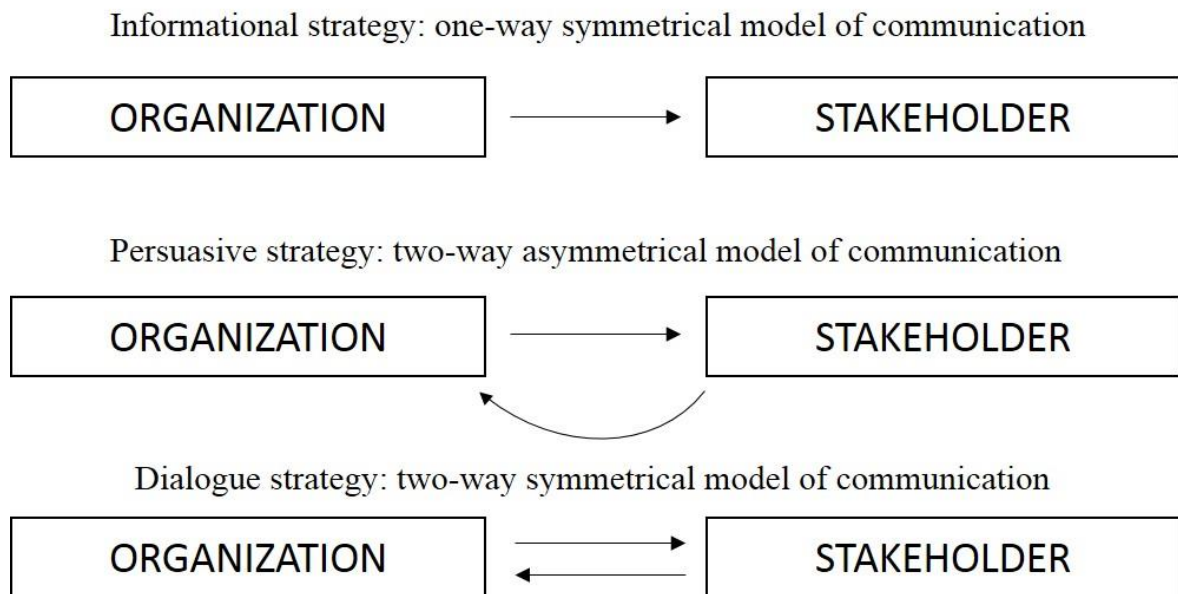
| ORGANIZATION | ⇄ | STAKEHOLDER |

Figure 5. Models of organization-stakeholder communication (Cornelissen, 2011, 50)

Because of Web 2.0, online communities are characterized as being very social in nature (see e.g. O'Reilly, 2007; Murugesan, 2007; Szmigin et al., 2005). Therefore, it is safe to assume that the last communication scenario is the best possible option for a social online community. Morsing and Schultz (2006) go more into detail about stakeholder involvement strategy. According to their research stakeholder involvement strategy takes stakeholder relationships seriously. This means that companies should not only try to influence stakeholders, but also seek to be influenced by stakeholders and thus change when required. For example dialogue between organization and stakeholders occurring in Facebook is from an organizational point of view a rather new phenomenon. Learning through active participation of the members can be an overwhelming task for organizations.

An organization can facilitate customized communication approach with its stakeholders, when the target audience is unique or there are different types of stakeholders with different types of needs. Crane and Livesey (2003) point out that the benefit of a customized approach for the organization is the enhanced understanding of the organization's position and behavior, because stakeholders are being spoken 'with their

own voice'. Customized communication may also enhance empathy and trust towards the organization.

Stakeholder communication requires an appropriate strategy, in order to achieve desirable results. Corporate communication strategy is a functional strategy, which provides focus and direction to the corporate communication function. It works as a framework for the communication plans to reach corporate's objective (Steyn, 2004).

Steyn (2004) also points out that even though the importance of communication strategy is acknowledged by organizations, actually only few practitioners understand what strategy really means. In order to formulate corporate communication strategy, it is essential that practitioners understand the business and societal issues the organization is facing.

2.2.4 Creating stakeholder value

Organizations are facing an increasingly competitive business environment, therefore firms seek for new ways to gain organizational advantage that cannot be easily or quickly imitated in order to attract investment capital (Hillman & Kleim, 2001). Creation of value for customers is a critical task for marketers, especially when developing new innovative products and services or starting new businesses (Smith & Colgate, 2007).

A famous contributor to the customer value, Robert Woodruff (1997, 141) defines customer value as "a customer's perceived preference for, and evaluation of, those product attributes, attribute performances, and consequences arising from use that facilitates (or blocks) achieving the customer's goals and purposes in use situations" (1997, 141). Butz and Goodstein (1997) on the other hand, perceive customer value as an emotional bond established between the customer and a producer after the customer has used a salient product or service produced by that supplier and found the product to provide added value.

Laukkanen and Lauronen (2005) research value creation in three mobile banking services. They point out that understanding how customers perceive value in various service context increases the quality of strategic decision making, ultimately leading to improved

customer orientation. Past strategies for gaining a competitive advantage have mostly looked at organization's internal strategies such as; quality management, re-engineering, downsizing and reconstructing. However, nowadays organizations are more outward orientated, looking for ways to bring superior consumer value for the customer (Woodruff, 1997).

Woodruff (1997) points out that by providing simply quality and new technological innovations are not enough to satisfy consumer needs. Deciding on how to bring up customer value Woodruff (1977, 144) presents four relevant question that every organization should think of when placing emphasis on consumer value;

1) What exactly do customers value?
2) Of all the things customers value, on which ones should we focus to achieve advantage?
3) How well do customers think we deliver that value?
4) How will what customers value change in future?

Lusch and Vargo (2006, 284) point out an important notion that in the value-creation processes customers can be co-creators of value. Lusch and Vargo (2006) introduce two components of value co-creation. First, it is not only organization that produces value, instead also customers co-create value throughout the process. Second, customers can also co-product value, meaning participation in the creation of the core offering itself.

Figure 6 illustrates how these questions can be put into practice. This figure is important, because it maps the stages of creating value in practice. The whole cycle begins from creating value delivery strategy, which means the ways organization decides to address its target audience. After this strategy gets translated into internal processes and their requirements, meaning that these process can be in a single department or across multiple departments. It is important to specify customer requirements, so that the value can be delivered successfully. Third part of the cycle focuses on implementing customer value delivery. This can be a difficult process, due to the fact that the responsibility may cut across different departments. It is challenging to define who is responsible in each action. The last part of the cycle encourages organizations to track down and follow the success

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of creating consumer value. By doing this organization can adjust to consumer needs and follow which strategies are more effective than others.
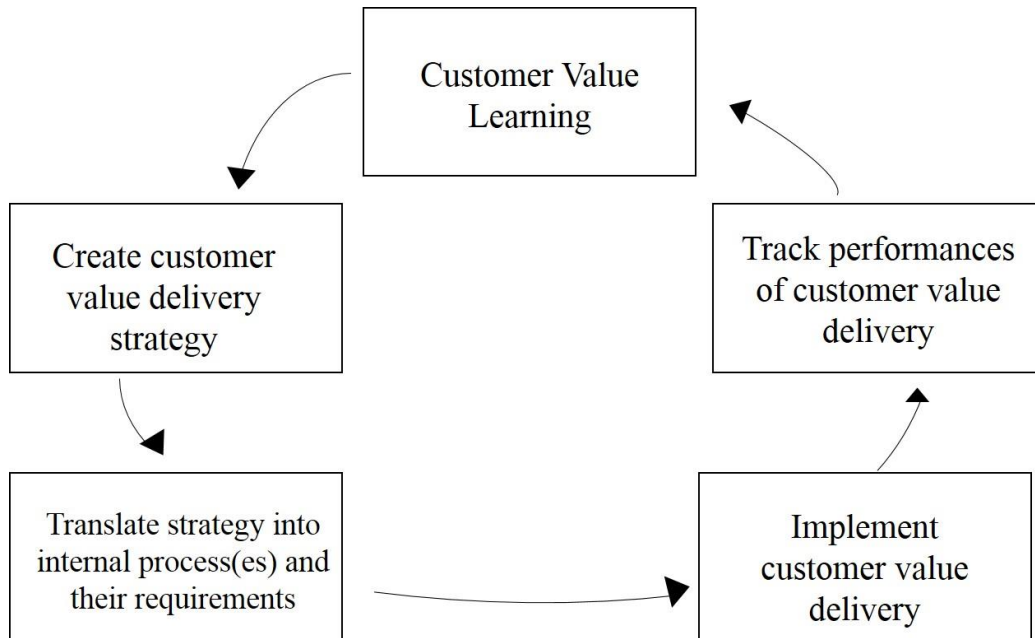
Figure 6. Translating customer value learning into action (Woodruff, 2001)

One way to create customer value is to develop technological innovations, such as online communities for target customers. According to Brodie et al. (2013) online communities share a cognitive dimension of consumer engagement. The members who participate in the online community build value by sharing information and experiences. Nolan et al. (2007) conducted a three-year longitudinal study regarding the development of a certain online business community. Their findings suggest that members engage with an online community if utility value and interest are greater than the perceived risk. Nolan et al. (2007, 62) define trust by dividing its components in the following manner:

1) Risk; providing information to unknown recipients and acting upon received information.

2) Benefit; an overall perception that involvement will provide individual gain.

3) Utility value; measured by high information quality.

4) Interest; indication of an inherent interest in the system and the information available.

5) Effort; the level of effort put into practice when acquiring information.

6) Power; an individual's ability to influence others.

Möller (2006) points out the importance of new future-orientated technological or value-production related innovations, which involve multi-actor development networks. As all major companies are involved in different types of value-creation strategies, there is a need for value based portfolio management practices and organizational forms. Möller (2006) adds that products and services, that provide new features to company's expanded offerings are described as "value-adding offering."

Smith and Colgate (2007) identify different types of values for customers. Functional or instrumental value is seen as type of value that has desired characteristics or performs a desired functions for a customer. Smith and Colgate (2007) define functional or instrumental value as; "Functional/instrumental value: the attributes of the product itself; the extent to which a product is useful and fulfills a customer's desired goals."

Another two identified types of values are experiential or hedonistic value and symbolic and expressive value. Experiential or hedonistic value is seen as a type of value in which a good or service produces appropriate feelings, experiences and emotions for the customer. Symbolic or expressive value is a type of value in which customer attaches or associates psychological aspects to the good or service.

Smith and Colgate (2007) also define different types of sources of value. Naturally, product itself is seen as a source of value. Second, information is regarded as a type of activity that provides crucial information about the product or the service for the customer. Third, interactivity is seen as a source of value, because it provides factors like; timetables, service quality and chance for interaction between different participants.

2.3 Research framework

After going over the relevant literature for the purposes of this study, this section focuses on the theoretical framework of the study. This section aims to take a closer look why communication is significant for achieving this study's research objective on fostering engagement in a private online customer community. The theoretical framework is built

from previous literature in general and from the research questions' objectives. As a base, the research framework uses a model developed by Szmigin et al. (2005). The sources for figure 7 are explained below.
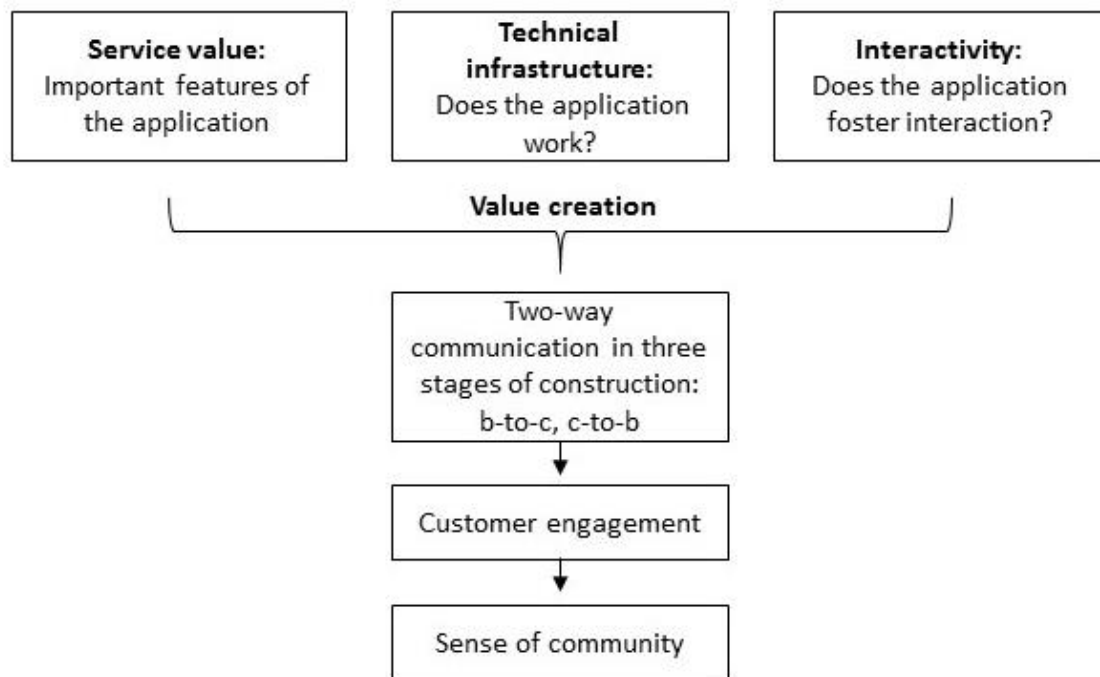
Figure 7. Thesis theoretical framework

This analytical framework aims to explore the relationship between these elements and how one cannot function without another in terms of fostering customer engagement in a private online customer community. Service value is seen as the added value that the online customer community offers for the customer such as; important features that cannot be found anywhere else or in another public social network site. Technical infrastructure refers to technical aspects of the online community such as; whether the platform is easy to use or does it work slowly, affecting the level of engagement. Interactivity on the other hand is enhanced by the previous two elements. All these three elements together create the sense of community and foster customer engagement. Based on the literature and the empirical study, these three aspects are the key elements in terms of creating added value for the customer.

The role of two-way communication is extremely important when it comes to describing and informing members of the community and its features. In other words, how value is communicated to the customer is an important factor. Three stages, or cyclicality of the project communication, is also noted in this framework. The communicative activities, which take place in each stage are important factors for fostering customer engagement. Once customer engagement is achieved, the interactive nature of the online customer community should further enhance the sense of community.

Since YIT Plus is a social network type of a site, communication can occur in both ways; from business to customers and from customers to business. All these elements need to be supported by one another in order to create the ultimate outcomes; customer engagement and the sense of community.

3. METHODS AND DATA

This chapter briefly introduces the background of the case company, which is relevant in terms of gaining a wholesome understanding of YIT Plus. Most importantly, the focus is on the chosen method and data collection of this study. Interview scheme and overall trustworthiness of the study are also presented in this section.

3.1 Case company YIT

YIT Group is a multinational organization, operating in the field of construction. The organization offers diverse services for different stakeholders. The three largest constructions business segments are; residential construction, business premises and infrastructure. YIT Group operates in seven different countries; Finland, Russia, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Czech Republic and Slovakia. Finland is the largest operating area, while Russia is the second largest, where YIT Group is the largest foreign residential construction corporation. YIT Plus is currently active in three of the operating countries, but it is expected to be extended to other operating countries.

In 2014 YIT Group had net sales of EUR 1,801.2 million and the organization had 5,881 employees. YIT Group's shares are listed on NASDAQ OMX Helsinki. As a construction firm, YIT Group's operations are strongly connected to the society around them as well as to the everyday life of their stakeholders. YIT Group has specified their most important stakeholder in the following manner: customers, personnel, shareholders and investors, partners, cities and public administration as well as the civil society (*source:* YIT).

3.2 Single case study approach

The present study uses single case-study approach. Yin (2003) defines case study as an empirical review, which investigates some contemporary phenomenon in-depth within some real-life context. There are several reasons why single-case study is the most appropriate approach for the present study, although multiple-case study approach seems

to bear more advantages over single-case study, because of its robust and more compelling nature (Yin, 2003).

It is important to keep in mind the limitations of this study. YIT Plus is chosen for a case online community for three major reasons. First, YIT Plus is directed to a very specific, well-defined audience, making the case organization's situation very unique in nature. Second, at this point the private online customer community is one of a kind, therefore it is rather difficult to find similar suitable cases or researches with appropriate circumstances. Third, the research topic is given by the case company and it is performed by one person as a thesis work.

Yin (2003) gives five relevant justifications why single case study is a suitable approach for the present study. First, to confirm, challenge or extend theory, which has a specified clear set of propositions as well as the circumstances. Second rationale for a single case study is, if the case used in the study represents a unique case. Third, if the purpose of the study is to capture circumstances and conditions of an everyday or a commonplace situation. Fourth rationale is the revelatory case, meaning if the researchers has a chance to observe the situation previously inaccessible to a scientific investigation. The last rationale is the longitudinal case, which means studying the same single case at two or more different points in time.

Based on Yin's rationales on choosing single-case study method it is reasonable to conclude that YIT and especially their unique online customer community, YIT Plus, requires a single-case study approach. In this case the mode of communication and content are very audience specific requiring a very specific approach for customer engagement in a private online customer community.

3.3 Data collection and interviews

The present study is qualitative in nature. Corbin and Strauss (2014, 4) describe qualitative research as a process where the researcher collects and interprets data, making the researcher as much part of the research process as the participants and the data provided. Marshall and Rossman (2010) point out that strengths of qualitative studies

should be demonstrated for research that is exploratory or descriptive and that stresses the importance of context, setting, and participant's frames or reference. This study chose a qualitative research approach, because this approach allows to view the phenomenon behind building a residential sense of community and customer engagement in detail.

The present study's research problem is approached in two different ways. First, by analyzing the existing theory and by creating a theoretical framework for the study. This study also conducts empirical research in a form of a semi-structured interview. Bjørnholt and Farstad (2012) point out that using semi-structured interview as a method can result in production of rich data, including observational data. Open-ended questions are useful in order to undercover possible solutions and discover underlying needs for the private online customer community and the ways customer engagement and the sense of community can be fostered online with the help of communication.

Since YIT Plus has a very well defined user pool for communication activities it is sufficient to interview six people working for YIT and YIT Plus. However, in order to gain a full understanding of the phenomenon of customer communication in a social network, the interview data also includes two customers, who are familiar with the online customer community. In total eight people are interviewed for the present study. The participants are all from Finland, however some of them are from different cities. Five of the interviews are conducted in face-to-face setting, while three of the interviews are conducted via phone.

Face-to-face interviews are characterized by synchronous communication in time and place, due to this face-to-face interviews can take an advantage of social cues such as; voice and body language. While interviews conducted via phone bare an advantage of an access to extended participants, it lacks on social cues (Opdenakker, 2006). As seen from table 4 interviews conducted via phone tend to be shorter in duration than those conducted in face-to-face setting.

Eight interviews are enough to give a comprehensive picture of the phenomenon, because throughout the interviews the results started to repeat themselves. Corbin and Strauss (2014, 15) point out an important factor of treating interview participants ethically, since the lines between the researcher and the participants may become blurred during the data

collection and analysis. Throughout the interviews the participants were treated ethically. The participants are given a chance to react to the data, by sending them the results of the analysis in order to gain a mutual understanding of the results. At the beginning of each interview the participants were assured about the anonymity of the interview. The interviews were conducted between 26.2.2015-29.4.2015.

Table 4 shows information of the participants, which is collected from each respondent:

Response #	Date	Duration in minutes	Face-to-face / Phone	Gender	Years in service
R1	26.2.2015	37:04	F	F	3,5
R2	2.3.2015	22:41	F	F	3
R3	4.3.2015	38:08	F	F	3
R4	11.3.2015	23:44	P	F	26
R5	24.3.2015	29:48	F	F	12
R6	24.3.2015	22:57	F	M	10
R7	29.4.2015	26:30	P	M	Customer
R8	29.4.2015	22:00	P	M	Customer

Table 4. Interview data of the participants

The interviewees have the following positions inside the organization: Housing Development Administrator, Brand Manager, City Development Manager, Marketing Manager in YIT Home, Digital Marketing Manager in B to C and Online Communication Manager (*in random order*). The interviews work as the main source of the data, however by observing YIT Plus application over the past six months, the behavior of the users, the frequency of the posts and its quantitative data gave a general implication of the current situation and the potential of the private online customer community. Online observation

is also called as netnography, meaning online practice of anthropology. Netnography is considered simpler, faster and much less expensive than traditional ethnography (Kozinets, 2006). However, the semi-structured interviews work as the main source of data, while netnography is used only to confirm topics arising from the interviews. This information gained from the netnography approach is further explained in the findings section.

The final interview question scheme is the following:

1. Background information

- Gender.

- Years in service.

- Relation to YIT Plus.

- Position if working for YIT.

2. General information regarding YIT Plus

- How familiar the participant is with the community.

- How many times they visit the community (YIT employee or a customer).

- Advantages of the community for YIT and for the customer.

- Disadvantages and challenges for YIT and for the customer.

- Ideas and improvement suggestions for engaging customers.

3. Different stakeholder roles

- What is the role of YIT in the community?

- What is the role of a customer in the community?

- What is the role of a housing company or a deputy landlord?

- What is the role of a sales person?

- Whose responsibility it is to post/update/modify content?

4. Content

- What type of content is interesting before the construction?

- What type of content is interesting during the construction?

- What type of content is interesting after the construction?

- What type of content is interesting in general?

- What type of features/content is the most valued?

5. Sense of community

- Do you interact with the neighbors?

- How important is the sense of community in YIT Plus?

- How important is the sense of community for you?

- How can YIT enhance the sense of community?

6. "Share your view" –part

This part of the interview gave the participants a chance to comment and share ideas, regarding the private online customer community, which did not come up during the actual interview.

3.4 Trustworthiness of the study

Qualitative research is often criticized, because of its subjective nature, data collection and analysis. It is important for the researcher to use scrupulous research methods in order to provide reliable results (Easton, McComish & Greenberg, 2000). In order to answer the criticism towards qualitative research, Rolfe (2006) point out that the term 'qualitative' should be used more carefully when referring to a research paradigm. It should rather be restricted to the descriptions of data. In other words, there is no single paradigm which can accommodate all of the qualitative methodologies. Therefore, each study should be justified on its own merits.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) divide trustworthiness into four key aspects. First aspect is credibility, which corresponds roughly with the positivist concept of internal validity. Second aspect is dependability, which shows that the findings are consistent and could be repeated. Third aspect is transferability, which shows that the findings have applicability in other contexts. The last aspect is confirmability, which focuses to neutrality in a way

that the findings of a study are shaped by the respondents and not by the researcher bias, motivation, or interest. The present research is evaluated based on these 'alternative but common criteria for qualitative research' elements mentioned above (Lincoln & Guba 1985, cited in Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008).

In addition to the criteria of qualitative research, it is important to focus on possible pitfalls and difficulties during the research. Easton et al. (2000) provide common pitfalls for conducting a qualitative research. First, equipment failure, which means issues with recording systems or other technological pitfalls. Second, environmental hazards meaning issues such as background noise that prevents the researcher for hearing what had been said in the interview. Third, transcription errors meaning inaccurate punctuations, misspellings that can change the whole meaning of the sentence. Common pitfalls provided by Easton et al. (2000) are avoided throughout the study. All the interviews are recorded in quiet rooms, with the right equipment. The interviews are secured in two different locations and the process of transcription is done as accurately as possible. The process of the research is throughout recorded and can be followed by another researcher.

Eriksson and Kovalainen (2008, 294) conclude that **credibility** of the research focuses on whether the researcher is familiar with the topic and if the data are sufficient to merit claims. Also the link between observations and categories is discussed and whether another researcher could come up with similar interpretations and agree with the claims presented. When conducting this research, attention is paid to the credibility of the research. The interviews are conducted in the best possible manner. The topic is also familiar for myself, because I am working for YIT and therefore I attain a general knowledge of YIT Plus. Also previous research supports the findings of the study, making it easy for another research to come up with similar conclusions.

According to Eriksson and Kovalainen (2008, 294) **dependability** refers to the researcher's "responsibility for offering information to the reader, that the process of research has been logical, traceable and documented." My own judgement regarding dependability of this qualitative study is very positive, due to consistent approach towards the research process. I have avoided making mistakes in conceptualizing the study,

collecting the data, interpreting the findings and reporting results. The logic for selecting the right people, the ways they have been observed and interviewed are clearly presented. Also interview transcripts are provided and they show similarity in every interview conducted.

Transferability refers to the degree of similarity between the present research and other previously conducted alike researches. The goal is to form a connection between the present research and previous results (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008, 294). When evaluating transferability of the study I begun by carefully explaining the phenomenon in sufficient detail. Even though YIT Plus is rather unique in nature, the phenomenon of enhancing customer engagement in a private social network, or in an online community, with the help of communication is something that every organization operating in social Web 2.0 have to encounter. Therefore, conclusions drawn from previous literature and empirical research are transferable to other times, settings, situations, and people similar to this type case.

Finally, **confirmability** according to Eriksson and Kovalainen (2008, 294) refers to "linking findings and interpretations to the data in ways that can be easily understood by others." Rolfe (2006) adds that qualitative research tends to assume that each researcher brings a unique perspective to the study. Confirmability is analyzed in the ways this study's results can be confirmed or used by others. My evaluation is that, although this study is rather unique in nature the phenomenon behind it can be used in different types of contexts. Some findings, which stem from researchers own, deeper interpretations of the interview are not as easily traceable, however they are throughout reasoned and explained in the findings section.

When conducting this research it is important to keep in mind my personal work related background at YIT. During the research, I was working for YIT at the same time. Some of the people interviewed for this study are familiar to me. However throughout the research this factor is kept in mind and the situation is kept as neutral as possible. I firmly believe that my position in the organization has not affected the results of the research. My position before the master's thesis was in the corporate communications unit, therefore I have gained the best possible knowledge of communication practices in YIT.

Knowing all the communication practices has proved to be very beneficial in creating accurate and relevant interview questions for the participants. It is important to mention, that I have not worked with YIT Plus before, therefore a starting point for this research is from the beginning.

4. FINDINGS

This chapter will present the findings of the present study, which are based on the eight semi-structured interviews, general background of YIT Plus and previous literature. The focus is on the key findings that are most relevant for attaining the research objective of the present study. Furthermore, this study's main research question is:

RQ: How can communication foster engagement in a private online customer community and create the sense of community among the customers?

In order to gain a wholesome picture of this phenomenon and answer the question in the best possible manner, the following sub-research questions are created:

SQ1: What type of added value the private online customer community provides for the customer?

SQ2: What are the challenges of customer engagement in the private online customer community?

While the present study focuses on YIT Plus in general, it is relevant to mention that also other online communities and social network sites are discussed for comparison purposes. Another notion worth of mention is that even though same or similar question are discussed with each participant, some of the interviewees have much stronger opinions than others. Therefore, some of the participants are also quoted in this study more often than others.

Most of the findings presented in the next sections share a mutual understanding among the participants, however especially one topic divides the group in half. The sense of community is viewed significant by some of the participants, while some did not find it important at all. Despite this interesting notion, all the other findings are aligned with the interview results.

This chapter is divided into four sections. First section discusses the background of the findings based on the netnography method. The focus is on the most commonly mentioned aspects of YIT Plus. Next section presents different challenges of customer engagement in an online customer community, the base for this analysis is on the different aspects; technical infrastructure, service value and interaction of the customer bonding model (figure 2) created by Szmigin et al. (2005). Unclear and changing Stakeholder roles are also discussed in this section.

Third section presents the added value of the online community for the customer. The focus is on the certain features of the private online customer community, which are most commonly mentioned throughout the interviews, and how communication of these features can increase customer engagement. Fourth, and the last section, attempts to create a project communication model or a schedule, which clearly defines the role of each stakeholder and answers the important five W's and How; *who, what, when, where, why and how?* The purpose of the project communication model is to give a clear insight of the whole communication process during a construction project and how a right type of communication of different functions and features can affect customer engagement in the private online customer community, YIT Plus.

4.1 Background of YIT Plus

This section describes the background information of the findings and focuses on YIT Plus as a private online customer community. Information is gained using a netnography method. The key background information, which is relevant for explanation and throughout understanding of the main findings, are the following; the launch date of the community, the current number of customers, the current number of housing companies, the current number of partners, the current approximate frequency of the posts by YIT and the current approximate activity level of the customers and YIT.

YIT Plus is a recently launched private online customer community designed for new home owners and those living in the apartment built by YIT. It is created in order to replace the older version called eTalo, which was a similar type of a platform, but with less features. In other words, there is a shift from informational strategy of one-way

symmetrical model of communication to a persuasive strategy of two-way asymmetrical model of communication. The goal of YIT Plus is to ultimately shift to dialogue strategy of two-way symmetrical model of communication (figure 5). The evolution from static pages to a vivid community with possibility of two-way communication can be viewed as a major change. This change requires a different strategy for communication, allocation of resources and redefinition of key stakeholders.
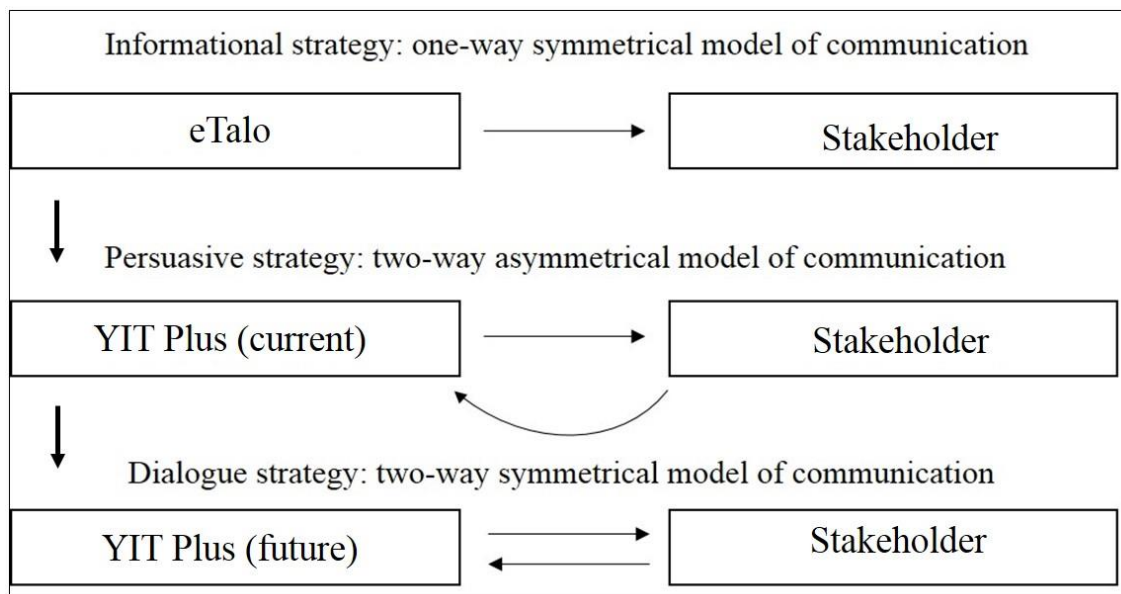
Figure 5. Models of organization-stakeholder communication in YIT Plus based on Cornelissen (2011)

YIT Plus is open for the customers ever since the end of the year 2014. It is an interactive community, where the customers can discuss with other parties of the community, follow water and electricity consumption, gain an access to important documents regarding the apartment and find information of the main events of the housing company. The objective of the community is to provide after-sale value for the customer, but also to stay in touch with the customers, promote new apartments and holiday homes, and increase future sales. At the moment the key figure in YIT Plus are the following:

Date	Number of users	Number of potential users	Number of housing companies	Number of potential housing companies
09.07.2015	1,600	10,000	180	210

Currently YIT Plus has approximately 180 housing companies, while the current maximum potential is 210. At the moment, the community has a total of 1,600 customers, some of those more active than others. The maximum potential for customers is approximately 10,000. This is calculated in the following way; if the current number of potential housing co-operatives is 210 and approximately each housing company has around 48 potential customers (210 x 48= 10,080). It is important to keep in mind that new apartment buildings are under construction all the time, therefore the number of both the customers and the housing companies, are steadily increasing. These key figures are limited to Finland, and do not include active housing companies in other countries.

Based on the six month observation of YIT Plus, some generalizations can be concluded. First, the frequency of the posts is rather low at the moment. From YIT's side the estimated post per community page is 1 post per month, while customers rarely post anything. Therefore it is safe to conclude that the activity level in the community and customer engagement is low. Out of 160 housing companies only few of them have some topics that have sparked conversations between the customers. YIT Plus has similar types of features as Facebook. The customer can post something on "the wall" of the community, the customer can "like" and comment a post generated by YIT or another customer.

Based on the observation there are only few posts that have gained likes or comments. At the moment the communication content is basically limited to some photos from the construction time, necessary housing company events and advertisements from YIT. An example of a housing company site and the "wall" can be seen in figure 8.

In general when thinking about YIT Plus, the biggest competitor is Facebook. Facebook has similar features, but it is lacking on specific content related to the housing company itself. However, at the moment some of the housing companies already created their own Facebook pages, which are being actively used instead of YIT Plus. There is a risk that social activity occurs in easier and faster to use social network sites such as; Facebook, while YIT Plus serves the customers only as a document bank. The biggest question raised by the interviewees is whether YIT Plus can compete against social network sites that are easier to use, and provide more interesting content with better frequency.
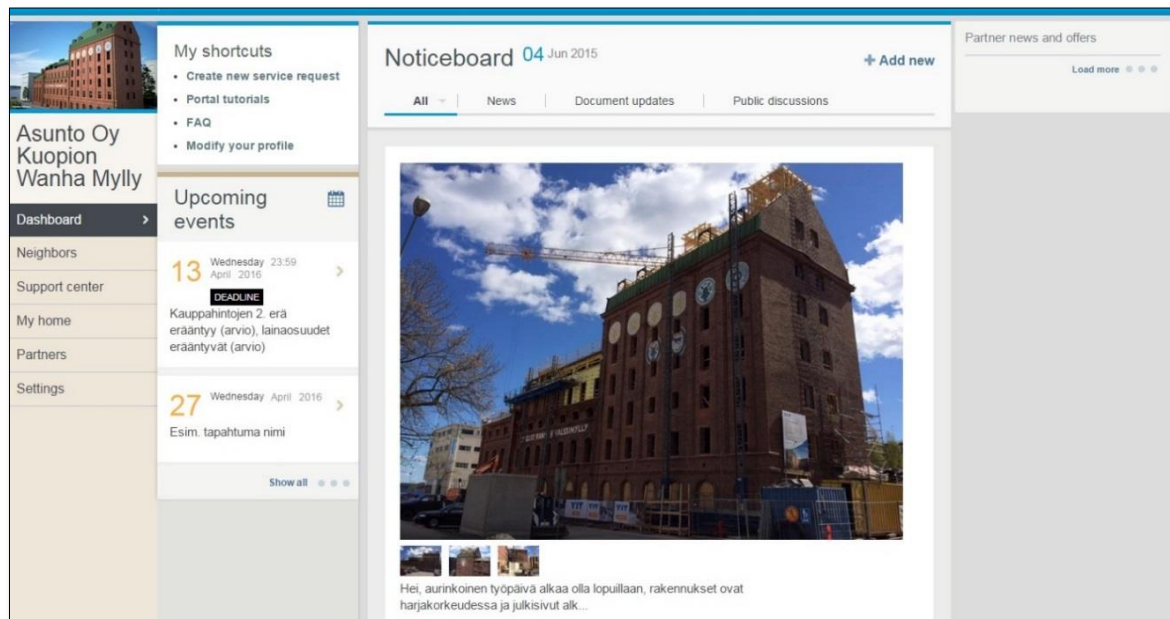
Figure 8. YIT Plus and "the wall"

In the next section the focus is on the challenges of the customer engagement. The customer engagement model developed by Szmigin et al. (2005) works as a base for the analysis. To recap, Szmigin et al. (2005, 488) summarize the triangle in the following manner: "service value is seen as a necessity, which is enhanced with interactivity between participants and is made possible by appropriate technical infrastructure."

4.2 Challenges of customer engagement in YIT Plus

This section focuses on the challenges of customer engagement, based on the most commonly mentioned issues according to the interviewees. In this section the focus is on the customer bonding model's first two elements; technical infrastructure and interactivity. The third element, service value, is discussed in detail in the section 4.3. Second analysis is derived from the unclear and changing role of, both external and internal, stakeholders during a life-cycle of an apartment building. An unrecognized role of a sales person is also discussed in this section.

Technical infrastructure of YIT Plus.

Perhaps the most obvious finding regarding the challenges of the online customer community is the result of an unstable or underperforming technical infrastructure. When interviewing the participants, this element is one of the most commonly mentioned aspects. Because of the very evident role of a well-working technical infrastructure, this study will only briefly outline the findings in this part.

> R7: *"It just popped into my mind that these pages are extremely slow. I mean… no other web page is this slow. I have tried to use it also with Explore and Firefox. It is almost nasty to use, because it takes minutes to download one page."*

Slowness of the online community is mentioned by most of the interviewees. Technical infrastructure is one of the key elements of customer bonding in an online community. It is important to keep in mind that before focusing on the service value or interactivity of the community, the technical infrastructure has to work appropriately. Slowness of the application seems to affect engagement of the customers, because it significantly affects the ease of use. If this important building block of the customer bonding triangle is not working, then the other two elements; service value and interactivity, cannot exist, thus customer engagement will not occur.

> R7: *"When the webpages were changed to this new version, everything [documents] were all messed up there, now they've been fixed a bit, but they are still really messed up, I do not know if housing company has to start putting them to the right folders. I believe that with hard work they [documents] can be put in the right folders."*

One of the key features of the community is the partial digitalization of the process of buying an apartment. All documents related to the apartment building, apartment itself, and installed equipment manuscripts can be found in digital folders. This should be one of the features that brings added value and better customer-service to the customer, however at this point the documents are not in logical places or in order. It seems unclear

whose role it is to arrange the documents to the right folders. This feature is regarded as one of the most important features of the online customer community.

> R1: *"When it comes to the sense of community, then our competitor is Facebook… why would not the housing company have their pages there, since it is easier to use?"*

> R6 *"I am worried about Facebook and other similar sites, which are easier to use and more compatible. How do we cope in the competition, so that it [YIT Plus] will not feel hard and clumsy to use?"*

Interestingly discussions about the technical infrastructure sparked meaningful conversations regarding competitors. YIT Plus is often compared to the social network site Facebook. YIT Plus is considered to be more difficult to use than Facebook, therefore the competition between Facebook and YIT Plus is a relevant challenge for the community. Facebook's technical infrastructure is easier to navigate and some of the customers already have existing accounts there, making it more natural to use Facebook instead of YIT Plus. It should be kept in mind that YIT Plus should not try to compete with Facebook, instead it should focus on the added value the privacy aspect of the community provides for the customer and harness positive sides of both social networks. In addition, it is essential to keep in mind that some of the customers do not have accounts in Facebook.

Interactivity and sense of community.

YIT Plus is designed to enhance the sense of community and participation among the residents of the apartment building. The private online customer community offers a chance for out of public eye discussion between the neighbors and between the customers and YIT. The social element is one part of YIT Plus, however at the moment the community could be described as "a silent community" (Preece et al., 2004). The residential sense of community is also one of the topics that received diverse opinions. Some of the interviewees valued the sense of community higher than the others, while

some of the participants did not have any interest towards the sense of community or did not find it important to have a chance to discuss with their neighbors online.

> R4: *"At the first we were afraid if the customers would start discussing negative things there, but so far I have not seen a single message there"*

> R6: *"I do not personally have any interest in talking with my neighbors there… for me the community gets build somewhere else. I am very active in Facebook, LinkedIn and so on… I am not sure if the people there [YIT Plus] would be interesting enough."*

> R8: *"I logged into the service to see if there is some sort of discussions, but the discussion has been very lame so far."*

One of the key challenges YIT Plus is facing is the customers' willingness to participate in discussions and create a self-sustaining interactive environment. At this point, approximately half of the respondents said that they do not see YIT Plus as a primary channel in terms of social interactivity. Preece et al. (2004) conclude that member's do not want to be part of a conversation where no one says anything. It seems apparent that most of the customers decide to stay as "lurkers" instead of taking a leading, interactive role in the community. Instead of registering with their own name, most of the registered customers have decided to stay anonymous. However, it can be drawn from the interviews that there is an underlying curiosity towards the social part of the community. It seems like those customers who would be interested in starting discussions, will not do it because no other customer has started a discussion either.

Preece et al. (2004) add that even if the online community would be busy, only a small number of members usually actively participate and post messages. Armstrong & Hagel (2000) summarize that the size of the online community or the number of participants is a significant factor in terms of survival of the community. It can be concluded that even the maximum number of potential housing company users (48) is not necessarily enough to sustain the continuous flow of conversation and self-sustaining interactive environment.

Unclear and changing role of stakeholders.

An interesting and very relevant finding is derived from one the key stakeholder groups; YIT's employees. When it comes to the responsibility of creating content and communication in general, the role of each stakeholder is unclear. The process of communication can be seen as a linear action, or as a life-cycle of an apartment building. There are three clear stages, with distinguished communicative actions. The first stage is the communication before the construction has started, the second stage is communicative actions during the construction, and the last stage is communicative actions after the construction.

YIT's role is the most relevant during the first two stages. When looking at the situation from YIT's point of view, the grey area, or the unclear area, is visible especially in between the last two phases. The following line-up illustrates the three stages of communication during the project:

1 stage: Communicative actions originate from YIT's side. The content is relying heavily on the important documents of the apartment building and promoting activities of the neighborhood and the community's features.

2 stage: Communicative actions originate from YIT's side. The content is mainly from the construction site such as; photos and videos of the apartment building, fun events at the work site, important documents, introducing the construction team etc.

3 stage: Communicative actions change from YIT to the housing company or deputy landlord. It is unclear if YIT should still stay as an active participator or give full responsibility to the housing company or the deputy landlord. At this point some of the housing companies have water and electricity consumption available for the customers.

It is important to keep in mind that the customers can comment and share content in each of the stages.

R5: *"I find it very difficult to see whose responsibility it is [content creation] ... I mean it does not necessarily mean that the site foreman is willing to update it... it should be thought out who wants and likes to do it and what type of content is interesting"*

R6: *"I think it would be easier to approach and credible if the general foreman would tell about things, because he/she is there and knows about things. In these things the trustworthiness is very important."*

Based on the interviews each communication stage has issues with unclear or changing role of each key stakeholder. Customers can participate in the online customer community at any stage, but the main responsibility for content creation is unknown. In the first two stages the communication responsibility is YIT's duty. However, being a large organization, it is unclear whether the information should come directly from the construction site or from the main office units such as; home marketing or corporate communication. At the moment the challenge is the low frequency of the posts. It seems apparent that none of the units have taken an initiative to be in the leading role.

R1: *"I believe that if we [YIT] disturb too much things that are only for the housing company, then I think that is "no go", I feel like people would feel that we are pushing ourselves to their territory."*

R3: *"When the housing company has been sold completely, I do not think it is that natural for YIT to be part of it anymore, because it [YIT Plus] should be housing company's own channel for messages."*

R7: *"One important notion to take under consideration is that the deputy landlord is not interested of this at all. In their contract there is no section where it says that they should do this. Deputy landlord will not do thing, I mean not one single thing."*

The last stage of the project communication cycle is the most challenging part. Most of the interviewees said that the private online customer community should be managed by a housing company and its members or the deputy landlord in the last stage. However, all of the interviewees agree that due to the lack of motivation, deputy landlord might not be the right person to be responsible of management of the online community. Despite the decreasing role of YIT in the last stage, YIT will still be somewhat visible in the community, because in the last stage they will still be promoting new apartments and conduct other cross-selling activities.

This change in stakeholders bares a risk that the chain of customer communication and customer engagement will be severely decreased in the last two phases. Figure 9 illustrates a model by Andrews (2002), which presents three steps to build a successful online community. First two steps are easy to accomplish, since construction projects are in between one and two years, depending on the size of the apartment building. Therefore there is enough time to "encourage early online interaction" of the customers.

Figure 9. Online community design, according to Andrews (2002)

A shift to "self-sustaining interactive environment" may be challenging, when the responsibility of communication is given to the housing company and its members. There is a risk that the chain of communication will be disturbed, when no-one is clearly nominated for management of the online customer community.

> R2: *"There should be someone who coordinates all of this [content]. It is hard to say who, because it is unclear whose task this should be. It seems silly, that people unknown of each other post content there, which can be, due to human error, in contradiction with each other."*

Another suggested solution is that due to different type of content from home marketing, corporate communication and construction site, there should be one individual who would coordinate all the content to the online customer community. The goal is that content would be aligned and supported by each other, not accidentally contradicting with each other. By nominating a coordinator the unclear role of each stakeholder in this community would be diminished and the right type of communication towards the customer could be generated. A coordinator could also use the project communication schedule in section 4.4, as a guideline to make sure that all the communicative functions are done by each unit, responsible of a certain communicative function.

The unrecognized role of sales person in the beginning of sale phase.

The role of a sales person is a significant part of the customer engagement process. Especially when thinking about customer's process of buying an apartment from YIT. Customer's first face-to-face contact is with the sales person, who can directly tell about the online customer community and even register the customer to YIT Plus.

> R2: *"It is extremely important, because if it [registration] is left for customer's own recall, then I guess 80 % will not log in. It would be really good if the registration would be done at the same time as the sale occurs."*

R6: *"I think it is very important [sale phase], it should be managed extremely well in customer events. There has to be a group of people who manages it and can describe the advantages and benefits of the community."*

The sales person is the very first contact for the customer regarding YIT Plus. When the customer is interested in the apartment and makes a reservation, there should be a direct access to the online customer community, because it builds interest and further engages the customer to actually finalize the sale. This is the first stage where the sales person can promote the community, describe its benefits and value it may offer for the customer. At the moment the sales person does not have an opportunity to show YIT Plus to the customer, when meeting the customer face-to-face. It becomes more personal to encourage the customer to register in to the community face-to-face, rather than just by sending a registration email.

R7: *"If I remember correct, the registration process was easy [...] what caused confusion among residents is that during the fall they received some useless registration email, which got canceled, but it caused confusion whether they can register there or not."*

The sales person, or the sales system, simply sends a registration email to the customer's email address which encourages to register to the site. Due to overwhelming amount of emails and online content in general, the role of a sales person and the first hand contact with the customer should be utilized more efficiently. For example, the sales person could register the customer immediately to the online community. When the customer registers to YIT Plus and visits the site for the first time the content should already be interesting, so that the customer would visit the online customer community again.

R6: *"The question is that what happens when I sell my apartment? Is it me who can tell about the service, or is there some sort of video or something that explains it?"*

Another challenges comes from the third-hand aspect of the online community. If a customer decides to sell the apartment then whose responsibility it is to tell about the online community to the new owner? At this point YIT is no longer an active user in the community, instead the responsibility has been shifted to the housing company. Next subchapter describes different ways of creating service value for the customer. The results are derived from the interviews, based on the most commonly mentioned and most valued features of the community.

4.3 Communicating the added value

This section presents the most frequently mentioned features that can foster customer engagement in the private online customer community. The findings are listed below from the point of view of what the communication in YIT Plus should focus on.

Audience specific content.

> R3: *"In a way I think that it should be a main principle that the message board would not be too advertising that it would have some concrete topics related to the apartment he/she owns or the housing cooperation."*

> R4: *"It could be so, that when we put some news or sort of "good feeling" things related to the apartment building, it would not be just advertising or marketing… so that these things are ways to engage customer to the community, because there needs to be topics and new discussions to give a good reason to visit the site."*

The benefit of YIT Plus compared to other social network sites is the privacy of the online customer community. Due to privacy, the access is limited to certain people. From an organizational point of view the target audience is already very well defined, allowing the content to be specified and designed for the needs of the target audience. This is a great way to gain a competitive advantage over other sites. Posts in YIT Plus tend to be relevant and designed for the purposes of the apartment building and for the people living in there. Some of the posts are important and rich in information such as; housing company

meetings and other important events. When asked about the content, most of the interviewees enjoyed the current content, however frequency of the posts should be increased in order to enhance motivation to visit the site more often.

Water and electricity consumption follow-up.

> R4: *"What bring additional value is the possibility to measure water and electricity consumption. It is something that interests them [customers] that how much they have used water."*

> R5: *"All the consumption information is something that interests me, but there should be something "bonus" there, like a virtual meter how much I have saved money by decreasing my water and electricity consumption ."*

> R7: *"The focus [in content] should not be in advertising, instead in practical features. The most important feature is the water and electricity consumption information…if we would have Facebook then of course that would not be there"*

When discussing about YIT Plus in general and its features the most often mentioned and valued feature is the possibility to measure one's water and electricity consumption. This is a feature that is significant from many aspects. First of all, members of the housing company or the deputy landlord can double check the figures from YIT Plus and compare them to the actual invoice sent by the water and electricity companies. It also directs the behavior of the residents of the apartment building. Second, it is a feature that interests residents in general, because of the possibility to follow the usage in real-life. The customer can therefore aim to decrease water and electricity consumption and as a result save money and environment. Third, this is a way for YIT to promote corporate social responsibility (CSR) when they are encouraging the customers to be more energy efficient and find ways to save water.

According to the research Facebook is considered as the biggest competitor for YIT Plus. However as R7 states that if the housing company would have their own site on Facebook, then water and electricity consumption follow-up would not be part of the online

community anymore. These types of distinguished features are specific ways to gain competitive advantage in a private online customer community. When it comes to communication the focus should be in promoting unique features that are interesting, meaningful and useful for the customer. This is the way to create added value for the customer, especially in the after-sale phase.

Visual content from the construction site.

> R3: *"The big difference is that in our official website we do not publish construction site photographs, only [photos of] fancy and already finished buildings. However in YIT Plus these photographs can be very important for the homebuyer."*

> R5: *"People are interested in videos, photographs and small posts, especially if this is expanded to other countries like in Russia it is a big thing, because it increase reliability that the building is actually under construction and they [customers] will get the apartment."*

> R8: *"Those who move from far away would have been interested in some sort of an online webcam, where you can follow what's going on in the construction site. Photographs from your own apartment would have been interesting and current."*

After water and electricity consumption indicators, one of the most frequently mentioned feature is the chance to follow how the construction site is proceeding through photos and videos. As mentioned before, buying your own apartment is a significant investment for the customer. YIT Plus opens up the construction site and its functions to customers by uploading photos and videos from the worksite. Usually photos indicated for customers represent finished apartment buildings, therefore this is one angle to be different from others.

When thinking about the three stage project communication model the second phase is the most important and interesting phase from the customer's point of view. This is the phase where the apartment building is actually under construction and the customer can see the different stages of construction. Photographs and videos from the construction site

are viewed very valuable from the home owners' perspective. In other countries like Russia there is an issue with a reliability of the construction firms in terms of whether the apartment building is actually going to be finished or will their investment be for nothing, therefore YIT Plus can build customer trust towards the organization.

YIT Plus also opens up the procedures of construction to the customer in a different, interesting way, when the construction team is showing how things are actually done in the home owner's own apartment and the building. This type of visual communication is one way to build engagement not only to the YIT Plus but also towards YIT as an organization. The touch is more personal when the photographs come directly from the construction site, from apartment building's own construction team. In other words, it is not a big corporation communicating to the customer, instead it is their own construction team, which the customer gets to know throughout the construction.

Humanizing the corporate aspect is very important, because the online community is small and private. At this phase the customer can be involved in the decision making process, because for example they can select what type of corridor lighting the residents would like to have in their own apartment building. Involving customers through the online community can be both symbolic and actual.

Technical documentation.

One of the features of YIT Plus is the technical documentation of important documents related to the apartment building and the apartment in general. The customer can find for example the following from YIT Plus; a floor plan, fire exit strategy and technical details of washing machine and other installed equipment.

> R2: *"If I think about myself, then the fact that the documents are being saved somewhere else than in my drawer is a good thing, because it is never in order and the papers are in wrong lockers anyways."*

> R8: *"YIT has given those documents in paper as well, but it is extremely important, that those documents are there. It has all the same documents, refrigerator*

instructions, dishwasher instructions, these types of documents they have about thirty there."

Possibility to access and save documents online is seen as an added value for the customer, because when a customer buys an apartment there are several important documents regarding the apartment. It is a feature that is not offered by any other construction company. This type of a feature is especially important in the after-sale phase, because every now and then there might be problems for example with the installed equipment such as; dishwashers. The possible solution is readily available for the customer any time of the day.

4.4 Project communication schedule

This section gives an example of a two-year construction project communication schedule, which focuses on important construction and office functions, which are important communicative actions in terms of fostering engagement in a private online customer community. It is important to keep in mind that the length of the construction project may vary, depending on the size of the apartment building. This schedule is just one example of an illustrated construction project, however the construction functions are similar in every project regarding an apartment building.

As mentioned before apartment building construction has three significant communication stages; before construction, during construction and after construction. This schedule is focusing on the first two stages, with heavy emphasis on the second stage. The first two stages of construction are the most significant from the point of view of YIT, because in the last phase of the communication cycle the responsibility of communication changes to a third-party; either to a member of a housing company or to a deputy landlord.

2015-2017 Calendar Example

		2015						2016												2017				
Type: Construction (1), Office (2)	Explanation	June	July	Aug.	Sep.	Oct.	Nov.	Dec.	Jan.	Feb.	March	April	May	June2	July2	Aug.2	Sep.2	Oct.r2	Nov.2	Dec.2	Jan.2	FREQ.	CHECK
1	Groundwork	GROUNDWORK																				2	X
2	Beginning of sale					BEGINNING OF SALE																4	X
1	Elements				ELEMENTS																	2	X
1	Rooftop						ROOFTOP															3	X
1	Facade masonry							FACADE MASONRY														2	X
1	In building								IN BUILDING													4	
2	Shareholder meeting					SHAREHOLDER MEETING (25 % SOLD)																4	X
1	Dividing walls							DIVIDING WALLS														1	X
1	Moisture insulation										MOISTURE INSULATION											1	X
1	Leveling & Painting										LEVELING & PAINTING											2	
1	Fitment installation											FITMENT INSTALLATION										3	
1	Parquet												PARQUET									1	
1	Moulding installation												MOULDING INSTALLATION									2	
1	Equipment & machinery															EQUIPMENT & MACHINERY						2	
1	Cleaning																CLEANING					1	
2	WOW-events																WOW - EVENTS					3	
1	Release															RELEASE						3	
1	Finalization & inspections																	FINALIZATION & INSPECTIONS				2	
2	Time after release																		AFTER RELEASE ->			N/A	
2	SPECIAL DATES + OTHER CONTENT	Mid Summer		Beginning of School				Independence day, Xmas	New Year	Valentines	Women's day,	Easter	Labor day, Mother's day,	Mid Summer		Beginning of School				Independence day, New Year Xmas		24	
																						66	

Figure 10: Example of a two year project communication

Figure 10 is created to demonstrate an example of a construction project between the years 2015-2017. The challenge with the communication is the result of unclear roles of key stakeholders. The first column describes the type of communication; construction (1), office (2). According to the interviewees the source of the apartment building related information and content should come directly from the construction site, because it increases authenticity and transparency of the construction processes. Therefore during the first two phases of the communication most of the content should come directly from the worksite.

Next column describes the basic construction functions of a regular sized apartment building (30-50 apartments). While the colors indicate the type of communication (green; construction, orange; office). Most of the construction functions are overlapping each other, but since the time span between each function is more than one month the frequency of the content will be sufficient. The frequency of the posts is measured in the second last column. The goal of YIT Plus is to create content valued by the customers at least once per week. Some of the construction functions are more interesting and meaningful to the customer than others, therefore the frequency depends on the estimated value it will bring to the customer. For example it is evident in the interviews that the participants value photos and visual representation of finished apartments and prefer to see them through YIT Plus.

During the first two phases of construction, or the communication cycle, communication from the office site is limited to the functions and events occurring outside the construction site such as; shareholder meetings and WOW-events, which are workshops on how to create a "wow"-feeling to the customer. The office units are also responsible for producing general content to the community such as; public holidays or other interesting relevant content such as; blogs.

The schedule is kept as simple as possible, because of the unclear role of each key stakeholder in the community. The schedule should be as easy to understand as possible, because in practice the schedule would be on the wall of a construction site office. Despite the simple look, the schedule efficiently answers the important five W's and How; *who, what, when, where, why and how?* The last column of the schedule has a "check –

function", so that it is easy to follow what has been done and by who. The communicative actions can be done through any digital device that has a connection to the internet, by uploading content directly to the online customer community.

5. DISCUSSION

This chapter concludes the main findings from chapter 4 and discusses their implications and relationship with the analytical framework described in the section 2.3. The chapter also discusses why customer engagement in a private online customer community is important for any organization and possible challenges it may face. This study's research question and sub-research questions are:

RQ1: *How can communication foster engagement in a private online customer community and create the sense of community among the customers?*

SQ1: *What type of added value the private online customer community provides for the customer?*

SQ2: *What are the challenges of customer engagement in the private online customer community?*

As presented in the literature review there are several key aspects that successful online customer communities have in common. The aim of RQ1 is to find out how communication can foster engagement in a private online customer community and how the sense of community can be enhanced. Facebook and other social network sites are mentioned as the biggest competitors for YIT Plus, therefore it is important to investigate ways to differentiate in the eyes of the customers. Throughout the study it is essential to research what type of content and / or features are the most interesting for the customers registered to the online customer community.

The ultimate benefit of the community comes from the privacy of it. YIT Plus provides unique and relevant content for the customers. Photos and videos from the construction site cannot be found anywhere else, technical documentation is only in YIT Plus and water and electricity consumption cannot be followed anywhere else, housing company events and sauna shift reservation are also a part of YIT Plus. Therefore the focus should be on how these features can be communicated to the customer in the best possible way. Highlighting the uniqueness of the members within an online customer community may increase member contribution and satisfaction with the community (Ludford et al., 2004).

The aim should not be in competing with Facebook, instead how this private online customer community is different and how it can provide added value for the customer. Service value is especially important in the first two stages of construction, because that is when YIT's role is the most active and that is when YIT can enhance customer engagement through their own communicative actions.

Privacy of the online customer community can be seen both as an advantage as well as a disadvantage in terms of customer engagement. First, the target audience is clearly defined, since the access is limited to certain members. Because of this, it is easier from an organizational point of view to craft messages designed for the needs and purposes of the customers. From a customer's point of view the content is also specified for a certain purpose unlike in Facebook, where content is delivered from different sources. Privacy also gives the customers a chance to discuss topics out of public eye, for some of the customers this can be a very important feature and encouragement, or even a condition, for a registration.

Disadvantages of the private online customer community are the lack of large user pool and a risk of continuous inactivity. According to the findings interactivity and frequency of the posts are rather low. Some of the interviewees are interested in the interactivity part of YIT Plus, but feel uncomfortable of starting a discussion when "the wall" of the online customer community is empty. In a certain way this challenge can be seen as a cycle; low number of users result in low number of interactivity and vice versa.

Naturally, the responsibility of the interactivity cannot be shifted solely to the customers. Also the frequency of the communication from YIT's side is discussed in the interviews. At this point YIT provides content approximately once a month, which is not enough to keep the community interesting and relevant for the customers. According to the interviewees there should be new, interesting and relevant content at least once per week. The frequency of the posts should be high enough for encouraging customers to actively log into the community. More specifically, the customers log into this online community, because they have purchased their own apartment from YIT. The reason to visit the site comes from the need to satisfy information regarding the apartment, the apartment building and the neighborhood (Hampton and Wellman, 2002).

Like any other innovative development project also YIT Plus has its challenges. The aim of SQ2 is to find out what are the challenges of YIT Plus or factors that may prevent customer engagement. A customer bonding model created by Szmigin et al. (2005) works as an excellent tool for mapping out the challenges of the private online customer community. Just like any other online community technical infrastructure has to be as easy to use as possible with fast speed. Due to high offering of different social media sites, YIT Plus cannot afford to have difficulties with speed, reliability and usability. Membership (see e.g. McMillan and Chavis, 1986) is not enough to create the sense of community and interactivity online, if the service value and technical infrastructure are not working appropriately.

Throughout the research it is important to address the challenge with changing stakeholders in construction stages of an apartment building. Friedman and Miles (2002) argue that organization and stakeholder relations change and that change can occur in any direction. Recognizing the role of each stakeholder in each stage of the cycle is especially important in terms of fostering engagement. In the first two stages the communicative actions are YIT's responsibility, while it is unclear whether the responsibility is at the construction site or at the office units. In the last stage the responsibility is almost fully shifted to a housing company or a deputy landlord.

The last stage is the challenging part of the communicative cycle, because in the last stage it is seen rather unnatural if YIT, as a corporation, has a dominating role in the community. It is unclear whether there will be a customer who is willing to take the responsibility of communication, therefore there is a risk that the communication cycle will be broken in the last stage. It becomes important from YIT's side to focus on the ways to motivate lead users, for example by providing training to the potential lead user in the last stage.

Due to unclear role of each key stakeholder in YIT, this study created a clear and simple communication schedule for the first two stages of construction. One of the main issues with the online community is that the current situation could not answer five W's and How; *who, what, when, where, why and how?* It is important to remember that it cannot be assumed that people working in the construction site should be content creators.

Therefore, the schedule provides an example of building functions of each apartment building. Based on the type and length of each function it can be better organized what should be communicated and when. Communicative functions of office and construction are both in the same schedule, because it increases understanding of what each side does and when. At the moment there is not a nominated person who is working solely on YIT Plus, therefore during each construction project there has to be people who are willing to take the responsibility for uploading content to the online customer community.

6. CONCLUSION

This thesis has discussed the importance of a right type of communication in a private online customer community and focused on the different ways customer engagement and the sense of community could be fostered. This study demonstrates that it is essential to listen to the customer and ask what they value in the private online customer community. Communicative actions can be designed to fit the needs of the customers by researching the service value of the community. However, this study also gives insight on importance of clarifying internal and external stakeholder roles during a three-stage lifecycle project of an apartment building.

The conclusion is built around observation of the current situation in YIT Plus and results of the interviews. This chapter is divided into four sections. 6.1 goes over the research summary of the thesis and discusses what can be learned from the present study, 6.2 focuses on practical implications of the study, 6.3 discusses limitations of the study and finally 6.4 provides suggestions for the future research.

6.1 Research summary

The objective of the present study is to gain a deeper understanding on how communication can foster engagement in a private online customer community, called YIT Plus. The research is practical, geared to solve managerial problems of YIT Plus. This study is motivated by a phenomenon behind the residential sense of community and customer engagement in a unique small online community, which involves different stakeholders, with different needs.

In order to gain a full understanding of this phenomenon eight semi-structured interviews are conducted in this qualitative single-case study. In addition, the present study use the netnography method over the time period of six months. This method helps to confirm topics discussed with the interviewees. Findings from these methods are supported by previous literature, in terms of what it takes for a private online customer community to become successful, vibrant and valuable place for its members (see e.g. Szmigin et al., 2005; O'Reilly, 2007; Tedjamulia et al., 2006).

The present study is positioned in the field of Corporate Communication. The role of communication plays a crucial role, especially when it comes to presenting the value YIT Plus provides for the customer. It is important to keep in mind that the online customer community is still quite unfamiliar to the customers. Woodruff (2001) points out that by providing quality and new technological innovation are not enough to satisfy consumer needs. Instead it is essential to ask, what the customer values.

The study demonstrates the importance of designing audience-specific content in a private online customer community. The findings show that innovative aspects such as; technical documentation and water and electricity consumption follow-up, are appreciated by the customers. At the moment the unique features of the private online customer community are a way to differentiate from often mentioned competitor Facebook and further create value for the customers in the after-sale phase. However, communication of these features should be executed more efficiently, in order to keep the customer interested in the online community.

Special attention is paid to the changing role of stakeholders (worksite, office, housing company and deputy landlord) as well as to the cyclical model of communication. The study demonstrates the importance of addressing the clear stages of communication and where the change in stakeholder roles occur. It can be learned that the change between the last two stages of communicative actions is especially crucial, because the communicative responsibility is shifted from YIT to a third-party. This study points out a major weakness, or a risk, in this change when it comes to maintaining a continuous flow of communication in the online customer community. It can be concluded that without clear roles of each stakeholder the whole project communication schedule and content creation becomes dysfunctional.

Tedjamulia et al. (2005) point out that successful online communities are beneficial for both members and the businesses. In general, YIT Plus is viewed as a valuable asset for new home owners and customer of YIT. According to the previous literature and interviews the sense of community occurs even when there is not active discussion among members of the community (McMillan & Chavis, 1986; Preece et al., 2004). This is an important notion that just because YIT Plus currently does not have active discussions or

interactivity going on, it does not mean that the members would not value the community or feel the sense of community.

All in all, this study provides findings that support previous research. However this study provides something new, when communication is viewed from a perspective of a three stage project, where key stakeholders change. This study also focuses on communicative actions in private online customer communities, instead of public online communities. In general, factors for a successful online community is discussed and previous literature provides guidelines for managing a successful online community. First, it is important clarify, but limit editing and policing. Second, understanding the participants' needs. Third, it is vital to keep the conversation going by using different type of approaches (Cothrel and Williams, 2000).

Another finding that clearly stands out in this study compared to previous studies, is that interactivity or vitality to 'keep the conversation going' is not seen as a necessity in this online community. YIT Plus provides a chance for interactivity and discussions, but the features of the community are seen more important than the interactivity or the sense of community in general. It can be concluded that at this point in YIT Plus' life cycle, the customers are satisfied with the useful and informative content that YIT Plus provides.

Based on all of this the project communication schedule is created in order to help to clarify the role of key stakeholders, increase the frequency of the posts, provide clear ideas for content during a construction and in general help the employees of YIT to address those responsible for communication and answer the important five W's and How; *who, what, when, where, why and how?*

6.2 Practical implications

The findings of this study provide managerial and practical implications on fostering engagement in a private online customer community and implications on communicative actions of an apartment building life-cycle project. The present study is conducted specifically for purposes of YIT, therefore the practical implications are most relevant and accurate for YIT Plus.

However, it is important to keep in mind that online services, such as online communities, provided by organizations for their customers are steadily increasing, as they are seen as a way to create value for the customers and also for organizations to stay in touch with the customers after sale. The benefit can be seen especially when there is a shift from public online communities to private ones, because the messages can be crafted for purposes of a specific audience. This study provides insight on construction site communication and different communicative actions during a three stage construction project where key stakeholders change.

At the beginning of the study YIT's aim for the objective of the study was to research ways to increase or enhance the sense of community in the application. However as the interviews proceeded, it turned out that the sense of community was not considered that important compared to actually engaging customers to the private online customer community and creating the sense of community through those engaging activities.

The findings of the study show the importance of addressing the right stakeholders. In this study the communication occurs in three clear stages. It is unclear whose responsibility it is to create content to the site. Large organizations tend to have different units and people who are not necessarily familiar with each other, due to different job positions and work locations, therefore defining clear roles regarding communication in the community is necessary. The third stage of the communication seems to be problematic, because it is not sufficient to shift the responsibility to a third-party and expect them to be comfortable of updating the online customer community. Another unrecognized or unaddressed group are the sales persons. The sales persons have the first-hand and face-to-face contact with the customers. This is an unrecognized opportunity in terms of customer engagement.

The second implication of this study are the general challenges or obstacles of customer engagement in the community. In addition to unclear stakeholder roles, these obstacles include the low frequency of the posts, challenges in technical infrastructure and the lack of interactivity. Technical infrastructure is tremendously important factor for customer engagement. Today the internet offers countless of options for well-working social media sites. In order to compete with these the technical infrastructure has to be problem free.

As a small online community, there needs to be a reason for the customer to log into the online customer community. Therefore the low frequency of the posts is affecting customer engagement, because customers want to browse something new every time they log in to the community. Due to low frequency of interesting material also interactivity is low. A key to a successful online community is an environment that fosters these elements.

For YIT this study provides specific recommendation on features, which the customers value in the community and therefore in which the communicative actions should focus on. This study also provides insight on challenges this online customer community faces at this point. Perhaps the most significant practical implication comes from the project communication schedule, which addresses the most important features of the community that create value for the customers, in what frequency different constructive functions should be communicated in the application, it clarifies the roles of each stakeholder and provides a clear project timetable. Over all, this schedule addresses most of the challenges and opportunities.

6.3 Limitations of the study

Like any other research project, also this study has its limitations. This sections attempts to identify limitations that may have an impact on the quality of the findings and ability to effectively answer the research questions. The limitations have been categorized in three parts; quantity of the data, challenge of studying a rather new area and qualitative nature of the study. Some of the limitations are already presented in section 3.4

First limitation comes from the quantity of the data and the interviews. YIT Plus is quite recently launched private online customer community that currently has a rather low activity level on both customers' and YIT's side. This study's interview data consist of six YIT employees and only two customers. Due to the inactivity and the fact that the community is recently launched, the best possible data comes from YIT's side.

Interviewees from YIT's side have a common ground, because they are working for YIT Plus and their knowledge in the certain field is useful for the purposes of the online customer community. However this common ground, turned out to be rather subjective

view point in terms of knowledge of the actual community. Furthermore, even though the participants are assured about the anonymity of the interviews, the questions are rather personal, therefore the answers of the participants reflect to their current position inside YIT.

It is worth to mention that the data derived from these interviews represent merely the side of YIT and components they feel significant for the success of the community. Two customer who are also interviewed are randomly selected, although both of them are active members of the housing companies. This may affect the results in a way that the two customers who were interviewed may be more active in the online customer community and value certain features of the community over another, than a regular customer would.

Second limitation in this study is the unique nature of YIT Plus as a private online customer community. When it comes to social aspects of the community, YIT Plus can be compared to Facebook. However it has significant differences and features that cannot be found anywhere else. The audience of the community is very limited and the online community is a closed community. Previous literature has mainly focused on customer engagement in public online communities, which tend to have a large pool of members. In this case it turned out to be difficult to find relevant research on small online customer communities that have an exclusive group of users.

Due to uniqueness of this study a notable limitation comes from the lack of previous research focusing on construction site communication in an online community. Previous literature focuses on customer engagement in general level, however this type of a project communication with cyclical elements and changing stakeholders requires a different research approach. Third limitation comes from qualitative nature of the study, which focuses only a certain group of people and their views of the certain community. The interpretations of the interviews are made by one person and due to unique nature of the community, the findings can be challenging to generalize for purposes of other research.

6.4 Suggestions for future research

Constantly changing online environment and especially online communities provide several interesting and challenging future research possibilities. Throughout the study it is clear that previous literature has paid attention on communication in public online communities. There are interesting possibilities to research further how communication can foster customer engagement in private online customer communities. Privacy of the online community can be researched from a customer's perspective, but also from an organizational point of view. Another interesting future research possibility arises from investigating reasons why some of the users in a private community want to stay anonymous, in other words as "lurkers". Furthermore, does the size of the community affect the decision to stay anonymous.

Throughout the interviews cultural aspect of Finnish people and Finnish culture in general are mentioned several times. This is an interesting notion of how culture can affect the sense of community and the level of engagement in an online customer community. Several interviewees conclude that perhaps Finnish people in general tend to be more private and do not feel comfortable in discussing with their neighbors online. Therefore future research could focus on a cultural aspect of engagement in a private online customer community. From YIT's perspective the online community is going to be launched in other operating countries, therefore it would be useful to research how the culture can affect the engagement and the sense of community.

The sense of community has endless possibilities, and it is truly an important phenomenon in residential construction, especially when building large residential areas with multiple housing companies. Another possible future research could explore how much customers actually value the community aspect of the neighborhood. For example in Helsinki there is a neighborhood called Vallilla, which is known for having a strong sense of community. Area branding can be the next possible step for gaining a competitive advantage in the construction world. In general, construction time communication is a research topic that could provide fruitful research opportunities.

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