

## **Exploring the motivations to participate in an online brand community: A study of 7–11-year-old children**

**Purpose** - Research is limited when it comes to understanding what motivates 7–11-year-old children to participate in online brand communities (OBCs). Prior research has concentrated on prescriptive product categories (games and gaming), predominantly adolescent groups and the social aspects of community engagement, and actual behaviour within communities, rather than the motivations to participate with the OBC. This has ultimately limited what has been gleaned, both theoretically and managerially, from this important segment.

**Design** - An interpretive, longitudinal position is adopted, employing a sample of 261 children (113 male and 148 female) from across the UK, utilising event-based diaries over a 12-month period, generating 2,224 entries.

**Findings** - Data indicate that children are motivated to participate in a brand community for four reasons: to support and ameliorate pre-purchase anxieties, resolve interpersonal conflicts, exact social dominance in terms of product ownership and perceptions of product knowledge and to actively engage in digitalised pester power. The study also reveals that certain motivational aspects, such as conflict resolution and exacting dominance, are gender specific.

**Research limitations/implications** - Knowledge of children's motivation to engage with OBCs is important for marketers and brand managers alike as the data reveal markedly different stimuli when compared to known adult behaviours in the field. Given the nature of the study, scope exists for significant future research

**Practical Implications** - The study reveals behaviours that will assist brand managers in further understanding the complex and untraditional relationships that children have with brands and OBCs.

**Originality/value** - This study makes a novel examination of a hitherto little-explored segment of consumers. In doing so, it uncovers theoretical and practical characteristics of child consumers that contemporary, adult-focused literature does not recognise. The paper makes an additional contribution to theory by positing four new behavioural categories relating to community engagement – Dependents, Defusers, Demanders and Dominators – and four new motivational factors which are fundamentally different from adult taxonomies – Social Hegemony, Parental Persuasion, Dilemma Solving and Conflict Resolution.

**Keywords:** Children, Consumer Motivation, Online Brand Community, Consumer Behaviour, Event Diaries.

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## Introduction

Brands have been conceptualised as living entities that have the ability to communicate consumer identities (Stokburger-Sauer *et al.*, 2012). They reflect individual values (Chahal and Rani, 2017; Round and Roper, 2017; Veloutsou and Guzmán, 2017), personal needs (Mogaji and Danbury, 2017; Dagger and Raciti, 2011) and importantly, in the last few years (Dessart, *et al.*, 2019) brands have evolved to offer consumers more and more opportunity for social exchange (Helme-Guizon and Magnoni, 2019). Brands are keen to capitalise upon this development and strategically utilise the information that stems from the individuals' affective and attitudinal commitment toward them (Dessart *et al.*, 2015; 2016; 2019; Veloutsou and Guzmán, 2017). These interpersonal relationships are central to brand development (Abrantes *et al.*, 2013) and are facilitated by the development of brand communities (BCs). BCs are now considered a fundamental part of the art of brand management (Dessart *et al.*, 2019; Hollebeek, 2011b; Veloutsou and Guzmán, 2017) as they allow consumers to seek out symbiotic relationships (Fritz *et al.*, 2017; Özbölük and Dursun, 2017) with like-minded others (Özbölük and Dursun, 2017) that reflect shared personal interests and values (Dessart *et al.*, 2015). As such, these individuals become working consumers (Black and Veloutsou, 2017) and offer brand managers valuable insights into lived experiences and tacit needs and wants (Lupineck, 2019).

Of interest in this nascent field has been the development of BCs in the virtual environment and the creation of online brand communities (OBCs). Like BCs, OBCs offer the opportunity for consumer-to-consumer communication, the facilitation of feedback and importantly, foster real-time participation (Lupineck, 2019), representing the genesis of the co-creation process (Koetz and Tankersley, 2016). Given this explicit commercial opportunity, a substantive body of literature has developed that is centred on the motivations to participate with OBCs (Voyer *et al.*, 2017). Such motivations have been revealed as multi-faceted (Lupineck, 2019) and according to Brodie *et al.*, (2011), dynamic in their orientation. Consequently, various taxonomies have been developed (Baldus *et al.*, 2015; Dessart *et al.*, 2015) that have explored, extrapolated, and evaluated motivations. Building on the extant literature (see Hollebeek, 2011a), Dessart *et al.* (2015; 2019) advocate that there are three basic motivations to participate in an OBC. These are 'affective' (predicated on levels of brand enthusiasm), 'behavioural' (predicated on informational need and informational sharing) and 'cognitive' (predicated ostensibly on brand addiction). This information has undoubtedly aided brands, but it is noteworthy that these insights have been centred on adult motivations, limiting what is known about children and their OBC interactions. The corpus of literature that discusses children and brand engagement is diverse. However, given that brand understanding, and engagement is formed at a surprisingly young age, typically between the ages of 7 and 11 (Page *et al.*, 2019; Nairn *et al.*, 2008; Roedder John and Sujun, 1990), studies have invariably focused on adolescents and tweens (see Flurry *et al.*, 2014; Hook *et al.*, 2016) and we believe this gap is a salient one.

We know that brand preferences are established in childhood (Folkvord *et al.*, 2019). These preferences are shaped by a myriad of socio-cultural (Pagla and Brennan, 2014) and contextual (Marshall and de la Ville, 2011) forces and children are subjected to a barrage (Wechsler, 1997) of brands as they develop (Lopez and Rodriguez, 2018). Brand engagement is therefore considered to be a part of everyday life for a child (de Chernatony *et al.*, 2008; Jones and Glynn, 2019; Moses and Baldwin, 2005; Roper and Shah, 2007). This enables the child's ability to recognise, interact, recall, and engage with brand and is

considered a normative occurrence (Achenreiner and Roedder John, 2003; Ji, 2002; 2008; Lopez and Rodriguez, 2018; Thomas *et al.*, 2020). Children develop clear brand knowledge (Thomas, 2020), know what they like and dislike (Daems *et al.*, 2019) and are said to have the same levels of awareness of brands as adults (Jones and Glynn, 2019; Martensen, 2007). Even from a formative age (7–11 years), children start to develop a network of association with brands (Rodhain and Aurier, 2016; Roedder John and Sujana, 1990) and this is augmented by newer technologies (Folkvord *et al.*, 2019) and a desire to belong (Cody, 2012).

This critical constituent group (Bergstrom and Blumenthal, 2001) want to distribute their voices and views online (Nairn *et al.*, 2008) as they have significant social skills (Paff Ogle *et al.*, 2014). The 7-11 age group regularly engage in online information gathering (Ofcom, 2020), have easy access to the internet/social media (Epps, 2020; Folkvord *et al.*, 2019), and actively seek social credibility through these platforms (Subramaniam *et al.*, 2015). However, despite this working knowledge of how children interact with their preferred brands, little or nothing is known about OBC interaction. What does exist is predominately adult oriented. Studies undertaken by Alonso Dos Santos *et al.* (2018), Baldus *et al.* (2015), Dessert *et al.* (2015; 2019) Hammedi *et al.* (2015), Hollebeek (2011a; 2011b, 2014), Kamboj and Rahman, (2017), and Sung *et al.* (2010) while seminal in the field, do not provide insight into why children participate in OBCs. Notwithstanding the undoubted digital proficiency of children (Sintonen *et al.*, 2018), the nominal empirical contributions that are available have explored what children, specifically adolescents, do when they have immersed themselves in an OBC, rather than what motivates the initial engagement with the OBC. Given the significant body of literature that explores motivation per se, extraordinarily little is known about children's motivations. What we do know is that adolescents "involved in brand communities may have important distinguishing attitudes and values and exhibit noteworthy differences in their marketplace behavior" (Flurry *et al.*, 2014, p. 107). Several questions remain as to whether there are conceptual, theoretical, and practical differences between the current taxonomies of what is considered the de facto position regarding what motivates individuals to participate in OBCs. We seek to explore this with children in the critical 7–11-year age group, an age where critical brand relationships are being forged.

The central contribution of this paper is to offer a critical extension to OBCs research and theory, as well as extending our knowledge of child-brand relationships. The paper moves beyond the extant literature when it comes to drivers to participate in OBCs. It reveals that 7–11-year-old children's motivations for participating are not linked with volitional support for a given brand or traditional posteriori consumption behaviour. What is apparent is that this age group manifest fundamentally different behaviours from older children, adolescents, tweens, and adults. The work demonstrates how participation is formed by needs for parental persuasion, dilemma solving, social hegemony, and interpersonal conflict resolution, with the latter two dimensions being gender specific. Previous research has not recognised that there might be a gendered dimension to OBC participation and this study highlights this for the first time. Finally, we present an organising framework for these behaviours through a novel typology, comprising of four groups of child participants in OBCs, that serves to further illuminate theoretical understanding of community behaviours and their antecedents.

## **Review of the literature**

### ***Community***

BCs can be online, offline, or potentially both (Ouwensloot and Odekerken-Schroder, 2008; Samuel *et al.*, 2018; Schembri and Latimer, 2016), but regardless of location they are

considered powerful tools for consumer engagement (Essamri *et al.*, 2019). It is posited that it is within BCs where loyalty is manifest (Pappu and Quester, 2016) and where consumers engage as a collective and share unreservedly (Özbölük and Dursun, 2017). However, the notion of community was first noted by Boorstin (1974). Boorstin (1974) suggested that modern society with its high mobility creates innate needs for identification, affiliation and affirmation and consequently gives us the notion of a consumption community (Friedman *et al.*, 1992). This idea was capitalised upon by Muñiz and O’Guinn (2001) and proceeding literature, with Guimaraes *et al.* (2016) indicating that it was this initial conceptualisation of human behaviour and communal need that provided the genesis of brand community. Muñiz and O’Guinn (2001) suggested that BCs have an “active interpretive function, with brand meaning being socially negotiated rather than delivered unaltered and in toto from context to context, consumer to consumer” (p. 414). They envisioned a brand community as a customer-customer-brand triad formed by two types of relationships; those established between the brand and the customers and those that emerge between community members. Muñiz and O’Guinn’s (2001) seminal work on BC advocated three common markers for any community to form and function:

- Consciousness of kind; members within a community have an innate sense of belonging and a mandate to own, create and forge the direction of the community and associated brand.
- Shared rituals and traditions; members share and express common, normative but unique behaviours within the community.
- A sense of moral responsibility to others in the community; members act out of a sense obligation and adhere to community law.

### ***Online brand communities***

The literature considers that BCs emanated initially in the physical domain (Özbölük and Dursun, 2017), adding an online presence as technology developed (*ibid*). But it is with OBCs that this work concerns itself, as these are becoming ubiquitous (Jang *et al.*, 2008) and more relevant to marketing practice (Dessart *et al.*, 2015, 2019). Muñiz and O’Guinn (2001, p. 412) were the first to define an OBC as “a specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relationships among admirers of a brand”. This was furthered by Dholakia *et al.* (2004, p. 241–242) who categorised OBCs as environments where individuals could meet and interact “for the sake of achieving personal as well as shared goals”. Such communities are driven by volitional participation (Bowden and Mirzaei, 2021; Jang *et al.*, 2008), are self-selecting, enduring (Veloutsou and Moutinho, 2009) and either consumer or company initiated (Bowden and Mirzaei, 2021).

OBCs share many of the same characteristics found in physical communities (Özbölük and Dursun, 2017). Sicilia and Palazón (2008) suggested that the unique features of an OBC are centred on the lack of physical boundaries and the immediacy of computer-mediated, internet-based discourse (Casaló *et al.*, 2007; Wiese and Akareem, 2019). OBCs are categorised by their capacity to facilitate interaction and provide quality relationships (Brogi, 2014). They allow high levels of personal and interpersonal identification and support timely, relevant, frequent, and longitudinal communication (Adjei *et al.*, 2010), and as outlined are frequented by “self-motivated individuals who want to declare who they are through their participation in brand-related activities” (Black and Veloutsou, 2017, p. 418). Given this, the literature indicates that online communities represent an opportunity for a higher level of brand engagement (Hammedi *et al.*, 2015; Schembri and Latimer, 2016; Zheng *et al.*, 2015), enhanced relational development (Muñiz and O’Guinn, 2001) and perpetual consumer interaction (Coelho *et al.*, 2019).

### ***OBC evolution***

A review of the literature indicates that the understanding of what comprises an OBC has evolved from a virtual chatroom, forum, or designated website (Flavián and Guinalú, 2005; Kamboj and Rahman, 2017; Rheingold, 1993; Sicilia and Palazón, 2008) to incorporate a myriad of social media platforms. This reimagining has taken place due to social media augmenting the notion of community and enhancing the social collaborative dimension (Zhang *et al.*, 2018). These sites (such as Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, Pinterest) share the same characteristics as a traditional OBC (Zaglia, 2013), but are set up by existing community members to further explore brand-related interests and experiences (Paschen *et al.*, 2017) and are now considered the norm (Bowden and Mirzaei, 2021; Hollebeek and Macky, 2019; Kaur *et al.*, 2018; Naumann *et al.*, 2020). Facebook in particular is increasingly being used by brand managers (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010) to both initiate consumer engagement (Zhou *et al.*, 2019) and increase active and meaningful participation to benefit the brand (Hutter *et al.*, 2013; Kaur *et al.*, 2018; Lee *et al.*, 2011; Zhang *et al.*, 2018). To that end, Kamboj (2019) suggest that most companies have migrated their OBCs onto social media platforms to exploit customer potential. However, in terms of customer potential, a nascent body of literature has emerged positing the notion of brand publics (Arvidsson and Caliandro, 2016). Social media has allowed the development of private perspectives on brands that develop outside the boundaries of the focal communities (Arvidsson and Caliandro, 2016), adding another dimension to the online paradigm. The motivations for engaging with these platforms reflect prior works with an emphasis on shared meanings and affiliation and articulation of personal feelings and meanings but differ as they are neither permanent nor centred on developing a collective identity (Arvidsson and Caliandro, 2016).

### ***Motivation to participate in a community***

Motivation, through a myriad of definitions, ostensibly encapsulates the desire of the individual or readiness (Ji, 2008) to do something. Sung *et al.* (2010), identified six motivations to participate in an OBC using a sample group with a median age of 31:

- Interpersonal utility
- Incentive seeking
- Entertainment seeking
- Information acquisition
- Convenience seeking
- Brand likeability

In relation to the above, the literature indicates that the motivations for engaging with a brand community are ostensibly two-fold; personal and emotional (Alonso Dos Santos *et al.*, 2018; Hammedi *et al.*, 2015; Kamboj and Rahman, 2017). Despite brand engagement being conceptualised as idiosyncratic (Essamri *et al.*, 2019), these basic ideas have been evaluated and the de facto position in the literature currently highlights three broad motivational/engagement behaviours – affective, behavioural, and cognitive (Dessart *et al.*, 2019) – with all said to provide significant benefits for brands and value creation (Dessart *et al.*, 2015).

### ***Affective dimension***

Affective motivation and engagement is said to be intrinsic (Algesheimer *et al.*, 2005), stemming from an individual's identification with a given brand, its symbolic value (Baldus *et*

*al.*, 2015; Matzler *et al.*, 2011) and the individual's enthusiasm for the brand (Dessart *et al.*, 2015). Personal pleasure is gleaned from this engagement and happiness derived from the interaction with like-minded others (Lupineck, 2019). Consequently, this dimension captures the joy that people feel when interacting with a given brand (Dessart *et al.*, 2019). Such hedonistic (Baldus *et al.*, 2015) motivations enhance interpersonal bonds (Veloutsou and Moutinho, 2009) and allow a shared consciousness to develop that relates directly to the brand (Baldus *et al.*, 2015; Cova and Pace, 2006; Dessart *et al.*, 2015; Muñiz and O'Guinn, 2001; O'Sullivan *et al.*, 2011; Vivek *et al.*, 2014). More succinctly, this affective dimension is driven by the motivation to find friends (Sicilia and Palazón, 2008), with Slater and Armstrong (2010) suggesting that this desire constitutes a basic human need. This has been a key theme within the literature, with Tsai *et al.* (2012) highlighting the desire for affiliation as a key personal driver and Escobar *et al.* (2014) echoing this in their stance that distinct membership of a desired group is a powerful motivational mechanism. These affective antecedents of motivation and engagement (Baldus *et al.*, 2015) are said to be strengthened further by the prospect of constant opportunities for participation (Chae and Ko, 2016), with OBCs allegedly providing "parties, gatherings and shared consumption activities" (Halliday and Astafyeva, 2014, p. 126) for those involved. Consequently, OBCs are said to offer a significant opportunity for general socialisation and this has also been determined as a key driver of this emotional paradigm.

### ***Behavioural dimension***

The behavioural dimension is categorised by the need for active sharing (Dessart *et al.*, 2019) and learning (Brodie *et al.*, 2011; Dessart *et al.*, 2015, 2019; Vivek *et al.*, 2012) and the articulation of both positive and negative brand experiences (Baldus *et al.*, 2015). Learning is a key paradigm, with this need for information posited as perhaps the major reason for engaging with a community (Brodie *et al.*, 2011). Building on this, Wang and Fesenmaier (2003) demonstrated that individuals were motivated by the immediacy of giving and receiving advice, controlling products and services, being perceived as helpful and satisfying the needs of other members. Furthering this concept, Jahn and Kunz (2012), in their work on fan pages, indicated that functional content and the ability to access it was an important driver of participating in a community. Baldus *et al.* (2015) extrapolated this further with the suggestion that the need for assistance and the provision of assistance is a paramount element when it comes to personal motivation. Additionally, and providing a unique concept in terms of the motivational and engagement literature relating to OBCs, Baldus *et al.* (2015) advocated that motivations to participate in a community might simply arise from avarice and the need to seek out utilitarian rewards such as discounts and prizes.

### ***Cognitive dimension***

This dimension is categorised by an individual who has a strong, cerebral connection with a brand (Kuvykaite and Tarute, 2015; So *et al.*, 2014). The brand is central in their lives (Shin and Back, 2020), they are fully concentrated on it (Hollebeek *et al.*, 2014), and stimulated to learn more about it (Baldus *et al.*, 2015; Dessart *et al.*, 2015; Hollebeek *et al.*, 2014; Kumar and Kumar, 2020). The interest in the brand is volitional, intrinsic, intense, and psychologically bound (Shin and Back, 2020) with Dessart *et al.* (2015) referring to it as an "engrossment". It is self-brand related (Bowden and Mirzaei, 2021), and those demonstrating this dimension will be fully concentrated on the brand (Shin and Black, 2020) exhibiting obsessive and adoring behaviours to the point of losing time (Dessart *et al.* 2015). For those cognitively engaged, the desire to participate in a BC will be predicated on brand information encapsulated by explorations of the brand and brand communications (Bowden and Mirzaei, 2021), product dimensions, product portfolio, service paradigm and potentially the broader industry (Brodie *et*

*al.*, 2013). A community then becomes a source of both tacit and explicit information, and a forum for knowledge-based self-expression and absorption (Dessart *et al.*, 2015). Such interaction, or engagement of the mind (Dessart *et al.*, 2015), can bring personal happiness (Shin and Black, 2020) and result in a complete immersion into the community but only if the information being sought is overtly interesting and or entertaining (Dessart *et al.*, 2015). Given this, Dessart *et al.* (2019) suggest that the cognitive dimension is perhaps the least of the three dimensions.

### ***Children and brands***

Brand knowledge and the motivation to engage with brands are said to be initially shaped and guided through parental involvement (Estrela *et al.*, 2014). This can take the form of routine shopping trips (Beatty and Talpade, 1994; Hite and Hite, 1994) or co-shopping trips (Harper *et al.*, 2003), when parents focus “on the development of the child as a critical consumer” (Watkins *et al.*, 2017, p. 911). This results in children between the ages of 6 and 18 months (McNeal and Yeh, 1998) being able to develop perceptual cues through colour and shape that give them the efficacy to identify corporate labels of potentially 200 brands (Mininni, 2005) and to independently choose brands at the age of 3 (McAlister and Cornwell, 2010; McNeal, 1992). Engagement is informed by peer groups (Bachmann *et al.*, 1993; Rodhain and Aurier, 2016; Ward, 1974) as children progress through elementary school (*ibid.*) and develop the ability to judge brands and their personal and social suitability (Rodhain and Aurier, 2016). Interacting with peers creates pressure (Dotson and Hyatt, 1994), but engagement with peer-approved brands can facilitate experiential learning (Bahn, 1986), help gain social approval (Kelman, 1958), develop strong social bonds (Ji, 2002) and provide a sense of belonging (Kerrigan *et al.*, 2007) before the onset of adolescence. It also presents a myriad of opportunities (Ji, 2008) to engage with a world that is saturated with brands (McNeal, 1992; Schor, 2004).

Siblings are also said to influence children’s brand choices (Commuri and Gentry, 2000; Kerrane *et al.*, 2015; Kerrane and Hogg, 2013). According to Kerrane *et al.* (2015), siblings have a propensity to engage in cooperative consumption relationships and willingly share information and products with one another. They can reinforce not only brand preference but also media usage, with Granich *et al.* (2010) suggesting such relationships can impact on the use of and engagement with electronic media.

As stated above, initial perceptions developed by children are said to be predicated on simplistic perceptual cues such as tangible form, colour, and taste (Achenreiner and Roedder John, 2003). These experiences are said to be the precursors of greater cognitive development and allow children the opportunity to develop a conceptual lens (Achenreiner and Roedder John, 2003). This in turn allows them to organise and assign meaning to the brands they encounter (McAlister and Peterson, 2013). A review of the literature indicates that it is at the ‘concrete operational stage’ (Roedder John and Sujana, 1990) or ‘analytical stage’ (Roedder John, 1999) that children aged 7–11 start to assign subjective meanings to brands (Roedder John, 1999) and will consequently develop an orientation toward it. Moreover, at this age children begin to understand a brand’s (potential) significance (Harper *et al.*, 2003) and its place in their lives. Importantly, it is at this stage, through direct experience (Bahn, 1986), that children begin to manifest an authenticity and stability in their engagement with brands (Achenreiner and Roedder John, 2003; Phelps and Hoy, 1996) and develop their love of brands (Kerrigan *et al.*, 2007). Given this, Belk *et al.*, (1982) suggest that a child’s ability to make choices is fully developed by 11 years of age.

Brand relationships can also be influenced by media (Jones and Glynn, 2019). Kunkel *et al.* (2004) and Preston (2005) have intimated that children as young as 8 years old are able to

encode the purpose and intent of traditional media advertising. O'Donohoe and Tynan (1998) empirically demonstrated that children can encode and decode brand positioning strategies, while Bartholomew and O'Donohoe (2003) suggested that this was accomplished with a critical lens. Children's use of digital technology is seen as instrumental in them forming meaningful relationships with brands (Fu *et al.*, 2017) and maintaining a place within their peer groups (Ahn, 2013). Importantly, it is through digital engagement that children develop "their perceptual map of the brands" (Estrela *et al.*, 2014, p. 226).

### ***Children and communities***

The elements outlined above have invariably been empirically substantiated exclusively with adult participants, with the most recent work conducted by Dessart *et al.*, (2019) incorporating a participant group with a mean age of 35+. Given that this is an identifiable trend within the literature, there is something of a paucity when it comes to children, BCs and OBCs. This is somewhat anomalous as it is clear that "children worldwide have become an important and unique market segment for practically every product category" (Lopez and Rodriguez, 2018, p. 131) and "differ from adults in many marketing phenomena" (*ibid.*). Ji (2008) indicated that when it comes to brand and branding, children are willing relational partners, given their susceptibility to sophisticated marketing strategies (Jones *et al.*, 2010) and brands. Regarding brands themselves, children under investigation in this study (7–11) are said to have an ability to compare products, think logically (Lwin *et al.*, 2012) and rationalise why they want them. Lindstrom (2004) indicated that this age is critical as it is at this juncture that brand preferences are established. At this age, children are progressing toward consumption independence predicated on their subjective socialisation (Lopez and Rodriguez, 2018; Morley, 1968). They are independently active in their consumption pursuits (Barcelos and Rossi, 2014) and develop a unique identity as they progress (Chaplin and Roedder John, 2005, 2007; Confos and Davis, 2016). This manifests palpably via online engagement, as "using touchscreens and mobile devices is possible for even very young consumers" (Confos and Davis, 2016, p. 2005).

However, and despite the above, investigations into children's engagement with BCs and specifically OBCs, is limited despite the proposition that children are centrally important as current and future consumers (Jones and Glynn, 2019; Thomas *et al.*, 2020). What we do know has been explored using adolescent participant groups. Flurry *et al.* (2014) emphasised the importance and significance of OBCs to this group they allow them to explore, share, and adopt brands. Moreover, Flurry *et al.* (2014) indicated that adolescents, very much like their adult counterparts, engage with a community "in order to enhance his or her self-image" (p. 105), and such interactions made them happy. However, despite the resonance of the work of Flurry *et al.* (2014) their work failed to fully explore children's motivations to participate in an OBC. The mantle was taken on by Hook *et al.* (2016) in an OBC context. They evaluated children's (aged between 6 and 14) motivations and community commitment toward the Minecraft website, but limited the investigation to purely social phenomena. They established member similarity and the salience of individual characteristics as a motivator but indicated that common brand preference is not a particularly strong motivational factor, thus offering an immediate degree of separation from the adult-based literature. However, their work did reveal that children in this age group have an active online presence and their participation in OBCs can be a source of personal happiness. Consequently, adopting the broad concept of OBCs as comprising traditional brand-owned sites, social media platforms and brand publics, the current work seeks to further explore the question; "Why are 7–11-year-olds motivated to participate in OBCs?"

## **Methodology**

This study seeks to provide insight into the “the meaning and experience dimensions of humans’ lives and social worlds” (Fossey *et al.*, 2002, p. 717). Given this, the work adopts a social constructionist approach to explore the dialectical process (Fernando, 2012) of social exchange and practice. Consequently, a qualitative framework was deemed the most apposite way to conduct the study. This approach with children has “taken hold as an integral part of marketing practice (Cook, 2009, p. 276) because of its capacity to conceptualise them “as a knowing, active being in the here and now” (*ibid.*).

### *Participant group*

For the age group under investigation, data from the UK based ‘Office of communications’ (Ofcom), indicates that 37% of UK 7-year-olds have their own tablet, with this rising to 49% for 11-year-olds (Ofcom, 2020). This is augmented by mobile phone use, with Statista (2020) reporting that 86% of children in this age range either have access to, or directly own a smartphone. Mobile technology represents a means of digital independence for children, and despite most social media sites having minimum age requirements (Ofcom, 2020), data indicate that 92% of UK 7–11-year-olds are actively online (Ofcom, 2020) and browse a myriad of social media platforms daily. Social media use for this group of children is a diverse proposition, but it is Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp that reflect the loyal choices for social interactions and YouTube and Google for information searching (Ofcom, 2020). Ofcom (2020) also suggests that more than a third of UK 7–11-year-olds are regularly engaged with vloggers and influencers and are exposed to brands regularly. Data from Ofcom indicates that this age group are visible online with well-constructed profiles (21% of 8–11-year-olds have active social media profiles), are brand savvy and have the critical ability to understand the nature of products, brands, and even paid advertising. More importantly, such behaviours are said to facilitate community interactions because children want to follow, participate and learn how to present themselves online (Ofcom, 2020). Consequently, for children, social media and social media networks are pivotal when it comes to product engagement and new discoveries (Mintel, 2018) with an average of 21hrs a week dedicated to online activity (Ofcom, 2020).

### *Event diaries*

Event diaries were utilised as the main data-collection tool as they allow for data to be collected naturally and spontaneously (Bolger *et al.*, 2003). Within the general marketing literature, diaries have been used to provide insight into participants’ feelings, activities and – importantly in this study – social activities (Papaoikonomou *et al.*, 2018; Penz and Kirchler, 2016) and the ever-changing present (Elliott, 1997, p. 3). The method provides more accurate insights into experience than traditional research methods (Hu and Bruning, 1988; Radcliffe, 2013) because it does not rely on the individual recalling experiences, situations or motivations (van Erde *et al.*, 2005). Diaries provide immediacy (Poppleton *et al.*, 2008; Symon, 2004), they capture spontaneous actions (Reis, 1994; Wechtler, 2018), highlight differences among individuals (Mackrill, 2008), reveal underlying issues that prompt behaviours daily (Poppleton *et al.*, 2008) and reflect true behaviours (Alaszewski, 2006; DeLongis *et al.*, 1992)

An electronic approach (Bolger *et al.*, 2003) was implemented because such approaches offer the researcher advantages when it comes to data management and data accuracy. Diaries are innovative but underused (Götze *et al.*, 2009; Siemieniako and Kubacki, 2013), despite the literature indicating that they can capture rich insights into everyday lives and relationships between consumers and products (DeLongis *et al.*, 1992; Patterson and Hogg, 2004; Radcliffe,

2013). Salient to this choice was the work of Elliott *et al.* (2005), who suggested that the ability to record and share events is something of a predilection for younger consumers. However, there is a limited body of literature that examines the use of diaries with children, but Barker and Weller (2003) indicated that this nascent method mitigates for the inherent boredom children suffer with traditional qualitative and quantitative methods and should therefore be considered. To this end, a small but promising body of literature has used this method successfully (see Thomas *et al.*, 2020) with children, and the current work utilises these methods and in particular the work of Götze *et al.* (2009).

### ***Diary use***

The “effectiveness of diary study designs depends on careful consideration of the question(s) one seeks to answer” (Bolger *et al.*, 2003, p. 581). Participants were simply asked to record in their diary each time they considered physically engaging with an OBC (recording the brand name, product category and the community itself). They were asked to consider their motivation, level of contribution (this is detailed below) and what they hoped to achieve from their contribution. There were no preconceived questions, reflecting work by Siemieniako and Kubacki (2013) and Thomas *et al.* (2020) who advocated a non-directive approach to capture reality in the extracts. All diaries were recorded electronically in English. This approach generated 52 entries, an average of 8 per participant. Given this level of engagement, event diaries were deemed suitable for this theory-building undertaking as they offer a significant means of exploring diverse social, psychological and physiological processes that occur every day (Bolger *et al.*, 2003), while at the same time mitigating concerns over potential peer pressure and domination by forceful children (Nairn *et al.*, 2008).

### ***Pilot study***

A pilot test consisting of a four-week diary experiment was undertaken prior to the main data collection. The children participating in the pilot study were recruited from a UK primary school. Utilising schools and educational facilities in child research are a significant design option, and this work replicates recent research by Durl *et al.* (2017). All the participants were aged 7–11 in keeping with the orientation of the work. The contact approach replicated work previously embarked upon by Deriemaeker *et al.* (2007) and an open letter was sent to the school outlining what would be undertaken and why. Consent was obtained from parents and the school, along with assent from the children involved.

### ***Data collection***

The main data collection process began with requests for involvement via schools. 461 schools were contacted, with these establishments representing the best opportunity to target potential participants between the ages of 7 and 11 and in that all-important analytical period of brand engagement. Schools were selected predicated on size and catchment, using statistics from the UK Government Department for Education, the Welsh, Scottish and Northern Irish Governments, Office for National Statistics (ONS) and Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Schools (Ofsted). This was due to the fact that there is no specific census information that clearly indicates where the greatest population of this age group reside. Like the method of Deriemaeker *et al.* (2007), this was an open letter with a rationale and contact details.

### *Number of families*

Feedback from schools indicated that 1,839 families were contacted directly. However, data was not captured on the types of family (nuclear, single parent, matrifocal, extended, blended) or their socioeconomic grouping. The process resulted in 346 parental acknowledgements that their child could be involved, with a total of 261 participating in the diary aspect of the research. Of the 261 participants 113 identified as male and 148 as female. The median age for males was 9 and for females 11. Parents, guardians or responsible adults were fully informed of the nature of the research prior to its commencement and, building on the work of Thomas and O’Kane (1998) and Alderson and Morrow (2011), an information pack was provided that detailed the research purpose, objectives and potential contribution. This electronic document also specified throughout that a potential participant could withdraw or be withdrawn at any point during the research process.

### *Participants*

While qualitative research with a small number can be informative and meaningful (Boddy, 2016), the issue of what constitutes an appropriate number of participants is predicated on context and research aims (*ibid.*). The extent of this study is justified by the limited contact and the desire to avoid the general limitations of qualitative work (Marshall *et al.*, 2013). Large diary based undertakings have been limited. However, Kirchler *et al.* (2001) used 80 participants, comprising 40 couples, and in the current study, given the desire to move toward scale development, the large number reflected recent contributions in the OBC field and mirrored the work of Dessart and Duclou (2019) ( $n=221$ ) and Zhang *et al.* (2018) ( $n=253$ ). Exactly as in the pilot, participants were simply asked to record in their diary each time they considered engaging with a community. However, capitalising on parental feedback, the instructions were simplified in terms of wording and duration and presented as a personal dialogue rather than as authoritarian, with the instructions captured below;

Hi,

Thank you so much for doing this!! I’m really pleased that you can help us. We couldn’t do this without you, and your parents have said you’ll be excellent at this. I just want to say thank you again for playing such an important role in this and what you’re doing is really helpful.

So, all you need to do is write down why you thought about going online to your favourite product sites. It’s very simple, and it’s all about what you were thinking and feeling at the time and why it was important to participate. This will be easy to answer as you’re in charge of everything. You can write whatever you want but remember the most important thing is to let us know why you were interested in participating in the community. Do you feel you can do that? Yes? Fantastic! Can we just ask you to think about some of the instructions below, please? Yes? Great!

1. Write something every time you log on to a community site (Mum and Dad have been through this with you).
2. Write whatever you want and how you want. This is not for school and there are no marks for spelling and grammar. We don’t care about that, so that’s good news!

If you're stuck all you need to do is just...

1. Remember to write the brand name each time.
2. Remember to write why you visited the site each time.
3. Remember to write how it made you feel.

This is important!

1. Don't write your name.
2. Don't write who you are.
3. Don't write where you live.

### ***Product sites***

The pilot study revealed that children referred to OBCs as “product sites” because that is where people went to discuss the products made by their favourite brands. It was apparent that for this age group, products and brands were semantically synonymous, with this reflecting work by Arnas *et al.* (2017) and John and Sujun (1990) who indicated that, for children, products can and do reflect brands. OBCs were the environments within which children drew upon a myriad of cognitive clues from associated products to develop their comprehension of brands (John and Sujun, 1990). Consequently, in the initial instructions the term “product sites” was used to reflect this.

Clear guidelines were given about disclosure, stating that results would be fully anonymised and nothing private or personal would be included. Instructions were administered electronically and disseminated to the children via their parents or guardians. This process generated 78 points of contact with parents seeking clarity, guidance, and reiteration. Building upon the lessons from the pilot, parents were explicitly asked not to adjust the entries in any way and to leave all grammatical and social nuances and idioms intact. They were also asked not to discuss the content to avoid bias in other possible entries. All correspondence was sent to and from an email address specifically set up for this research purpose and the diaries were sent without any participant detail other than age, gender and the brand and community details (names in the data are pseudonyms). The diarised events were requested at the end of each month, adopting Bolger *et al.*'s (2003) fixed schedule approach, but with short intervals. There was no direct communication with participants and all entries were sent via parental email accounts with this established at their request. Only six children failed to provide an entry during the year-long process and there were no dropouts recorded.

### ***Motivation***

An issue with using a diary method is that of ensuring consistency and quality in the submissions (Johnson and Bytheway, 2001). It should also be noted that the literature in relation to maintaining participant interest and motivation in diary-based studies is somewhat limited. Prior to commencement of the data collection, the work of Radcliffe (2013) was considered, this work advocating and utilising follow-up calls and emails directly with participants to motivate them, but this was inappropriate given the nature of our study. Penz and Kirchler (2016), in their study of household decision-making, among various techniques (calls, direct meetings, financial incentives), had used letters of encouragement to participants, and the current study capitalised on this. Using the same process as the instruction email, letters of encouragement and thanks for their contributions so far were drafted and sent to parental email

addresses to be passed on to participants every four weeks, with this fitting in with the analytical process. These letters re-emphasised the need to explore the motivations to participating in an OBC and ensured that the orientation and integrity of the works objectives were maintained.

### ***Entry decline***

Issues with participant commitment to longitudinal studies, particularly diary studies, is a documented phenomenon (Radcliffe, 2013). Factors that can impact on a decline in entries can include time, personal motivation, commitment, personal efficacy, willingness, ability to identify a given action and personal reflections on the benefits and burdens of creating the entries (Alaszewski, 2006; Bolger *et al.*, 2013; Mackrill, 2008). This study saw a decline in diary entries, but it was concluded that rather than this being a negative element, it was down to the fact that children had conveyed their primary motivations and did not feel the need to replicate information ad nauseum.

### ***Analysis***

Replicating Götze *et al.*'s (2009) approach, content analysis was chosen for its ability to reveal "detail and depth, rather than measurement" (Forman and Damschroder, 2007, p. 41). The diary accounts presented complete data and a template was used where entries were analysed in a monthly cycle rather than upon receipt. These monthly sets of diaries were systematically evaluated with an emphasis on identifying entries that were relevant to the broad research question. The analysis itself was conventional, with no preconceived categories applied prior to analysis, given the limited literature available on children and brand community. While the initial reading of the diary entries was undertaken with knowledge of the precursive literatures about OBCs (see Baldus *et al.*, 2015; Dessart, 2015; 2016; 2019; Hollebeek, 2011a, Muñiz and O'Guinn, 2001; Sicilia and Palazón, 2008; Sung *et al.*, 2010), the analytical codes emerged directly from the data set. Over the 12-month period, 2,224 meaningful entries were generated, with each child providing on average 8 meaningful entries (many children offered far more entries, but they were often expurgated for lacking relevance), demonstrating remarkable consistency. Diaries were read individually in the first instance, with the intention of disaggregating the relatively large quantity of text into smaller coded categories.

One of the major criticisms that is levelled at interpretive research is the difficulty of demonstrating the robustness of the analytical procedure (Miles, 1979; Spiggle, 1994). One complementary approach incorporates multiple persons for the analysis of the data and the subsequent calculation of the degree to which their observations concur. Inter-rater reliability values (termed the Kappa value) can then be calculated, and this work employed this scrutiny. Several means of calculating Kappa can be employed, depending upon the number of raters involved (Schwartz *et al.*, 2019). Kappa values range between 0 and 1, indicating 'no agreement' or 'complete agreement', respectively. Intermediate values of Kappa indicate varying degrees of agreement (Fleiss *et al.*, 2003; Landis and Koch, 1977). This study employed three raters and Fleiss' Kappa was calculated as  $K=0.62$ . According to Fleiss *et al.* (2003) this represents 'good' agreement, and according to Landis and Koch (1977), 'substantial' agreement. This process established 62 codes, and the major codes, categories and themes are presented in Table 1.

CODES (n=62)	FREQUENCY	CATEGORIES (n=20)	THEMES (n=4)
Community counsel (CC <sup>1</sup> ) Social scouting (SS <sup>1</sup> ) What more can I do? (WMCID?) Direct recce (DR)  Looking for buzz (HfB) Part of the chase (PC) Goal recognition (GR)  Making up our minds (MM1) Conforming collaboration (CC <sup>2</sup> ) Tell me, tell me, tell me (TM3) Tell me what I want (WWW)  Learning to like (LL <sup>1</sup> ) Liking to learn (LL <sup>2</sup> ) If you love it (IYLI)  Get in and Get out (GIGO) Out in the open (OP) The likes are out there (LAOT)	(n=106) (n=72) (n=56) (n=35)  (n=137) (n=83) (n=48)  (n=103) (n=76) (n=52) (n=45)  (n=156) (n=35) (n=12)  (n=183) (n=132) (n=38)	<b>Exploring</b>  <b>Hunting</b>  <b>Uninformed</b>  <b>Fallibilism</b>  <b>Agora</b>	<b>DEPENDENCY</b>
Parental persuasion (PP <sup>1</sup> ) Please, please me (PPM) Shaping shopping (SS)  Resolving doubts (RD) I declare (ID)  Hard pressed dad (HPD) Vital need (VN) Parents under siege (PUS)  Just get it for me (JGM) Master and commander (MC) I'm desperate to have it (DTHI) Ever wanting (EW)	(n=143) (n=83) (n=76)  (n=152) (n=52)  (n=115) (n=102) (n=47)  (n=123) (n=103) (n=53) (n=43)	<b>Communication</b>  <b>Signalling</b>  <b>Beleaguer</b>  <b>Cathexis</b>	<b>DIGITAL PESTER POWER</b>
Sibling domination (SB) Pushing and shoving (P&S) Mercenary motives (MM <sup>1</sup> )  Personal supremacy (PS) Edging out (EO) Possessed (P <sup>1</sup> ) Assertion (A <sup>1</sup> ) Pushing (P <sup>2</sup> )  Product advantage (PA) Social assertion (SA) Why be bashful? (WbB) Polite possessiveness (PP <sup>2</sup> )  Maintaining order (MO) Minimising threat (MT) Keeping control (KC)  My zone! (MZ) Look at me (LaM) My coterie (MY) Creating boundaries (CB)	(n=51) (n=24) (n=23)  (n=172) (n=25) (n=23) (n=18) (n=17)  (n=139) (n=35) (n=13) (n=16)  (n=156) (n=35) (n=12)  (n=137) (n=38) (n=33) (n=15)	<b>Aggression</b>  <b>Determination</b>  <b>Self-Assertion</b>  <b>Managing Rivalry</b>  <b>Proprietorship</b>	<b>DOMINANCE</b>

Don't do that (DDT)	(n=139)	<b>Judgement</b>	
Community jurisdiction (CJ)	(n=23)		
Trump card (TC)	(n=21)		
Community communication (CC <sup>2</sup> )	(n=31)	<b>Connecting/Reconnecting</b>	<b>RESOLUTION</b>
Let's put it behind us (LPIBU)	(n=23)		
Promoting social harmony (PSH)	(n=43)	<b>Forgiving</b>	
Peace building (PB)	(n=52)		
Placatory (P <sup>3</sup> )	(n=12)		
Reconciliation tactics (TC)	(n=43)	<b>Shaping Discourse</b>	
Irenic behaviours (IB)	(n=39)		
Community forgiveness (CF)	(n=28)		
Community calm (CC <sup>5</sup> )	(n=127)	<b>Catharsis</b>	
Willing to deal with it (WD)	(n=32)		
Join to forget (JTF)	(n=29)		

**Table 1: Thematic Analysis**

## Findings

Fundamentally different to the adult taxonomy provided by Sung *et al.* (2010), the data presented highly nuanced, idiosyncratic and gender-specific behaviours and these are identified in our categorisation of four discrete subgroups. Through identification of these groups, we address the research aim by gaining understanding of four motivational mechanisms for 7-11-year-olds to participate in OBCs. Dependents utilise OBCs to interrogate prospective purchases, Defusers use them to moderate existing external social relations, Demanders participate for the purposes of eliciting 'digital pester power', and Dominators utilise this digital space to exert power over a friend or sibling.

## Dependents

Offering some synergy with the work of Sung *et al.* (2010) and their motivational construct of Information Acquisition and Brand Likeability, analysis revealed that participants used OBCs to query, verify and qualify potential purchases, across multiple product categories, *prior* to actual consumption or engaging with their parents to buy the product for them. In that context, the motivations are recognisable from Sung *et al.*'s (2010) work. The broad motivation was conceptualised as 'Dilemma Solving', and as identified in the literature review, we posit this is a predominantly cognitive motivation. This is because the data indicate that individuals are seeking to shape their identities through establishing the social authenticity of brands (Astakhova, *et al.*, 2017; Marzocchi *et al.*, 2013). Fundamentally, this pre-emptive exploration of the OBCs is used to ensure that they are making the right, socially acceptable brand choices (Marzocchi *et al.*, 2013).

For children in this study, the motivation to participate in an OBC stemmed from the need to establish the authenticity of a product and gain an in-depth understanding of its potential fit. Some 337 (15%) entries indicated that detailed information was gathered during this process, indicated by both the number of likes on a given site and the nature of the comments that were left. The following extracts from India (aged 10), Daisy (aged 9) and Zack (aged 11) encapsulate this:

*Catherine and me (sic) were checking on Instagram today to make up our minds if we should ask for Fila Disruptors II. There was (sic) 12,348 likes in one day, so that made up our minds and we'll ask for them. [India]*

*Not sure if I like North Face, so I had a look on their site to see what type of people liked them, and that's why I joined. I didn't leave anything on there but joined to check if it was good and popular. [Daisy]*

*We don't know who decides what's in and what's out, so it's easier to check on the communities. Because people in different schools wear different things, so it's good to join a community to be safe. I joined Ellesse with Mitch and found out that they'd gone. [Zack]*

The OBCs outlined in the three extracts (Fila, North Face and Ellesse) clearly helped participants with the decision-making process relating to the immediate problem of whether the products are suitable. Despite no articulation of prior engagement with the brand their participation allowed them to 'cross the Rubicon' and buy a product. This has a strong thematic link with Dessart *et al.*'s (2015) behavioural paradigm, but the communities are used not to express advice, but purely to receive advice. However, the extract above and others like them did not express formal requests. These almost clandestine visits have more in common with what Özbölük and Dursun (2018) referred to as a 'learner' in the context of OBCs. Learners have limited knowledge of a brand and weak ties to a given community. However, unlike Özbölük and Dursun's (2018) learner conceptualisation, none of the extracts indicated that any direct questioning took place when individuals were active in the OBC. Özbölük and Dursun (2018) suggested that direct questioning, particularly of 'lead users' in OBCs, is a defining characteristic of learners. However, for these 7–11-year-olds, advice was gleaned purely through the evaluation of likes and comments rather than being driven by the need for interaction with like-minded individuals. This was considered a distinct difference and is captured below. OBCs were seen as genuine ways of exacting judgement. Of significant additional interest was that if there was not enough 'buzz' or chat about the desired product on the community website, the product was perceived as incongruent, with the potential to cause psychological and social tensions within the individual that could be linked to buying unpopular brands. Extracts are taken from Chloe (aged 10) and Elizabeth (aged 10):

*I spent part of today looking at the posts on Champion Facebook page as I want a reverse sweatshirt from Mum and Dad. There were only 127 likes this week, so I don't think I'll get them. [Chloe]*

*Just been checking what's hot on [hardcandy.com](http://hardcandy.com). I set up an account to see what other girls thought of glitter reveal [lipstick product] and not many liked it, so I'm not going to get that, but will get the crayon [lip gloss product] instead as people are loving it. [Elizabeth]*

Communities in this context assist children with a more scientific way of enquiry and to ameliorate and expedite the learning milieu that emerges in significant brand choice. Within this is genuine efficacy, but the managerial issue is that the quality of the solution is indelibly linked to the quality of the community itself. However, the analysis of this data stream indicated that there was invariably a limited expertise with the product category and there was a sense throughout the 337 entries that children were aware that they only had peripheral knowledge of products and product categories due to the limitations of their social groups.

Significantly, the extracts above, and others like them, indicated that it was a group problem-solving strategy: 136 of the entries indicated that this was done in conjunction with friends (plural) or as a social dyad with a clear understanding that this behavioural pattern was occurring with other children outside the participant group. Consequently, these behavioural dimensions were confirmed as happening outside the participant group, and what was articulated was clearly representative of a behavioural norm for this age group generally. While this could not be verified, it was articulated widely, and the extract taken from Billy (aged 10) is considered representative of this:

*Five of us looked at PUMA today and we'll talk about it, discuss if we like Classic + [sports shoe] in school tomorrow. [Billy]*

The analysis suggested that the only pertinent like-minded individuals for this age group were outside the OBC, with several extracts indicating that post-OBC engagement and product verification with friends was far more important than maintaining a presence within the OBC. Unlike Özbölük and Dursun's (2018) conceptualisation of the OBC Pragmatist, that is, an individual who wants to find a place "where people reply their questions and ensure them not to feel alone" (p. 378), questions were confined to external friendship groups who had been involved in similar searches. In the analysis, this behaviour seemed odd, insofar as the OBC was likely to provide answers even if questions were not directly asked. However, it was considered that perhaps the need to maintain strong social bonds outside the OBC was a far stronger motivation than developing social bonds within the OBC. Additionally, it was during these interactions where the only evidence of 'sharing' was found. There was no account of online provision of content or experiences to help others and this element, too, offers a degree of separation from the adult-oriented literature. However, these aspects of the Dependents' behaviour will require further validation.

### ***Defusers***

A type of motivation was articulated that saw individuals participating in online communities to reconcile social differences, avoid conflict, engage in interpersonal collaboration, and seek social compromise. What is undoubted is that this approach, again, is very much relationship oriented and fits with the social and psychological aspects outlined in the literature. Community is then seen as a vital tool in maintaining external relationships for this age group, given the need to maintain increasingly important relationships and protect the external social harmony. We posit that this is part of the affective dimension of motivation (Lupineck, 2019) that seeks to strengthen the relationships within the community (Veloutsou and Moutinho, 2009).

The distinct motivation here was Conflict Resolution and through the coding process this group became known as Defusers. This motivation offered no synergy with the taxonomy of Sung *et al.* (2010) or classifications offered by Baldus *et al.* (2015) or Dessart *et al.* (2015, 2019), and was therefore considered novel. The essence of these, and indeed the other behavioural types presented here, is that the motivation to participate in a community is to manage external relationships rather than foster new relationships with current residents.

The utilisation of communities as a vehicle to resolve complex scenarios has not previously been revealed in the literature. Weijo and Rintamäki (2014, p. 119) considered that these social environments take on a far more prominent role in what are the complicated social lives of children, suggesting that the "emergence of the internet has also enabled not only new forms of communality, but also provides a new avenue for coping". The analysis concluded that this was very much a coping behaviour, with 344 entries, all from female participants, capturing this phenomenon.

It was fascinating to read that the reciprocal nature of a community had been encoded and seen as a platform to ameliorate tension. The reading of these diary entries suggested that the nature of community would negate criticism and escalation. The extracts below are from Ava (aged 10) and Astrid (aged 9):

*Needed to talk to Mali after [an] argument, so [I] joined the Starbucks online. I can now send her something and I know she'll get back to me on that and then we can chat about it. [Ava]*

*Alex is my best friend, and me and my other friend had a row with her, and we made up by being nice on Adidas on Instagram because she likes that and football. [Astrid]*

It was evaluated that this was pure problem solving, and that the transparency of a community - in these instances Starbucks and Adidas - was an ideal platform to stop reactionary strategies that might occur in an actual physical meeting. It also indicated that children viewed these sites as a level playing field where superiority could not necessarily be exacted. Also, the traditional harmony of a given site, with multiple players, would be maintained. The community offers a trade-off relating to the amount of effort needed to resolve an actual conflict and the opportunity for a quality resolution. The following is from Grace (aged 10):

*I joined Gaia as its (sic) way better than arging (sic) with Ellie and Rachel in school. Other people get involved and listening to them is important. [Grace]*

Pursuant to the work of Hook *et al.* (2016) and their positing of a community as a social phenomenon for children, it was clear that actual brand engagement played no part in this motivational element. Instead, the resultant effect of such a choice was the acknowledgement that other community members could, and did, act as judge and jury. Community is viewed as a focusing device to improve decision-making and to generate social solutions. Additionally, children see communities as a pre-emptive opportunity to circumnavigate social tensions. Of added interest was that by using an OBC a process of forgiveness to promote social harmony was fostered. This came exclusively from female participants and indicated joining a community to openly declare that issues had been resolved. The extract from Olivia (aged 11) captures this:

*Went onto [joined] Outfitters [multinational lifestyle brand] to thank Katlin for saying sorry for what happened in school. I then told her what I'd done, and she joined. [Olivia]*

### ***Demanders***

In terms of a relationship with prior motivational constructs, it was considered that there was some concurrence with Sun *et al.*'s (2010) "incentive seeking" for this group, as they were seeking an external reward through joining an OBC. This was considered as Parental Persuasion and, in line with the literature, we posit this as a combination of affective and behavioural motivation mechanisms (Sharp *et al.*, 2019; Dessart *et al.*, 2019; Lupineck, 2019).

This group offered synergy with the notion of Taghavi and Seyedsalehi (2015) that when children reach the age of 7, they start to "adopt more advanced persuasion strategies" (p. 2023) and this is manifest in the data set; community was being used to foster personal, 'me'-oriented purchase requests. This represents a whole new digital dimension to the well-known notion of 'pester power' and has obvious implications for marketers in terms of further influencing and gleaning information from those exhibiting this behaviour. There were 458 instances of this behaviour over the course of the data collection. The following extracts capture this and are taken from Lily (aged 10) and Joe (aged 9):

*Dad is away, so I want to show him how much I care about getting a pair of Adidas Nemeziz 17+ 360Agility. I know they're expensive, so I'm showing everybody at home how much [I want them] by joining Facebook. [Lily]*

*Mum nows (sic) I want the GRGM21 [Ibanez electric guitar] so this is the best way without going on. [Joe]*

The children in this data set were clearly creating what might be considered 'crisis' communication, as potentially traditional pester power had not worked. Pester power has been

described as “repetitive asking/requesting for a specific item and/or service” (Quinn, 2002, p. 7) but the above extracts add theoretically to what has been described as ‘pester tactics’ (Gregory-Thomas, 2007; Nash and Basini, 2012). Rather than wear down or simply nag parents, there was evidence of a controlled, systematic, and logical representation of potential commitment to a product via children’s commitment to engage with it. This extract is from Jessica (aged 11):

*Dad will be able to see I’ve been online chatting about PUMA’s fierce rope trainers. He’ll know I like them and will see the price and think that £54.99 is OK and will get them for me. I’m OK to wait and I’ll leave something again. [Jessica]*

Frustratingly, the data did not reveal how successful this strategy had been, but this does represent an opportunity for future research. What is significant in the above is that this medium of interpersonal communication constitutes a quality message in context, with the child passionately believing that they have the capacity to determine the success of this process. In addition, the extract hints at this constituting a traditional approach, with the participant expressing a positive relationship with the PUMA brand and an affective commitment to the community, with the caveat that they would revisit for further validation. However, the issue within the data is that parental consideration or resistance to this was not articulated by any participant. That was not part of the research, nor articulated in the final instructions. However, it is considered that this behaviour ultimately needs a parental response to ensure success, but the number of instances recorded in terms of motivation would indicate that it is successful.

### ***Dominators***

Again, analyses in the context of prior taxonomies and empirically proven adult motivational factors, revealed that a distinct motivation to participate in a community was to establish dominance over a friend or sibling (the extracts were not specific regarding immediate relationships). During theme development this motivation was categorised as Social Hegemony, with the core group exhibiting behavioural motivations (Dessart *et al.*, 2019; Baldus *et al.*, 2015; Brodie *et al.*, 2011).

This behavioural pattern saw a gendered identity developing and a degree of gender polarisation, with this behaviour seemingly a “mutually exclusive script” (Bem, 1993, p. 81) for male participants. Of the 113 male participants, 34% (38 individuals) indicated that they participated in an OBC for the above reasons. At its core, this behaviour was almost traditional; individuals liked a brand and participating in the OBC community acted as a meta-communication to demonstrate a greater affiliation and knowledge of it than a rival. Additionally, it offers some synergy with the notion of OBC Opinion Leaders, posited by Özbölük, and Dursun (2017), and capturing the behaviours of individuals who “embrace the community intensely enjoy sharing their ideas with the community” (p. 379). However, Dominators were cognisant that community allowed them an opportunity to shape social interaction within their social groups and to also generate something of an ideology regarding their own status. Such behaviours were articulated when there was seemingly conjecture over the liking or desire to own the same product. This is the first time that community has been conceptualised as a means of exacting jurisdiction, but thematically it has its roots in the psychological motives for participating in a community and offers synergy with the notion of social enhancement (Kamboj and Rahman, 2017). The following extract is taken from Ethan (aged 10):

*Jack wants the same Herschel bag as me, but I've told him that I've followed them on Facebook and that means I like them more, and that he can't have the bag because of that. I've already sent questions [to Herschel] so he knows he can't do that either. [Ethan]*

What was also fascinating was the intimation that this action would be formally acknowledged by Jack. Another 217 individual entries from different participants also indicated clearly that this behavioural act was a normative act representing a degree of conditioning. For this group, the community was a component in the maintenance of a satisfactory external social environment. However, there were other significant layers applied to these extracts. Contained within several entries was the clear indication that the act of participating in a community forbade others engagement with that online community, with an inference of a degree of punishment. This has social value implications as it is conceptualised that this exclusivity would help moderate future interactions. This is apparent in the following extract from Noah (aged 9):

*Feed (sic) up with Jake saying that he knows more about Forza [Forza Motorsport 7 is a racing video game for Xbox] than me, so I've been posting loads of stuff on the Forzatography Forums and Drivers lounge, so its (sic) obvious I know more. [Noah]*

What was considered in the analysis was how this behaviour might have been learned or, indeed, instigated. It implies a degree of dynamic learning and it was considered that, like many of the other motivations revealed in this work, it was manifest because of external interaction, possibly emanating from more experienced community users within the individual's social group. The process did not seem spontaneous in these instances or during the coding process, and there was an indication that such actions would ensure the social order and create hierarchy in the context of social exchange. This offers some synergy with extant socialisation theories that posit "male children are socialized to be more competitive than female children" (Lucas *et al.*, 2007, p. 264) and can expect "positive outcomes to result from successful performances" (*ibid.*). In the analyses it was considered that these participants might be exhibiting social dominance orientation (SDO). Those with this trait will tend to encode hierarchy-enhancing ideologies Graham-Kevan (2011), and a community seemingly allows for this. The interesting aspect of this is to see whether this act becomes repetitious and is a part of the performance of gender and community engagement. However, this domination behaviour also consolidates the individual, in the context of the community, given their propensity to actively engage and make a significant contribution in a very traditional manner. By doing this, Dominators, more so than any other group, assimilate themselves in the community, but according to the diary extracts, do so almost unconsciously.

## **Discussion**

This study set out to explore why children are motivated to participate in OBCs. Prior research has concentrated on prescriptive product categories (games and gaming) and purely social interaction while engaged in community, limiting what can be gleaned managerially. Consequently, this novel work offers considerable expansion of this nascent area. The main findings indicate that children's rationales and personal motivations, alongside the benefits of participating in a community, do differ from the adult taxonomy presented by Baldus *et al.* (2015) and prior work presented by Flurry *et al.* (2014) on young children and adolescents. The data set indicates that, far from being passive in their interactions, children are "powerful and actively engaged players" (Tregua *et al.*, 2015, p. 200), but somewhat novel in their approach to community.

## ***Behavioural dimension***

Brand influence is posited as a significant element in the frameworks of Dessart *et al.* (2015) and Baldus *et al.* (2015) and is categorised broadly as a desire to influence a given brand, but interestingly in the data set there was limited evidence of children wanting to influence online discussion or products or to control direction. As outlined above, there was some synergy with the role of an Opinion Leader, but actions were exacted in relation to external opinions, rather than those within the community. Despite the breadth of the brands discussed within the entries and accounts of significant usage, there was not one solitary entry relating to improvement, influence or personal expression that could be analysed as a distinct motivational factor. Given that this is a highly personalised endeavour predicated on experience, interaction and usage, it is plausible that these children did not have enough experience to cerebrally engage with brands regarding personal requisites. However, this thesis is not supported when the number of brands that are identified in the extracts are calculated ( $n=296$ ) and the number of instances that conveyed ownership and use ( $n=653$ ). It was considered that there was enough evidence to suggest there was significant engagement, but that the basic elements of sharing (Dessart *et al.*, 2019) was unimportant to this age group, and this may be a purely adult phenomenon.

### ***Cognitive dimension***

There were no revelations of a profound personal absorption within the myriad of brands that were mentioned, other than ensuring that the brand investigated had sufficient acknowledgement of its popularity by community members. Dominators perhaps captured some degree of this absorptive behaviour, but the motives for this participation were not based on traditional cognitive measures. This was surprising, as the literature clearly indicates that children are profoundly connected to brands (Hurwitz *et al.*, 2019; Nairn *et al.*, 2008). The nearest the data set came to expounding absorption was the fact that 1,129 entries contained references, words, and phrases such as “like”, “liking”, “prefer”, “care”, “wanting”, “picking”, “choosing”, “hand-pick” and “pleasing”. While these were indicative of a want, need or preference, evidence of absorption or engrossment (Dessart *et al.*, 2015) could not be found, even interpretively. Again, in the analysis, elements such as a limited vocabulary, or even a limited emotional range, were considered, but given the depth and richness of the data set and the (surprising) eloquence of the participants, it was concluded that this dimension was unimportant for this age group.

### ***Affective dimension***

There was evidence of a desire to connect, but this was not born out of a brand connection, or the desire to feel more connected with other brand users. Connection, as articulated by those designated as Defusers, was to further strengthen pre-existing, well-established *external* relationships. In this instance it was considered that online communities represented little more than extensions or additions to the use of Snapchat, Facebook, Habbo, Orkut and Tagged; all social media sites that participants clearly indicated they used with friends. However, this orientation, despite not being other-user generated, clearly has a strong social function and should be the subject of further investigations.

Helping – that is, active brand engagement and the sharing of knowledge – again was absent from the data set. However, it was more than apparent that the group designated Dependents were certainly reliant on the help of others. Consequently, there are comparisons with adult motivational factors. However, the behaviour is still considered novel, as the diary entries themselves articulated that these behaviours were ostensibly related to a pre-purchase paradigm reflecting the need to get requests for products right and to mitigate for potential errors in choice

that could not be rectified. Consequently, while knowledge was sought, it was prescriptive; the questions sought to explore brand-related issues, and problems were simply confined to social norms rather than function or dissemination of experience. Again, given the age group it can be considered that there was not the knowledge base to make a significant contribution to a given community. Importantly, the zeal or desire to do so was missing from the data set. However, the behaviour was seen across a huge range of brands and these are presented with their frequency in the data set in Table 2.

Table 2: Brand Communities Joined for Pre-planning/Pre-purchase

Sports Brand Communities (n=182)	Cosmetic Brand Communities (n=97) <sup>a</sup>	Electronic Brand Communities (n=75)	Fashion Brand Communities (n=87)
New Balance (n=12)	Kylie Cosmetics(n=22)	Apple (n=12)	Top Shop (n=11)
Adidas (n=22)	Urban Decay (n=3)	Samsung (n=18)	River Island (n=12)
Forever 21 (n=3)	Benefit (n=2)	Xiaomi (n=1)	Primark(n=12)
Under Armour Girls (n=3)	NYX (n=1)	Sony Xperia (n=3)	Next (n=3)
Roxy (n=10)	Two Faced (n=1)	Huawei (n=12)	New Look (n=13)
Limeapple (n=8)	Inglot (n=5)	Meizu (n=1)	H&M (n=5)
Champion (n=9)	Maybelline (n=10)	PlayStation (n=16)	Hollister (n=1)
Converse (n=10)	Sephora (n=11)	Xbox (n=12)	Jack Wills (n=12)
Puma (n=22)	Hard Candy (n=12)		Superdry(n=15)
Umbro (n=2)	Kat Von D (n=11)		Barbour (n=3)
JD Sport (n=10)	Kardashian Beauty (n=15)		
Joma (n=2)	V Sculpt (n=1)		
Mizuno (n=8)	Jessica Simpson (n=3)		
Canterbury (n=3)			
Kappa (n=14)			
Asics (n=4)			
Fila (n=4)			
New Balance (n=7)			
Skins (n=5)			
2XU (n=1)			
Superfeet (n=1)			
Vans (n=8)			
Ellesse (n=14)			

<sup>a</sup>Only female participants engaged with these brand communities

There was no evidence of reward being sought as the genesis of engagement. Baldus *et al.* (2015) referred to both hedonic and utilitarian reward in their typology, but no diary entries indicated that OBCs were participated in for fun or financial gain. Several Dependents indicated that they liked participating in communities, albeit with a limited aim. This could be interpreted as fun, but a clear articulation that such interactions were missing fun as understood by children (see Poris, 2005).

Dependents were certainly apt to participate in OBCs to seek assistance and obtain up-to-date information. The data revealed instances of this group obtaining personal validation as a motivation to engage. While this was not participatory in origin, it did seek to capitalise not so much on product information, but on product perception. While this certainly constituted seeking an answer to a given question, invariably it centred on the dilemma of whether the individual should ask for something (n=128) or buy something (n=219). It was apparent that communities were not directly associated with or evaluated as opportunities for higher levels of engagement with the brands, or the need for a triadic relationship with the brand and other customers, but as a means of putting choices in order. Importantly though, a myriad of brands and BCs were mentioned in extracts from Dependents; to facilitate understanding, these are presented in Table 3.

<b>Cosmetic Brand Communities (n=112)</b>	<b>Fashion Brand Communities (n=175)</b>	<b>General Brand Communities (n=30)</b>	<b>Food/Drink Brand Communities (n=17)</b>
Beauty Talk (n=39) H&M (n=23) Bobbi Brown (n=14) Lush (n=3) Rimmel (n=19) Sugar Pill (n=15) Lime Crime (n=2)	Abercrombie & Fitch (n=24) Urban Outfitters (n=16) Zara (n=9) Hollister (n=15) Forever 21 (n=2) Adidas (n=37) Michael Kors (n=9) Timberland (n=3) Guess (n=9) Roxy (n=11) True Religion (n=24) Juicy Couture (n=6) Hurley International (n=1)	Gaia (n=9) Being Girl (n=17) Figment (n=4)	Starbucks (n=12) Costa (n=1) Subway (n=2) Dominos (n=2)

Table 3: Brand Communities used for Conflict Resolution

### ***Transition***

What we see in the data are significant social factors at the heart of motivations to participate in an OBC and, to that end, we posit that these motivations are not necessarily static. Children are on an inexorable journey of influence and sensitivity to social change and it is, therefore, conceivable that they may exhibit several of the above behaviours as a means of social expression. At the heart of this statement is reward, in terms of getting the demanded product, social tensions being ameliorated, product information being provided and sibling subservience being demonstrated. These motivations may be manifest at different junctures by children, as OBCs seemingly represent a shortcut to getting the reward they want. The notion of reward could see increased behaviour of certain motivations or even modifications due to perceived reward. Conversely, a lack of reward could see a decrease in activity predicated on personal sensitivity. We must also consider that ongoing/changing family dynamics, changes in peer groups and simple developmental changes in children could produce more idiosyncratic behaviours as their efficacy develops.

### **Managerial Implications**

Importantly, we see that children are engaging with both online social media BCs (invariably Facebook and Instagram) and more traditional virtual, company-owned sites, and do not see the platforms as distinct. However, as denoted above, this may well be without parental consent. Given the idiosyncratic nature of the above, what we are seeing with children's interactions with OBC is linked to what Welter (2002, p. 267) referred to as "Hypermedia learning". Welter (2002) continued that such learning relies upon "the internet and digital television as it will allow the 'non-linear' jumping around from one subject to another that our net-generation child craves" and OBCs offer this. Given this learning paradigm, the most obvious practical consideration here is how children are manipulating or engaging with OBCs to influence parental purchasing decisions, as seen with the Demanders.

### ***Demanders***

At its core, pester power is an attempt to exert influence over parents through repetition of requests, bordering on annoyance. While the data do not reveal any parental annoyance (a future research consideration), it does reveal behaviours designed to influence through repetition. Table 4 outlines the OBCs utilised in this activity, and they are well-known, well-established brands.

**Table 4: Brand Communities used for Pestering**

<b>Sports Brand Communities (n=261)</b>	<b>Electronic Brand Communities (n=197)</b>
Adidas (n=122) Nike (n=98) Under Armour (n=31) PUMA (n=10)	Apple (n=65) Samsung (n=31) Xbox (n=101)

It is apparent that this approach is rational, almost emergent in scope and very much reliant on a capacity to intellectualise a parental response to commitment. We deem this rational persuasion, as children in the study believed that such behaviours were feasible. However, whether this is encoded by parents is not addressed in the data. This strategy, like the traditional ‘pestering’, is dependent on parents’ ability to recognise this persuasion, but the data indicate that parents do check what is online, and that is perhaps the greatest asset. Managerially, one might expect this behavioural pattern to be maintained into adolescence and it perhaps indicates that brand managers could expect a generation of willing and expectant consumers because this behaviour was exclusively happening in firm-initiated community sites.

*Defusers*

In practice, Defusers are motivated to participate in a community volitionally as a means of mitigating personal tensions. It is of managerial interest that for this group, the coordination of what seems like potential social jeopardy can be ameliorated by participating in a brand, and this, again, can result in positivity. Perhaps the greatest managerial element is that there should be the expectation that familiarity with these communities could influence future predicated engagement. Children can store and retrieve information about their brand interactions, and successes initiated within certain OBCs could be the catalyst for future relationships.

*Dependers*

Of additional managerial relevance is that communities are being used for pre-purchase evaluations, with this seen in the Dependents taxonomy. This very much falls within the parameters of function and offers some synergy with the extant literature, but participants indicated that they participated in a community to glean pertinent information on a product, with a decision to buy or engage in pester power dependent on likes and positive comments. Community engagement could debouch perceptions about a product's overall excellence or superiority in providing value to these children, even though the children did not currently own the brand under evaluation. Communities seemingly provide the antecedents of a meaningful, value-laden consumer approach; the greater the actual need, the higher the possibility of a robust and extended traditional pre-purchase search. Problematically for managers, there was a palpable reluctance to engage with or request products if the communities did not convey overwhelming positivity, regardless of the product category, and that denotes the necessity for general management to organise online commentaries. However, the payoff is that such interaction could draw others to the community as success is disseminated and more normative customer-to-community identification and customer-to-company identification is enacted, leading to potential loyalty.

### *Dominators*

The data revealed that male children used communities as a mechanism for regulating external relationships, as witnessed in the Dominator group. It was the community itself and the interaction of participating, rather than identification with in-group members, that drove this behaviour. This suggests that for these Dominators, and despite a perceptibly atypical motivation for participating in a community, there is an opportunity to develop or foster a meaningful, brand-based relationship. There is also the possibility that the subjective power that is potentially gleaned from engaging with a community can free-fall into aggressive or potentially anti-social tendencies in relation to resolution and this could devalue the community for others who are seeking genuine interaction. It should be considered that this behaviour might be an act of both gendered mimicry and affiliation mimicry and the data suggests that this type of motivation for participating in a community might be normative, predicated on the behaviour of those within an individual's social group, siblings, or even the parents.

In summary, managers must consider that OBCs offer huge value to children between the ages of 7 and 11 and are associated with effective relationships to facilitate future predicated brand advocacy and consumption practice.

### *Societal implications*

OBCs are being redefined by children as a means of self-expression beyond brand engagement. Where OBCs have blurred boundaries between producers and consumers, they are now blurring the boundaries between family, siblings and immediate physical social groups, radically reshaping their intended purpose and orientation. This may well have been an incremental process, but the data suggest that for children, this is a normative behaviour insofar as OBCs are used and seen as digital companions that ameliorate, accelerate, and escalate social situations. The process and techniques of children's calculative practices are being inspired by OBCs, with such sites indicating to children what they need to prioritise both personally and socially. Given this, there is undoubtedly the potential for negative impact. Children regularly encounter cyber bullying and cyber victimisation (Kowalski *et al.*, 2008; Sezer *et al.*, 2015; Wright, 2016) and greater use of and exposure within OBCs could provoke or promote these negative behaviours.

### ***Regulatory implications***

Children are inherently vulnerable and more needs to be done with consent regarding OBCs. This research was carried out in the UK, which has a strong regulatory mandate regarding marketing and children. However, a review of the current CAP Code (UK Code of Non-broadcast Advertising and Direct & Promotional Marketing) does not offer any guidelines or rules on how online communities might be managed; instead, the focus is on protecting children from online gambling. It is posited that more mediation strategies, beyond parental intervention and self-reporting, need to be considered and implemented through legislation. Furthermore, future policies need to explore the financial pressures that such sites can cause, with children using them to ‘pester’ parents. There is potential for the CMA (Competitions and Markets Authority) to conduct a similar review to the one initiated in 2013 looking at apps and how apps encourage children to engage in in-game consumption. Finally, parental controls, governance, and management of the accounts of children under the age of 13 needs to be far tighter. Mechanisms and legislation should be brought into prevent the circumnavigation of such controls.

### **Limitations**

The paper has limitations, notably by being culturally situated in the UK, and also through having a higher percentage of female than male participants. Many issues that were found in the data need to be explored further, but the nature of the diaries preclude opportunities for direct follow-up. Additionally, diaries come with the inherent risk that “participants may not reliably identify each relevant event” (Bolger *et al.*, 2003, p. 591) and potentially engage in over generalising (*ibid.*). The diary entries did not reveal how successful the individuals had been in securing products, finding appropriate information and resolving personal and familial issues. Finally, it is possible that diary entries were deliberately created by the children to act as a record of the sibling tensions, brand preferences and the children’s needs and wants that they wished to share with their parents.

### **Future research**

Initially, research should be carried out to explore the behaviours of this age group within an OBC. It would also be pertinent to explore how these behaviours may be affected by siblings, peers, and parents. A future avenue for productive research would be to explore how OBC participation develops over extended periods of time. It is conceivable that as children develop into the pre-adolescent and adolescent age groups, these highlighted behaviours may diminish and that would have value both theoretically and practically. Further research could also explore whether the findings are consistent between children of different cultural backgrounds. Future research needs to isolate the behaviours above and explore them extensively with larger samples. Additionally, there is parental perception of the posited new ‘digital pester power’ This needs additional evaluation to add to the already well-defined body of literature. The work also posits that a gendered evaluation of children and OBC engagement could be of value.

Finally, work should be carried out to see how successful the children were when using OBCs to resolve the myriad of identified social issues, and to record the parental responses to these behaviours. The qualitative framework should be maintained for this, with a view to creating

an appropriate scale, a children's scale that might assist practitioners and academics alike to further explore and refine children's motivations for participating in an OBC.

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