

Evaluating the power of online forums in consumer buyer behaviour

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Abstract

PURPOSE: This research aims to examine the power and influence of online forums in shaping consumer buyer behaviour in Ireland.

DESIGN/METHODOLOGY/APPROACH: The researcher adopted Creswell's (2011) exploratory sequential design of; qualitative research, building to quantitative research. Data collection was divided into two phases, the first being a qualitative approach of semi-structured interviews followed by quantitative online questionnaire. Judgement sampling technique was applied to both phases. Semi-structured Interviews were undertaken with four industry experts ranging from online community managers to online forum founders. The second phase of the research consisted of digital questionnaires targeting the users of online forums. Data collection was performed using a web-based survey tool 'Survey Monkey'.

FINDINGS: The findings suggest that online forums influence the buyer behaviour of forum users but also of non-users, as the content within online forums appears within the results of search engines. It was also found that users of online forums are categorised as early adopters. However, while the results suggest that online forums have influential value during the decision making process, advertisements within online forums have little to no impact in the influence of consumers purchases, therefore companies should look at using online forums for relationship marketing, market research and listening to consumers.

RESEARCH LIMITATIONS/IMPLICATIONS: Defining the sample size within an online forum has presented a number of challenges. The researcher found, as previous research highlighted that sampling and distribution remain a challenge to any online survey. However, it still remains the only way to access groups and individuals who would be difficult, if not impossible, to reach through other channels (Andrews *et al.*, 2003).

ORIGINALITY/VALUE: This research provides useful insights into the value of online forums to marketers and provides seminal academic research on the influence of online forums in Ireland. This research will be a useful tool for researchers conducting experimental research in the area.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH: Further research on online forums in Ireland could focus on more specific industries or sectors. This could, in turn, present a larger amount of qualitative and quantitative responses. A case study approach could also be applied to highlight incidences of best practice. Furthermore, additional research into this area may perhaps adopt the same methodology along with incorporating an ethnographic approach to discover social patterns and meanings (Schensul *et al.*, 1999) and is known for being the best technique for providing insight into consumer behaviours of online communities (Kozinets, 2002).

Dedicated to Gran Byrne who sadly passed away on the 1st June 2012

“Mary had a little lamb, doctor fainted”

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Table of Contents

Chapter One - Introduction	1
1.1 Introduction	1
1.2 Research Objectives	3
1.3 Value of Research.....	4
Chapter Two – Literature Review	5
2. 1 Introduction	5
2.2 Online Forums	5
2.3 Usage & Motivation.....	7
2.4 Trust.....	10
2.5 Influences on Buyer Behaviour	12
2.6 Advertising	15
Chapter Three – Methodology	18
3.1 Introduction	18
3.1.1 Research Objectives	18
3.2 Research Philosophy	19
3.3 Research Approaches & Strategies	19
3.4 Data Collection Methods	20
3.4.1 Qualitative: Semi-Structured Interviews.....	20
3.4.2 Quantitative: Online Questionnaire.....	21
3.5 Measurement.....	22
3.5.1 Qualitative Method	22
3.5.2 Quantitative Method.....	22
3.5.2 Questionnaire Design	23
3.6 Sampling.....	25
3.6.1 Phase One Sampling Method	26
3.6.2 Phase Two Sampling Method.....	26
3.7 Analysis	28

Chapter Four – Findings and Analysis	29
4.1 Introduction	29
4.2 Phase One: Interviews.....	29
4.2.1 Influence of Online Forums.....	29
4.2.2 Usage of Online Forums	31
4.2.3 Advertising within Online Forums.....	32
4.2.4 Using Online Forums	34
4.3 Phase Two: Questionnaire.....	36
4.3.1 Profile of Respondents	37
4.3.2 Contribute to Online Forums	42
4.3.3 Influence of Online Forums.....	45
4.3.4 Awareness of Advertising.....	47
Chapter Five – Conclusion and Recommendations	48
5.1 Introduction	48
5.2 The Influence of Online Forums in Shaping Consumer Buyer Behaviour ..	48
5.3 Profile of the Members of Online Forums	49
5.4 Why People Use Online Forums.....	49
5.4.1 Why do People Contribute to Online Forums.....	50
5.6 The Awareness and Effectiveness of Advertising within Online Forums.....	50
5.7 How Companies Should Use Online Forums.....	51
5.8 Recommendations.....	52
References	53
Appendices	62
A. Consent Form	62
B. Interview Theme Sheet.....	63
C. Questionnaire	64
D. Evidence of Questionnaire	66

Figures and Tables

Figure 1: Moore's Curve.....	10
Figure 2: Respondents Age & Gender Profile	37
Figure 3: Respondents Access to the Internet.....	38
Figure 4: Profile of Online Forum Users.....	39
Figure 5: User Profile Age & Gender	39
Figure 6: Member usage of online forums	40
Figure 7: Why use online forums	41
Figure 8: Frequency & usage of online forums.....	41
Figure 9: Profile of users and online forum usage	42
Figure 10: Contribute to online forums	43
Figure 11: How often users contribute	43
Figure 12: Why users contribute to online forums.....	44
Figure 13: User contribution & profile.....	45
Figure 14: Statements Respondents Agreed with	46
Figure 15: Statements Respondents Disagreed with.....	46
Figure 16: Advertising Influence within Online Forums	47
Table 1: List of Interviewees	20
Table 2: Methodology Map.....	21
Table 3: Interview themes to Objectives	22
Table 4: Questionnaire theme to Objectives	23
Table 5: Top Online Forums in Ireland.....	27
Table 6: Time Spent on & Accessing the Internet.....	38

Chapter One - Introduction

1.1 Introduction

Researching buyer behaviour is;

'The process of trying to think why people behave in certain ways. Or if not why, then what that behaviour is likely to be given certain kinds of products, certain kinds of... just stop to think' (Theodore Levitt cited by Smith, 2003, pp 75).

The internet has changed the way we view and share content. Today, 64 percent of the Irish population are regular internet users (European Commission, 2011) spending 18 hours and 7 minutes online each month (Comscore, 2009). 740,000 people use their mobile to access the internet (Return-to-sender/B&A, 2011) and the highest internet users in Ireland are those aged 16 to 29 years old (Central Statistic Office, 2011).

Internet based access to information and internet communication means have become ever-present (O'Murchu *et al.*, 2004) and one aspect of the internet that has been in our past, is in our present and will most definitely be in our future is Online Message Forums.

An online forum or message board is an online discussion website where people can have conversations by posting messages. Forums contain vast product knowledge that is accessible to everyone via the internet. Members can log in and post or reply to treads, while non-members have full access to read treads but must register to become a member in order to contribute.

The first online forum was called Usenet newsgroups and was designed and built by Duke University graduate students in 1979. Usenet was the initial Internet community. It was the place where Tim Berners-Lee announced the launch of the World Wide Web and where Marc Andreessen announced the creation of the Mosaic browser and the introduction of the image tag, which opened the Web

into its role as a graphical medium (Reid and Gray, 2007). Since that time, discussion forums have been renewed technically and they have become more easily accessible (Savolainen, 2010).

Online forums consist of members, who share knowledge of a given topic. They are a trusted consumer-to-consumer network of knowledge exchange and as rapidly as the internet is growing, so too is the way we use the internet by researching purchasing decisions along with seeking out online opinions of other consumers before we buy (Pitta and Fowler, 2005). The majority of Irish message boards are open forums, allowing for members and non-members to read the information published within. Leading the research into how discussions within online forums can influence other users buying behaviours.

Within this digital genre consumers can now share opinions and experiences online via message forums. Online forums are an online database of product knowledge, expertise and experience filled catalogues for an endless list of products and services. Research has established that online communities are used to research products and services (Evans, Wedande *et al.*, 2001), for friendship or to exchange information (Ridings and Gefen, 2004) and that messages passed between tight trusted communities have a greater impact (Bughin J *et al.*, 2010). Furthermore, people now use the internet to help make important life decisions (Howard *et al.*, 2002).

The future looks bright for online forums, with the introduction of smart phones and tablets allowing consumers to access the internet from anywhere at any time. Online forums will eventually have a massive impact on every company that produces consumer goods and services; they will redefine the shape and delivery of all consumer goods and services (Champy *et al.*, 1996). It is therefore important that this growing area is investigated to help fully understand the implications of online forums in terms of marketing and consumer behaviour.

The aim of this research is to understand the power and influence of online message forums in shaping consumer buyer behaviour. It aims to understand

why people use online forums and the motivation that drives them to contributing knowledge. It will explore the users of online forums, profiling the types of people who use online forums. It will measure the awareness and effectiveness of advertising within online forums and provide companies with recommendations on handling discussions within online forums. Therefore, the following research objectives have been established.

1.2 Research Objectives

The main research objective is;

To understand the power and influence of online forums in shaping consumer buyer behaviour in Ireland.

Following on from this, four sub objectives have been established:

1. To profile the members of online message forums;
Identify the types of people who give online reviews/share knowledge via online communities?

Justification: This objective looks at the different types of users of online forums; it aims to highlight usability of forums users versus forum contributions. It also aims to profile the present types of people who use online forums as being: Innovators, Early Adopters, Early Majority, Late Majority or Laggards.

2. To understand why people turn to online message forums;
 - a. Why do people contribute / what motivates them?

Justification: This objective aims to establish the main reasons why people use online forums and why they contribute knowledge and information within forums. It also aims to establish what kind of information users contribute and what users mainly do within online forums.

3. To measure the awareness and effectiveness of advertising within online forums.

Justification: This objective aims to explore the effectiveness of advertising within online forums. Furthermore, this objective aims to establish if advertising within online forums influences purchasing decisions and assist companies approach to advertising within online forums.

4. To investigate how companies approach, use and handle information and reviews within online forums.

Justification: This objective looks at how companies and marketers could utilise online forums as a marketing tool.

1.3 Value of Research

While there is research done to date on online communities (Preece, 2001; Pitta and Fowler, 2005; Raban and Rafaeli, 2007; Reid and Gray, 2007) the area is still very new and constantly evolving with little research focusing on the link between online forums and the influence on buyer behaviour. This is coupled with company engagement of online forums with little strategic use of this online tool which may be due to lack of knowledge and understanding of their potential impact. Overall this research aims to provide fundamental value to marketers who want to achieve competitive advantage through low cost, online platforms.

Chapter Two – Literature Review

2. 1 Introduction

We have moved beyond the networked age into the ‘connected-age’ where we are always connected (Ahonen & Moore, 2005) and the internet has changed how we communicate socially and at work (Quan-Haase and Wellman, 2004). It has blended into our everyday lives and is used for a wide variety of purposes such as surfing for information, playing games and chatting (Howard *et al.*, 2002; Quan-Haase and Wellman 2002). Consumers are using the internet to seek out online opinions of other consumers before they buy (Chen & Qi, 2011). A popular source of feedback is an online community, namely online forums, where consumers can read online reviews but also post a specific question about the information they require (Pitta and Fowler, 2005).

2.2 Online Forums

Online communities are defined as (Porter, 2004, par.1),

‘an aggregation of individuals or business partners who interact around a shared interest, where the interaction is at least partially supported and/or mediated by technology and guided by some protocols or norms’.

Raban and Rafaeli (2007) identified online communities as informal learning systems where members can interact and learn by engaging in discussions, sharing knowledge and helping others. An online forum consists of *People*, who interact socially to satisfy their own needs. A shared *Purpose*, such as, an interest or information exchange. *Policies* in the form of rules and *Computer Systems*, to facilitate a sense of togetherness (Preece, 2001).

An online forum, commonly called discussion groups or message boards, are based on the physical metaphor of a notice board in which individuals participate in text-based discussions on specific topics (Okleshen and Grossbart, 1998). Message boards usually contain several categories (broad subject areas) which consist of forums (more specific subject areas) which contain threads

(conversations on a topic) and individual posts (where a user writes something), (vBulletin Community Forum, 2010). Threads, the subject headers for a discussion, are active for a while, with new postings being made until the forum members lose interest in the discussion (Pitta and Fowler, 2005). Many forums offer search facilities, private mailing capabilities and icons for interpreting messages (Preece, 2001). Discussions are managed by moderators, who read and edit posts, facilitate discussions and ensure members abide by forums rules and guidelines (Webb et al., 2008). Online forums are unique in that their content is generated not only by the site provider but also by the members (Hsu *et al.*, 2012).

Users of online forums can be divided into two types: posters and lurkers (Nonnecke and Preece, 2001). Posters are members who actively participate in discussions within the forum and are willing to help others (Huvila *et al.*, 2010; Wasko and Faraj, 2000). Lurkers are those who do not wish to participate in the discussion but instead eavesdrop (Jones, 2006). Lurkers observe the forum but never actually contribute to the community by posting posts or replies (Nonnecke and Preece, 2001).

In forums, people can exchange their ideas and experiences allowing them to learn from the experts, as well as other peoples experiences (Desikan et al., 2005). They can set agendas, convey experiences, clarify values, transit information and help decision making and consumption (Okleshen & Grossbart, 1998). Forums can also help in problem solving, information sharing and understanding (Savolainen, 2010).

Lazer *et al* (2009) highlight the different characteristics of an online community as being, a shared purpose: a focus on an interest, need, information, service or support that provides a reason for belonging to the community. People; who interact with each other and take roles within the community and Policies; language and protocols that guide people's interactions. Bernier and Bowen (2004) found two ways to characterise online forums using computer

metaphors; 'pull technology' and 'push technology', the mechanisms that automatically delivers content and calls on users to obtain the information.

Kozinets (1999) established four distinct online community member types, tourists, minglers, devotees and insiders. Tourists lack strong social ties to the group and only have a passing interest in using the forum. Minglers have strong social ties but are only interested in quick activity with the forum. Devotees have a strong interest and enthusiasm in the forum but have few social attachments. Insiders have strong social ties to the forum and maintain a strong interest in the central consumption activity.

Lazer *et al* (2009) highlighted community leaders as those who provide leadership within the community, offering a welcome to newcomers, advice to those who ask and wisdom based on past experiences. Community leaders tend to post frequently and are well known among community members.

While extensive research has been undertaken on online communities, little is known as to why community members are willing to contribute knowledge and spend their time with strangers in a virtual space (Wasko and Faraj, 2005; Hsu *et al.*, 2012).

2.3 Usage & Motivation

Clearly online forum users come in all shapes and sizes, with different personalities, abilities, experiences and needs (Preece. 2001). Consumers are using online forums to exchange their opinions on products, providing a valuable source of information for companies (Kaiser & Bodendorf, 2012). Knowledge, self value, personal outcome expectations and social influence motivated people to share information in online forums (Lu and Hsiao, 2007). Customers are generating their own content, searching, sharing and interacting in a new way, changing the way consumer's access information changes the way they use it (Ahonen and Moore, 2005). De Valck (2005) found that within online forums, users exchange more than factual information about purchases and experiences

and distinguished four main frames of discussion as (1) sharing knowledge (2) negotiating norms (3) opposing values and (4) celebrating similarities.

Armstrong and Hagel (1996) identified that online communities meet four types of consumer needs; (1) *Communities of transaction* facilitate the buying and selling of products and services and deliver information related to those transactions. Eg: Done Deal <http://www.donedeal.ie>. (2) *Communities of interest* bring together participants who interact extensively with one another on specific topics. Eg: Irish Classic Car Forum <http://classiccar.ie/forum/>. (3) *Communities of fantasy* allow participants to create new environments, personalities or stories. Eg: Guinness Fantasy Rugby <http://fantasyrugby.guinness.com/>. (4) *Communities of relationship* give participants the opportunity to discuss certain life experiences that often are very intense and can lead to the formation of deep personal connections. Eg: Irish Cancer Society Forum <http://forum.cancer.ie>.

In the past consumers used to talk to each other discussing experiences and brands which are traditionally known as word of mouth (WOM). With the birth of the internet and consumer opinion websites, now give consumers the opportunity to voice their opinions, experiences and preferences online, which is known as word of mouse. Word of mouse differs from traditional WOM in that information comes from individuals who have little or no relationship with the person seeking the information (Xia and Bechwati, 2008). Some people are willing to take the advice of strangers and in general are influenced by and rely on what others say about a product or service before they buy it (Price & Feick, 1984). Ahonen & Moore (2005) highlight word of mouth as the most influential consumer component.

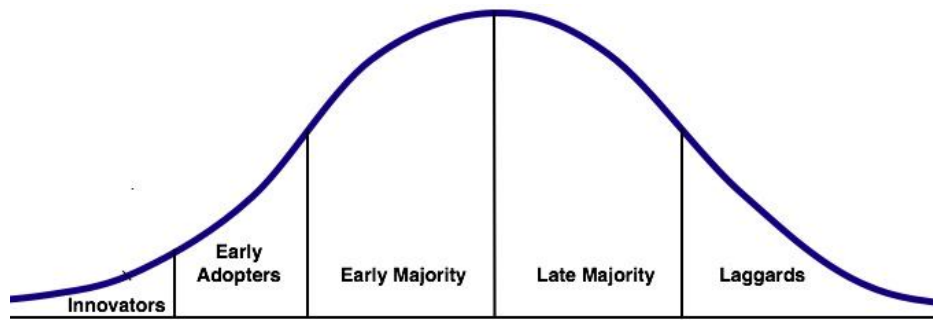
Karakaya and Barnes (2010) found that non-socially based sites such as company web sites and search engines have no impact on consumer opinion and that companies need to pay attention to the voices of customers on socially-based web sites and respond appropriately in order to maintain brand loyalty. Wu and Wang (2011) found that the positive effects of word of mouse are not affected

by the degree of product involvement, which means these relationships are naturally robust.

A study undertaken by Evans, Wedande et al (2001) found that 50% of respondents used online communities to find more information about products and services while Ridings and Gefen (2004) found that people joined online communities for friendship or to exchange information, while a lower percent sought social support or recreation. Furthermore, people now use the internet to help make important life decisions (Howard *et al.*, 2002) and to form relationships, exchange knowledge (Preece, 1999) and for intellectual learning (Brazelton and Gorry, 2003). A community of relationship is formed around some intense life experience such as a significant event, where consumers find comfort in the experience of others (Pitta and Fowler, 2005). In research undertaken by Hsu *et al* (2012) found that members identify with an online community because it provides a source of information and helps in achieving tasks and goals.

Seth Godin (2002) takes Moore's curve (Figure 1) and talks about Innovators and early adopters who are the ones that will embrace a product and sell it to the early majority. Innovators are the first to purchase the products or services, early adopters are those who actually benefit from using the new product and are eager to maintain their edge over the rest of the population by seeking out new products and services. The early and late majority, don't necessarily yearn for a new product or service that can benefit them, but if enough of their peers try it and talk about it, these followers are likely to come along as well. The laggards don't use something new until it's so old that what they used to use is obsolete, impractical, or not even available any longer. This research aims to ascertain which sections of Moore's Curve do members of online forums presently fit into, i.e.: innovators, early adopters, early majority, late majority or laggards.

Figure 1: Moore's Curve



2.4 Trust

Previous research has looked at online trust in the context of online shopping and e-commerce (Bart *et al.*, 2005; Chen and Barnes, 2007). Hsu *et al* (2012) found that online trust has received somewhat little attention in relation to online communities, and defined online community trust as;

'Community members' psychological states of confidence that the online community and other members have the ability to deliver what has been promised and put their interests first'

Trust can be defined by three types of beliefs which can be differentiated on the levels of competence, honesty and benevolence, as perceived by the individual (Casaló *et al.*, 2008). Competence refers to the group of skills and characteristics that enable a party to have influence within some specific domain. Honestly involves the perception of the trustor that the trustee adheres to a set of principles that the trustor finds acceptable. Benevolence is the extent to which a trustee is believed to want to do good to the trustor (Bakker *et al.*, 2006).

Singh and Sirdeshmukh (2000), found a considerable relationship between trust and perceived value of the interaction. While according to Harris and Goode (2004), trust is directly linked with assessment of satisfaction and perceived usefulness. Shih (2010) found that compared with individuals motivations, their satisfaction with the online forum is the strongest predictor of knowledge contribution, while Pitta and Fowler (2005) argue that information sharing is at

the heart of a consumer-to-consumer network with the key obstacle to sharing being trust. Messages passed between tight trusted networks have less reach but greater impact as it's the opinions of people we trust who are valued more (Bughin *et al.*, 2010).

The glue that holds online communities and other social networks together is called 'Social Capital'. Social capital has been defined as 'the resources embedded in a social structure that are accessed and/or mobilised in purposive action' (Lin, 2002, p.29). According to Preece (2002) and Cook (2005) a key ingredient for developing social capital is about trust and the exchange of information. However, Bakker *et al.*, (2006) found that trust may be a condition of knowledge sharing but does not have a positive effect on the sharing of knowledge per se: although the absence of trust may hinder people's motivation to share knowledge with others, it is doubtful that those who have high levels of trust in others are more likely to share knowledge than those with moderate trust levels.

The norms of social trust within an online community would allow community members to become more confident in receiving help or support from other participants (Mathwick *et al.*, 2008). Hsu *et al.* (2012) found that participants who develop social trust toward a community are inclined to engage in community activities, particularly when depending on other users for advice or support. Social trust is viewed as an important determinant of volitional behaviours such as knowledge sharing in online communities (Inkpen and Tsang, 2005). The degree of trust in members may influence individuals' engaging behaviour in online forum activities (Chiu *et al.*, 2012); therefore social trust among members is critical as it affects the attitude toward social behaviours in an online community (Huysman and de Wit, 2004).

Trust is an important element affecting consumer online buyer behaviour (Chen and Barnes, 2007). Online recommendations are regarded as very trustworthy (Bickart and Schindler, 2001) and the greater the level of trustworthiness, the higher the intention of making a purchase (Lee *et al.*, 2011). Information coming

from credible sources will be highly accepted (Bearden and Etel, 1982), credible being expertise and trustworthiness (Hovland *et al.*, 1953). Furthermore, trustworthiness influences consumers' positive attitudes towards a brand and their buyer behaviours (Lascu *et al.*, 1995; Petty and Wegener, 1998).

Horppu *et al* (2008) found that members do not always trust the information given in online forums. However, WOM is perceived to be more reliable, credible and trustworthy by consumers compared to brand-initiated communications (Brown *et al.*, 2007; Schiffman and Kanuk, 1995; Arndt, 1967). Building brand trust requires a systematic relationship between a consumer and brand (Ha, 2004). Trust is at the core of the value that a brand provides to its consumers (Berry, 2000), a consumer who trusts a brand is more willing to remain loyal to it and to share information about it (Chaudhuri and Holbrook, 2001; Busacca and Castaldo, 2003).

2.5 Influences on Buyer Behaviour

According to the behaviour perspective model (BPM), characteristics of consumer behaviour is predictable from two elements of situational influence:

1. The consumer behaviour setting, and
2. The utilitarian and informational of the consumers learning history in the setting (Foxall, 1998)

However Chen and Qi (2011) found that the need for a product or a service arises in the customers mind and then goes through the process of information searching and product evaluation to lead to purchase decisions and post-purchase evaluation. As also established by Constantinides (2004) who describes the consumer buying process as a learning, information-processing and decision-making activity divided into several consequent steps:

1. Problem identification
2. Information search
3. Alternatives evaluation

4. Purchasing decision
5. Post-purchase behaviour

De Valck (2005) found that online forum influences are high during the information search and evaluation phases, while it is limited during the other phases. This is due to consumers using forums to broaden, update and refine their experiences resulting in increased knowledge and altered choices. Rowley (2000) also emphasised information search as the key stage in the buying process, along with previous researchers have also found that online information search and evaluation to be considerable influences in consumers purchase intentions (Vazquez and Xu, 2009; Shim *et al.*, 2001; Wright and Jayawardhena, 2001).

Smartphones and tablets are transforming consumers' buying behaviour with the 'always on customer' and 82 percent of smartphone owners in Ireland are using their device to research buying decisions (Amas, 2012).

Evans *et al.* (2006) described two types of groups that influence consumer behaviour, Social Groups and Tribes. Social group influence is instrumental in determining an individual's buying behaviour. Any individual or a group of individuals that can significantly influence behaviour could be called a reference group (Bearden and Etzel, 1982). Tribes are identified as consumer-driven groups that hold meaning for constructing an individual's self-identity and creating new communities based on shared beliefs, passions and ideas (Mitchell and Imrie, 2011). Tribal leaders help increase the effectiveness of the tribe and its members by (1) turning a shared interest into a goal; (2) provide tools to allow members to tighten their communications and (3) leveraging the tribe, allowing it to grow and gain new members (Godin, 2008). Tribal members have shared purposes and beliefs, interacting socially by adhering to clear rituals and roles using internet technologies that support interaction (Preece, 2001).

The consumption focus of online communities developed by Figallo (1998) who identified three types of group behaviour within online communities; (1) *Interactivity* refers to the degree to which community members interact and

communicate. (2) *Focus* refers to the purpose of the community or the interests of the members. (3) *Cohesion* refers to the degree to which online community members feel close to one another. However, recent research has shifted the focus of consumption toward a community based experience that adds value through consumer-to-consumer bonding (Mathwick *et al.*, 2008).

An important factor of a consumer's behaviour is other consumers influence (Bearden *et al.*, 1989). Okleshen and Grossbart (1998) found that Usenet groups may influence behaviour because they serve informational, value expressive and utilitarian functions by giving marketplace knowledge, enhancing images and distributing rewards. Deutsch and Gerard (1955) found that informational influence is the tendency to accept information from others, and plays a central role in influencing the purchasing decisions of individuals (Huang and Chen, 2006). Value expressive is related to the degree to which the consumer values the information in the discussions, which is related to the level of change in their behaviour (De Valck, 2005). Utilitarian and social interactions provide online users with desired benefits (Nambisan and Nambisan, 2008), of giving and receiving information (Hsu *et al.*, 2012). These experiences are likely to show distinctive influences in online members' evaluation processes and engaging behaviour in their online communities (Hsu *et al.*, 2012).

In a study undertaken by Granitz and Ward (1996) established that purchases are influenced by discussions or recommendations, product use, aspects of consumption and related products. Customers create huge amount of information within online forums, which influences other customers (Chatterjee and Patrali, 2001; Chen and Xie, 2008). This information provides extensive power for consumer behaviour such as purchasing decisions (Park *et al.*, 2007). Steffes and Burgee (2009) found that information created within online forums is just as influential in customers' decisions as their own experiences and is more influential than traditional word of mouth. Through discussions within forums, consumers directly influence each other's opinions and therefore their purchase decisions (Kaiser and Bodendorf, 2012). High influencers who can manipulate attitudes and behaviours within online forums are called 'opinion leaders'

(Rogers, 2003). Opinion Leaders are characterised by their high degree of involvement, active communication and expert knowledge (Solomon *et al.*, 2006) within the forum. Only a small number of opinion leaders are needed to influence the opinions of a network (Keller and Berry, 2003).

Previous research has found that online discussions influence consumers purchase decisions (Okleshen and Grossbart, 1998; De Valck, 2005). It is vital that companies monitor these discussions, use the findings to identify opportunities and take marketing actions at an early stage (Kaiser and Bodendorf, 2012). The trend of helping behaviour among members may become a major source for information in the decision making process for the purchase of products or services (Chu, 2009).

2.6 Advertising

Within the age of connectedness, active communities are altering the way businesses market, promote and sell their goods and services (Ahonen & Moore, 2005). The rise of online communities and user-generated content has forced marketers to wake up to opportunities that are being created for their brands (Simmons, 2008). Online communities are a vital resource for consumers facing even the smallest of buying decisions; hence businesses must make use of this new marketing channel (Kuo, 2009).

Advertising within online communities is one of the newest forms of internet advertising (Hart, 2008). Research from Amas (2012) found that the online advertising industry in Ireland grew by 20 percent in 2011, to a value of €132 million. Companies initially saw online communities as an exciting new advertising medium; however consumers got irritated by the advertisements which resulted in them ignoring advertisements (Pitta and Fowler, 2005). Hadija *et al.*, (2012) found that users of online communities do not dislike advertisements, but they simply do not notice them.

Constantinides (2004) found that the marketing tools used by traditional and online marketers in order to influence the buyer behaviour of their customers

are not the same and that a set of elements experienced during the virtual interaction are indeed the controllable factors affecting the online buyer. By creating strong online communities, businesses will be able to build customer loyalty and in turn generate strong economic returns (Armstrong and Hagel, 1996).

Pitta and Fowler (2005) highlighted the benefits of online forums to marketers, not as a form of advertising but as a source of market research in that a collection of data can be gathered. Data such as: product or service satisfaction, desired and undesired product features, brand loyalty and price sensitivity, new market users, perception of competitors and changes in consumer attitudes. Using forums as a source of market research is a discipline known as Netnography (Kozinets, 2002). The insights in consumer behaviour generated by Netnography could serve as a focal point for product development, positioning strategies and developing advertising campaigns (De Valck, 2005). Trend scouting is another function of forums that marketers could adapt. Identified by Graubner-Muller (2011), trend scouting aims to discover current trends, topics and opinions that consumers are discussing within forums which may be future evolutions. Forums are an exceptional platform for trend scouting as trends in consumer behaviour often arise within forums before spreading through society (Graubner-Muller, 2011; Kaiser and Bodendorf, 2012).

Marketers that want to use online forums as an online advertising medium should comply with the rules within such forums. Sterne (1997) highlights some of the basic rules which marketers should consider; (1) read the rules of posting first to ensure your posts won't be marked as 'spam' or get banned from the forum, (2) get acquainted with the forum, don't fly in blind, (3) study the forum to analyse if other companies are posting and the reaction they get and (4) make sure your subject matter is on-topic.

However, looking beyond advertising within online forums, Pitta and Fowler (2005) have found relationship marketing more important as forums have the potential to offer an exceptional link between the marketer and the consumer,

which may yield a robust relationship. Companies need to translate customer relationships which have been created in the traditional environment into the online marketplace, and use online communities to strengthen these relationships (Farquhar and Rowley, 2006). Traditionally companies tried to build relationships with every customer on an individual level however, within an online community the company may in addition be responsible for the facilitation of a wide web of relationships between its customers (Barnatt 1998). An example of this in Ireland today is that of Electric Ireland who have a forum within Boards.ie, www.boards.ie/electricireland. If marketers can provide expert information within online forums, they can gain an expert position of trust, differentiating themselves from competitors while gaining competitive advantage and economic success (Pitta and Fowler, 2005). Hong-Youl Ha (2004) suggests that marketers conduct ongoing updates of their content and manage online communities so that consumers are able to enjoy experiences from these communities, with increased customer satisfaction, giving better information, not more information will increase customer value and brand loyalty.

Companies could also exploit the influence generated by opinion leaders to spread information about their products, or try to win opinion leaders over by providing them with free samples (Kaiser and Bodendorf, 2012). Discover the forums that are most relevant to you and then try to isolate the most influential members of those communities to channel your marketing communications (Ahonen & Moore, 2005).

Research on online communities (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001) has shifted the focus from consumption experience (Cova, 1997) toward a community-based experience to underscore the value delivered through consumer-to-consumer bonding (Mathwick *et al.*, 2008).

Chapter Three – Methodology

3.1 Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to outline the research methods, the specific area of research being used and the consequent methodology used. An introduction to research methods and justification for the chosen research methods used during this study will be provided. Research design and reasons for choosing specific research approaches are also explained. The research objectives, outlined in chapter one are mapped to the chosen research methods, as they are fundamental points from which research is planned and conducted (Zikmund, 2003).

Following the research process, ‘research onion’ of Saunders et al (2007), this chapter addresses; research philosophy, research approach, research strategies and data collection methods. Following on from this process, the researcher also incorporates Malhotra (1999) research framework involving; measurement, questionnaire design, sampling process and plan of data analysis.

3.1.1 Research Objectives

The main research objective;

To understand the power and influence of online forums in shaping consumer buyer behaviour.

From this, the following four sub objectives were devised:

1. To profile the members of online message forums
Identify the types of people who give online reviews/share knowledge via online communities?
2. To understand why people turn to online message forums?
 - a. Why do people contribute / what motivates them?
3. To measure the awareness and effectiveness of advertising within online forums.

4. To investigate how companies approach, use and handle information and reviews within online forums.

3.2 Research Philosophy

Research is objective in that it attempts to provide accurate information that reflects a true state of affairs (Malhotra, 1999). Saunders *et al* (2007) defined research philosophy as the development of the research background, research knowledge and its nature. No single research methodology is better than any other methodology (Benbasat *et al.*, 1987) and previous researchers have identified a need for combining research methods in order to improve the quality of research (Kaplan and Duchon, 1988). Because of this, the researcher has adapted a mixed methods research philosophy for this study.

3.3 Research Approaches & Strategies

The researcher applied both deductive and inductive research approaches, also referred to as qualitative and quantitative. The mixed methods approach is defined as the combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches in the methodology of a study (Tashakkori & Teddli 1998 cited by Creswell 2011). Preece (2001) also discusses the use of different qualitative and quantitative approaches for evaluating the usability and sociability of online forums. In a mixed method study it is recommended to undertake a literature review, and it should have subtopics examining the research topic of study (Creswell, 2011).

The qualitative technique is in the form of semi-structured interviews (Wittink *et al.*, 2006) with industry experts. Malhotra (1999) found that expert information is obtained by undertaking interviews. Peerce (2001) states that an increasing number of interviews are being conducted via email and internet technologies as it offers several advantages to online community managers and that semi-structured interviews are best used to collect information early on. The researcher undertook semi-structured interviews via telephone, email and other electronic devices, depending on the availability of the respondent.

The quantitative method was undertaken in the form of digital questionnaires, which is commonly used to collect the subjective input of respondents of online forums. Using web based questionnaire software is seen as more promising for online forum evaluations (Peerce, 2001). With this in mind, the researcher assumed digital questionnaires using specialist software called ‘Survey Monkey’.

Adopting a qualitative approach, the first phase of research fits around constructionist learning, aiming to provide insight rather than measure. The second phase incorporates positivist learning using quantitative research seeking to understand research objectives of online forum users (Hanson and Grimmer, 2005). The researcher adopted Creswell’s (2011) exploratory sequential design of; qualitative research, building to quantitative research leading to interpretation, allowing the quantitative data to validate qualitative findings (Myers and Qetzel, 2003).

3.4 Data Collection Methods

Data collection has been divided into two phases, the first being a qualitative approach of semi-structured interviews followed by quantitative online questionnaires.

3.4.1 Qualitative: Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured Interviews were undertaken with four industry experts ranging from online community managers to online forum founders (Table 1). A semi-structured approach is the preferred method when undertaking interviews via the telephone (Cachia and Millward, 2011). In semi-structured interviews, the researcher starts with a general, but pre-planned question then probes until no new relevant information is forthcoming. An interview theme sheet was prepared in advance to ensure the same topics are covered in each interview (Peerce, 2001) and can be found in the appendices.

Table 1: List of Interviewees

1.	Online Community Manager & Industry Expert
2.	Online Community Manager
3.	Online Community Manager

The researcher chose interviews with industry experts over observation techniques to help gain valuable insight into the research topic (Malhotra, 1999). Due to availability and busy work schedules of those being interviewed, participants were conducted via telephone or electronically.

3.4.2 Quantitative: Online Questionnaire

The second phase of the research consisted of digital questionnaires targeting the users of online forums. Data collection was performed using a web-based survey tool 'Survey Monkey', as used by Idriss *et al* (2009). 'Survey Monkey' being the chosen tool as it provides quick distribution and a hosted platform that transfers responses directly into a database for analysing (Andrews *et al.*, 2003). Letterkenny Institute of Technology also has an account with 'Survey Monkey' which allows for unlimited responses, question & answer piping and other advanced features that were needed for this research. The questionnaire was designed through 'Survey Monkey' and distributed within six online forums with a request for participation and an introduction to the survey. Research has shown that a link to a questionnaire on an online forum gave more complete responses and higher quality responses than respondents who received that questionnaire as an email (Domegan and Fleming, 2003).

Table 2 below maps the link between the research objectives and how the chosen methodology aims to capture that information.

Table 2: Methodology Map

Research Objective	Interview	Questionnaire
1. To understand the power/influence of online message forums in shaping buyer behaviour	X	X
2. To profile the members of online forums	-	X
3. To understand why people turn to online forums	X	X
3(a). Why do people	X	X

contribute / what motivates them		
4. To measure the awareness and effectiveness of advertising within online forums	X	X
5. To investigate how companies should approach, using information and handling reviews within online forums	X	-

3.5 Measurement

3.5.1 Qualitative Method

Semi-structured interviews were guided with a theme sheet and aimed at gaining insight into the research objectives (Table 3).

Table 3: Interview themes to Objectives

Objective 1	• Question 3, 4, 5 and 6
Objective 2	• N/A
Objective 3	• Question 2
Objective 3 (a)	• Question 1
Objective 4	• Question 9 and 10
Objective 5	• Question 7, 8, 11, 12 and 13

Objective two was not applicable during the interview stage of the research as this would be established via the second phase of questionnaire with online forum users.

3.5.2 Quantitative Method

Table 4 highlights the research objectives to the online questionnaire themes.

Table 4: Questionnaire theme to Objectives

Objective 1	• Question 8
Objective 2	• Question 1, 2, 7, 10, 11, 12 and 13
Objective 3	• Question 4
Objective 3 (a)	• Question 5 and 6
Objective 4	• Question 9
Objective 5	• N/A

Objective five was not applicable during the questionnaire stage as this information was obtained through interviews with industry experts.

3.5.2 Questionnaire Design

The questionnaire was designed on paper first, to ensure effective layout and then turned into a digital design (Peerce, 2001). The questionnaire was also enhanced by the functionality of Survey Monkey, so that respondents would not respond multiple times (Malhotra, 1999). All questions within the questionnaire were marked as compulsory to ensure that no question went unanswered or missed. Questions were designed using a range of different scales and answer categories were based on the literature, such as:

Question one, was a nominal scale to establish how often respondents use online forums, options included; as needed, daily, weekly, monthly and one time only.

Question two, three and six being multiple choice questions. Malhotra (1999) states that an alternative labelled 'other' is important in multiple choice questions so this was also incorporated. The question options were derived from the literature review and the qualitative findings. The opinions in question two included; discussion (Raban and Rafaeli, 2007), research (Evans *et al.*, 2001), pastime (Lu and Hsiao, 2007), job (Interview #3), feedback (Ridings and Gefen, 2004), advice (Chen and Qi, 2011; Pitta and Fowler, 2005) and 'other' (Malhotra, 1999). Question three answer options were based on the top ranking online forums in Ireland and consisted of Boards.ie, Weddingsonline.ie, Politics.ie, Irishhealth.com, Rallyforums.com, Mummypages.ie and 'other'. Question six

options, also came from previous literature and included; to learn (Raban and Rafaeli, 2007; Brazelton and Gorry, 2003), to help others (Raban and Rafaeli, 2007), to share knowledge (Kaiser and Bodendorf, 2012; Raban and Rafaeli, 2007; Lu and Hsiao, 2007; Preece, 1999), enjoyment (Ridings and Gefen, 2004), interest (Pitta and Fowler, 2005) and 'other' (Malhotra, 1999).

Question four was a nominal scale to establish what respondents do within online forums; this question was also rooted depending on the respondents answer. The first three answers went directly onto question five while the fourth answer directed the respondent onto question seven. This was to remove irrelevant questions from the questionnaire based on the respondent's answers, i.e.: 'lurkers' don't contribute so the themes on contributing to online forums were not relevant to those respondents. The question options of; post new threads, post replies, bit of both and I just read and don't contribute was to establish the type of user, such as poster or lurker (Huvila *et al.*, 2010; Wasko and Faraj, 2000; Jones, 2006; Nonnecke and Preece, 1999).

Question five was a nominal scale to establish how often respondents contribute to online forums. Question options included; as needed, daily, weekly, monthly and every few months.

Question seven consisted of a nominal scale asking the respondent to select an option which best describes themselves. This question was to establish the profile of respondents, answer options were based on Moore's curve (Godin, 2002). Options consisted of; (1) always the first to try out new products or services (Innovators), (2) willing to try new products or services (Early Adopters), (3) price sensitive and take my time making purchase decisions (Early Majority), (4) Take my time making purchase decisions and more comfortable with established products or services (Late Majority) and (5) Don't like using new products or services (Laggards).

Question eight was an interval/rating scale, evaluating one object at a time (Malhotra, 1999). Using a five point likert scale where respondents rate their degree of agreement or disagreement with a number of statements, as used by

Hsu *et al* (2012). Taken from the literature (Hsu *et al.*, 2012; Steffes and Burgee, 2009; De Valck, 2005; Okleshen and Grossbart, 1998; Granitz and Ward, 1996) the statements included; (1) reading discussions about a product or service influences your purchase intentions (2) reading negative discussions about a product or service would entice you to make a purchase, (3) reading positive discussions about a product or service would entice you to make a purchase, (4) you trust everything you read within online forums and (5) you trust the opinions of members you have relationships with over new members (Bughin *et al.*, 2010).

Question nine involved an interval scale asking respondents to rate how often they notice advertising within online forums. Answer options were based on the previous research of Hadija *et al* (2012) and positioned on a five point scale, rated from always to never.

Question ten was a gender nominal scale and question eleven was an age ratio scale. Question twelve and thirteen consisted of ratio scales analysing how respondents access the internet along with their internet usage.

Once the questionnaire was designed it was pretested on twenty users similar to the respondents (Malhotra, 1999). After a couple of minor changes to the wording of questions, the questionnaire was set live from Saturday 19th May for a two week period. The questionnaire was given a unique URL in order to increase click through rate and enhance authenticity.

<https://www.surveymonkey.com/s/onlineforums>.

The researcher had considered including a prize incentive to all respondents who completed the questionnaire but chose against it, so as to remove systematic bias in the study (Andrews *et al.*, 2003).

3.6 Sampling

During the sampling process, the researcher kept the main research objective in mind when selecting target sampling population and methods;

To understand the power and influence of online message forums in shaping consumer buyer behaviour

3.6.1 Phase One Sampling Method

The target population for phase one consisted of online community managers and industry experts in Ireland. No comprehensive sampling frame was available so the researcher applied judgement sampling to select participants. The researcher approached a known contact for interviewing and requested the recommendation of other online community managers who would participate in the research. Hence snowball sampling was used to gather interview participants, the same approach as used by Miller (2008). An email was sent in early January 2012 inviting selected interviewees to show their interest in participating in the research. The email included a short pre-notification introducing them to the research (Andrews *et al.*, 2003). Follow up reminders were then sent to those who consented to participate and an appropriate interview time and date was scheduled. A sample size of four participants were chosen for interviewing, reflecting a similar size to previous research (Wilson, 1999; Rolfe and Gilbert, 2006).

3.6.2 Phase Two Sampling Method

The second phase of the research consisted of an online questionnaire with online forum users. Previous research has found it impossible to draw a random sample from a complete list of internet users and the online population is not reflective of the offline population (Holstein and Gubrium, 2003) as some demographic groups are strongly over represented and others under-represented (Witte *et al.*, 2000). Online forums are membership based on common interests and little information is required when registering to use these communities. Furthermore, participation in online forums may be sporadic depending on the discussion and measuring the overall active users within the community to draw a sample frame, will be omitting 'lurkers' who may complete the online survey (Wright, 2006).

Non-probability sampling is common in online questionnaires and Coomber (1997) suggested that online self-selection is suitable to use when researching a

particular group of internet users. By applying non-probability sampling, respondents are selected because they happen to be in the right place at the right time (Malhotra, 1999). The researcher chose to adopt the same research approach as Hsien-Chang Huang *et al.*, (2011) who used judgement sampling and posted a web-based questionnaire on larger online communities in Taiwan. The top online forums in Ireland were chosen based on Google ranking and popularity (Table 5). Respondents were invited to participate towards the questionnaire via the URL which was posted within the online forums (Andrews *et al.*, 2003).

Table 5: Top Online Forums in Ireland

Boards.ie
Weddingsonline.ie
Gaire.ie
Irishwebmasterforum.com
Magicmum.com
Rollercoaster.ie

To cooperate with forum rules and guidelines, the URL was posted to ‘General’ or ‘Off Topic’ threads. This is to avoid rude or offensive behaviour (Hudson & Bruckman, 2004) of disturbing the discussion within specific threads, which can also be deleted by moderators (Wright, 2006) or reported as ‘spam’ (Andrews, 2003). All of the above online forums were contacted before posting the link to the URL and each of them approved the section for it to be posted within.

The researcher included a brief outline of the research and contact information along with an invitation to participate in the survey, to enhance the credibility of the research and create opportunities for email interaction between participants (White, 2006).

From the 217 responses received within a two-week period, there was a usable sample of 215 valid surveys. This sample size is comparable to previous research

undertaken within online forums, such as Casaló *et al.*, (2007) and Liao *et al.*, (2011) who also obtained 215 valid questionnaires.

3.7 Analysis

The analysis of the qualitative data consisted of preparing and transcribing all information to identify the main themes and findings (Boeije, 2010). The transcripts were divided into broad themes and coded based on the research objectives (Morrill *et al.*, 2000). The style of the analysis is that of a narrative format (Robson, 2011) which explores stories allowing for insights to emerge (Murray 1997). Key quotes from interviewees on each theme were identified to highlight the 'insider's perspective' and allow to creatively synthesize the findings (Patton, 2002).

The quantitative data was analysed through the functionality of 'Survey Monkey's' online data analysis tools, which consisted mainly of a series of 'filtering' and cross tabulations. Filtering the responses were applied to audience segments and cross tabulations helped identify trends based on the respondent's answers. The data was then transferred into Microsoft Excel where it was manipulated and represented on pie, bar and line graphs to represent the findings.

All data was analysed according to the research themes and, where applicable, linked to the literature review.

Chapter Four – Findings & Analysis

4.1 Introduction

This chapter is structured based on the research methodology. The interview findings are analysed first moving onto the results from the 215 online questionnaires. The findings are analysed against the set research objectives outlined in previous chapters.

4.2 Phase One: Interviews

Analysis of the interview findings are coded against each sub theme according to the relative objective. Four interviews were conducted with two online community managers, one forum founder and one industry expert. Interviewees are identified as R1 – R4.

4.2.1 Influence of Online Forums

Research objective one:

1. To understand the power and influence of online message forums in shaping consumer buyer behaviour.

Sub themes:

1a Influence on other members

1b Influence on 'lurkers'

1c Overall influence of forums

1d Trust within online forums

The first theme, 1a, aims to establish if forum members influence other members purchasing decisions. When put to the interviewees it was a unanimous yes; R1: *"It completely depends on the forum, but generally yes."* R2: *"Yes, both rightly and wrongly."* R3: *"Definitely, getting peer feedback and influence is a big factor in purchasing decisions."* R4: *"Definitely, forums provide an excellent source of research when it comes to buying products or services".* This relates to past literature as members are influenced on the feedback of

others before they purchase a product or service (Price and Feick, 1984; Kaiser and Bodendorf, 2012; Chen and Qi, 2011; Hsu *et al.*, 2012).

1b aims to identify if forums influence non-members or 'lurkers', again the overall opinion from the interviewees was that they do influence members and also non-members / 'lurkers'. R4 points out that *"Whether a person actively engages or contributes to a Forum, the nature of the online environment means that content which gains a lot of traffic and interaction will be placed highly within search rankings and Forum listings. As such anyone doing any sort of purchase research will undoubtedly be influenced by conversations and advice that they weren't necessarily actively involved in."*

When asked about 1c, their overall opinion of the influence of online forums, R1 found the question difficult to answer as *"it all depends on whether or not the consumer actually research forums"*. What R4 states, is in contradiction to this in that consumers don't have to directly research forums as most topics within forums will appear on search engines, *"I think that forums extend beyond themselves and provide a lot of online searchable content. Any web search around a product will throw up forum results and by simple exposure to these a person's purchase decision will be influenced."* R2 points out that *"we live in an age where many consumers read multiple reviews and articles on a product before making a purchase, many of these come from online forums."* Previous research has found online forum influences are high during the information search and evaluation phases (Rowley, 2000; Shim *et al.*, 2001; Wright and Jayawardhena, 2001; De Valck, 2005; Vazquez and Xu, 2009), as R4 highlights, content within forums appear in the results of a search engine, members don't necessarily have to be searching within online forums. The 'searchable content' within online forums provides a strong indication of them being influential during the information search and evaluation phases of the decision making process.

The last theme of this objective was based on trust within online forums, 1d. R1 described forums as a hierarchy, *"established members command a lot of trust*

and credibility". Bearden and Etel (1982) found that information coming from credible sources will be highly accepted and that trustworthiness influences consumers' buyer behaviours (Lascu *et al.*, 1995; Petty and Wegener, 1998). R4 points out that *"those that are very active in a forum will generally be trusted when it comes to making recommendations around purchasing"*, Bickart and Schindler (2001) state that online recommendations are regarded as very trustworthy. R3 makes an interesting point about *"people trust what others say about a product, service, brand or company more than they trust what that company themselves say about themselves"*. R3 portrays previous research (Brown *et al.*, 2007; Schiffman and Kanuk, 1995; Arndt, 1967) that people trust each other's communications over brand communications.

4.2.2 Usage of Online Forums

Research objective three:

3. To understand why people turn to online message forums?
 - a. Why do people contribute / what motivates them?

Sub themes:

3a Why do members use online forums

3b What benefits do users get from online forums

Highlighted within the literature review, members use online forums to exchange ideas and experiences (Srivastava *et al.*, 2005), for information sharing, problem solving and understanding (Savolainen, 2010). To exchange their opinions on products (Kaiser & Bodendorf, 2012), to find out more about products (Evans *et al.*, 2001) and purchasing experiences (De Valck, 2005), along with seeking friendship (Ridings & Gefen, 2004).

Based on the literature, 3a, why do members use online forums, was asked to all interviewees. R1 points out that *"online message forums are the original social media. Members use them to discuss, in detail, specific topics and interests they have that they would otherwise be unable to on more general social media or sharing sites"*. R4 also points out that members use online forums to access

information, *“forums generally offer hyper-targeted content to cater to very specific interests that people have. Forums allow them to access information that they simply may not find anywhere else and to talk to people who share that specific interest. R2 talks about a shared interest in that “members use online forums to share and learn new information, explore ideas, to build or maintain a sense of community. To create new friendships and because it gives them a sense of freedom to express ideas of opinions they might not get elsewhere”.* R3 states that it’s simply to *“interact with peers and contribute to the discussion, much in the same way people debate anything in the offline world”.*

3b looks at identifying the benefits members get from using online forums. R1 states that *“members get to be part of a community of enthusiasts on their topic, they also get to socialise with others interested in their passion”* which is similar to what Pitta and Fowler (2005) discuss about a community of relationship. R2 highlights that members *“get access to instant, up-to-date information which validates their knowledge allowing them to share or relate to others experiences”.* While R3 also feels that members *“get to learn from others, often getting answers to common problems more quickly than they might in other ways”.* Previous literature has found that people use online forums for intellectual learning (Brazelton and Gorry, 2003) and knowledge exchange (Preece, 1999). R4 highlights the advantage of online forums in that it is *“content specific to a certain topic of interest and everyone contributing is generally very interested in that topic”.*

4.2.3 Advertising within Online Forums

Research objective four:

4. To measure the awareness and effectiveness of advertising within online forums.

Sub themes:

4a Should companies use forums as a marketing tool?

4b Is advertising within online forums effective?

Literature has found that online forums are a vital resource for marketers (Kuo-Ming Chu, 2009) for data collection (Pitta & Fowler, 2005), Netnography (Kozinets, 2002) and trend scouting (Graubner-Muller, 2011). Relevant forums should be used for marketing communications (Ahonen & Moore, 2005) and opinion leaders could be influenced to help generate promotion (Kaiser and Bodendorf, 2012).

When asked the interviewees about 4a, it was a mixed response. R1 feels that companies shouldn't directly use forums as a marketing tool as *"they should be used as customer service and feedback systems. Promotion within online forums is more often than not, seen as spam"*. R3 also discusses promotion within online forums, *"less promotional and marketing, more discussion and listening; forums are like a social event, if you promote, people will find you a total bore, if you discuss and listen, people will engage"*. R2 also states that *"direct marketing and promotion should be kept to an extreme minimum and that those who blatantly only out to promote themselves will not be tolerated"*. However, R2 does think that online forums are an excellent way for passive marketing and promotion for those who *"build relationships and are accepted into the community by offering advice and guidance"*; this is similar to the findings of Farquhar and Rowley (2006) who discuss using online forums to strengthen relationships. R4 argues that it's not something that can be answered universally, *"some should and others shouldn't, it all comes down to individual circumstances, however, every company should consider if they should be using forums for marketing"*.

Theme 4b brought mixed feelings when asked. R1 being the only candidate who clearly stated *"from experience, yes"* while R3 talked about less promotion, more listening and didn't find advertising within forums effective, *"definitely not"*. R2 discussed how it *"depends on the forum, its users, your target audience and the number of people advertising on that forum"*. While R4 highlights how *"the effectiveness of any advertising will rest with the creative and execution of that advertising"* and goes onto discuss how *"forum sites for advertising are definitely"*

worth considering, especially where the brand or product being advertised fall within a topic that there is an active forum discussing it”.

4.2.4 Using Online Forums

Research objective five:

5. To investigate how companies should approach using information and handling reviews within online forums.

Sub themes:

5a Negative discussions

5b Monitoring forums

5c Customer research, NPD, Innovation

5d Advantage of online forums

5e Advice

When asked how companies should handle negative online discussions R1 stated that companies should *“get involved in the discussion and resolve the problem in public”*. R2 believes that it depends on the company and the nature of the negative post, but also to address the issue, reply politely and offer solutions, *“ideally you want to turn the negative into a positive. Often company’s initial reaction is to remove it immediately, which can worsen the situation. Leave the post up for a week or two until it’s died down and then look to have it removed if necessary”*. R4 also mentioned how *“it may be better to let it fizzle out and fade away than to stoke the flames, so to speak. Before engaging it is always worth investigating what impact the discussion is having and how visible it is”*. R3 talks about having an online PR plan in place before situations arise and gives three main points; (1) an online PR plan to ensure every customer has their voices heard, (2) treat customers really well in the first place so that you don’t have to deal with the issues and (3) make sure that they know when to respond, when to ignore, when to declare publicly, what to speak privately and when to take discussions offline.

5b, should companies monitor online forums was put to the interviewees, to which it was a unanimous answer. This reflects the findings of Hong-Youl Ha (2004) who suggest that marketers should conduct ongoing updates of online communities because it will increase customer value and brand loyalty. R1 points out that the majority of large companies do this now, *“yes, for sentiment analysis, customer service and engagement”*. R2 and R3 both feel companies should be monitoring online forums with R3 adding *“even if they decide to ignore they should at least be aware of what they are ignoring”*. R4 add that *“companies should monitor all online platforms for their brand, product, industry or association and that anyone not doing this is at a disadvantage to their competitors”*.

5c, should companies use online forums as a form of customer research, NPD or a source of innovation also brought a unanimous yes response from the interviewees. R1 states that *“forums can provide priceless market and consumer research”*. R3 adds that *“it’s all about listening and using what you learn to market better, become a better company and develop better products and services”*. R4 points out that *“any customer research, NPD or source of innovation should be conducted across all online platforms”*, however R2 mentions that *“would be largely dependent on the method and willingness of the users to part-take”*. Pitta and Fowler (2005) highlighted the benefits of online forums to marketers, as a source of market research and that insights in consumer behaviour generated by Netnography could serve as a focal point for product development (De Valck, 2005).

Using online forums to a company’s advantage, 5d was asked where R1 mentioned about becoming engaged with customers, *“listen, never try to sell, show them what they will get when they become customers”*. R3 also mentions listening, *“listening is everything, online forums and social media are about dialogue, not monologue”*. R4 agrees with R1 about engaging with customers while R2 suggests that companies should *“regularly posting valid information and advice that the users will want to read, use or need”*.

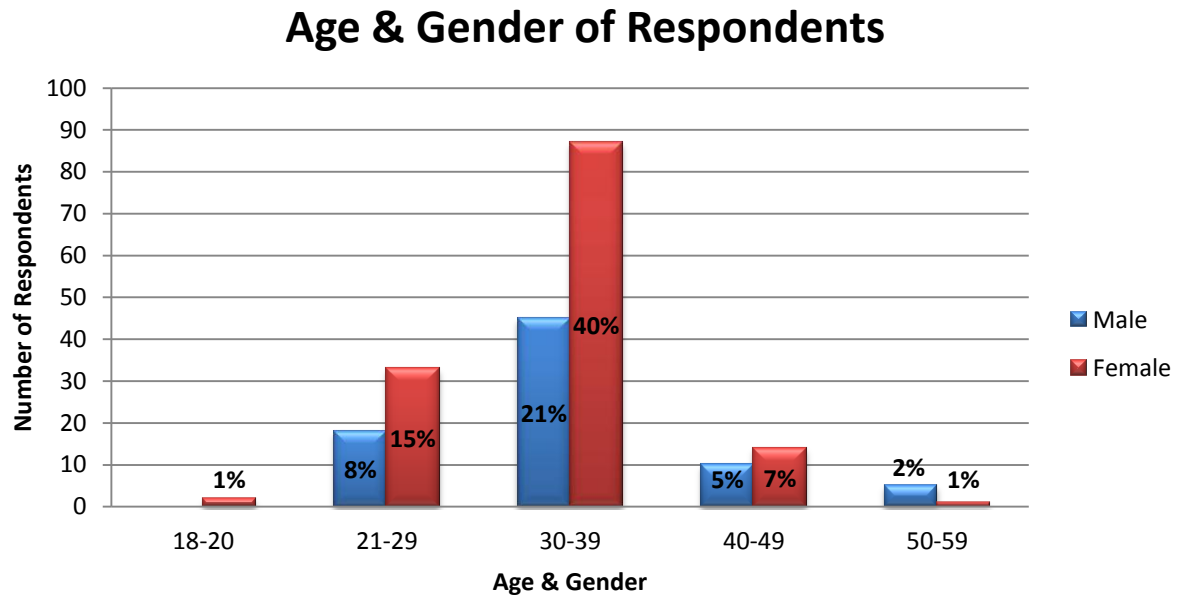
Lastly, 5e, asked interviewees for any advice they would give companies in relation to online forums. R1 discusses how someone with no experience of social media or an intern should not handle the forum for the company, *“the higher the person in the organisation dealing with the public in this fashion, the more trust the company will be perceived as having. When something goes wrong, confront it head on, and don’t pretend it didn’t happen”*. R4 suggests that marketers should *“research first, work out where your customers / audience are. Work out what they are saying and decide if there is value in engaging with them”*. R3 closes by saying that online forums are social media, not sales media and not commercial media, *“think of someone in the bar or at a dinner party constantly talking about themselves and their business - people would think he / she was an idiot. However someone who just talks naturally, is interested in the needs and thoughts of others, and converses freely, will naturally meet friends and engage - it is exactly the same in the digital world”*. Previous literature on online forums is now focusing on value being delivered through consumer-to-consumer bonding (Mathwick *et al.*, 2008) and relationship marketing (Pitta and Fowler, 2005).

4.3 Phase Two: Questionnaire

Analysis of the questionnaire findings were filtered through the functionality of filtering and cross tabulations offered by ‘Survey Monkey’. Questions were exported into Microsoft Excel for manipulation and represented on graphs.

4.3.1 Profile of Respondents

Figure 2: Respondents Age & Gender Profile



A sample of 215 online forums users of which 77 were male (36 percent) and 138 were female (64 percent) participated. This reflects a similar sample of mostly females as found by Chu (2009). A cross tabulation of age and gender, as seen in Figure 2, shows that the majority age group who contributed to the research was in the 30-39 age bracket. Figure 3 highlights how users of online forums access the internet. Both males and females accessed the internet mostly via a laptop, (21 percent male, 39 percent female). Desktop was the second highest medium used to access the internet followed up with phone and lastly a tablet.

Figure 3: Respondents Access to the Internet

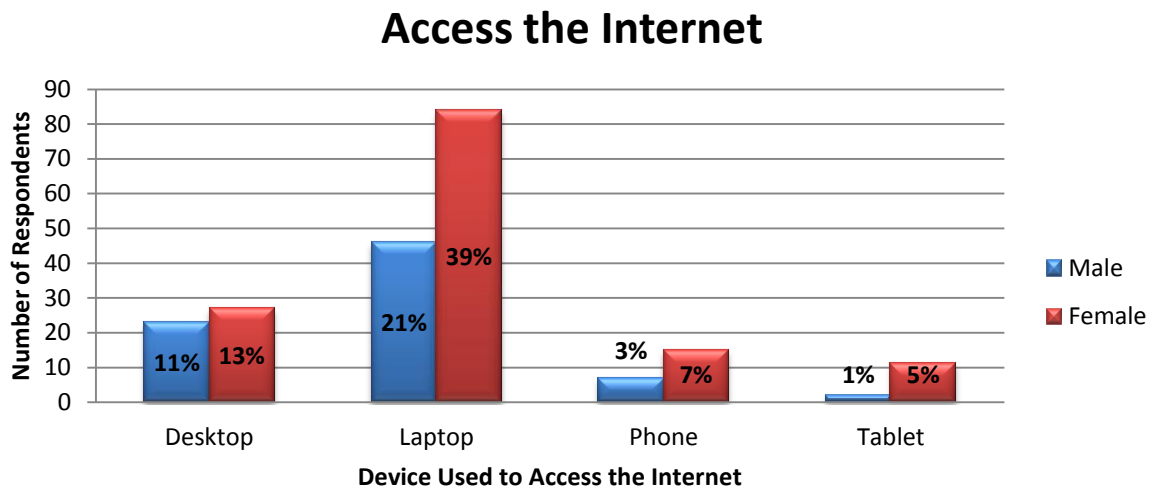


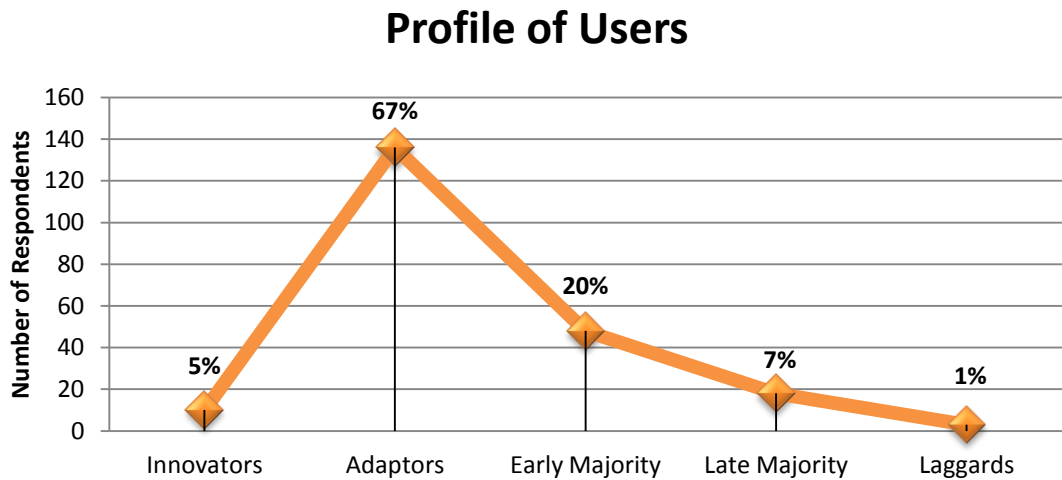
Table 6 shows a cross tabulation of time spent on the internet versus the medium used to access the internet. Respondents used Desktop and laptops for longer period of time on the internet while phones and tablets were popular for shorter period of time. The majority of time spent on the internet was less than 4 hours (52 percent), 20 percent less than 7 hours, 18 percent less than 2 hours and 2 percent less than 1 hour. 8 percent of the respondents spent more than 7 hours on the internet.

Table 6: Time Spent on & Accessing the Internet

	Phone	Tablet	Desktop	Laptop
< 1 Hour	5%		2%	3%
< 2 Hours	32%	39%	24%	11%
< 4 Hours	41%	31%	41%	60%
< 7 Hours	22%	30%	22%	17%
> 7 Hours			11%	9%

Respondents of online forums were profiled against Moore’s curve, see Figure 4. Online forums users were found to be mostly early adoptors with 67 percent. Forum users who would class themselves as innovators consisted of 5 percent, while 20 percent are early majority. 7 percent rated themselves late majority with 1 percent being laggards.

Figure 4: Profile of Online Forum Users



A cross tabulation of the profile of users against the age and gender profile, Figure 5, shows that Innovators are mostly male with an average age of 35. Early Adaptors and the Early Majority also have an average age of 35 and consist mainly of females. With the Late Majority having an even amount of males and females, with average age also 35. Laggards however showed a lower average age of 28.

Figure 5: User Profile Age & Gender

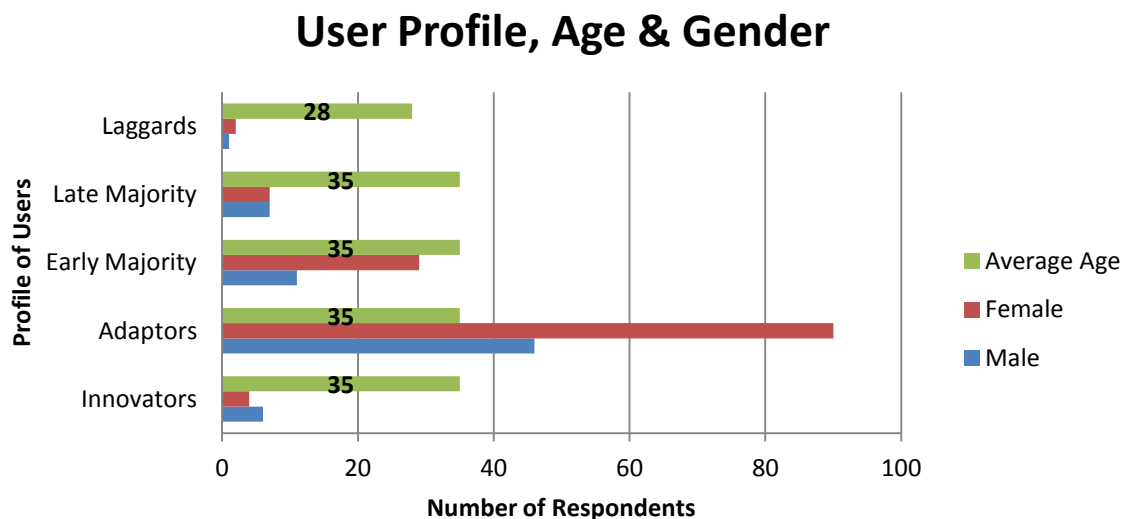
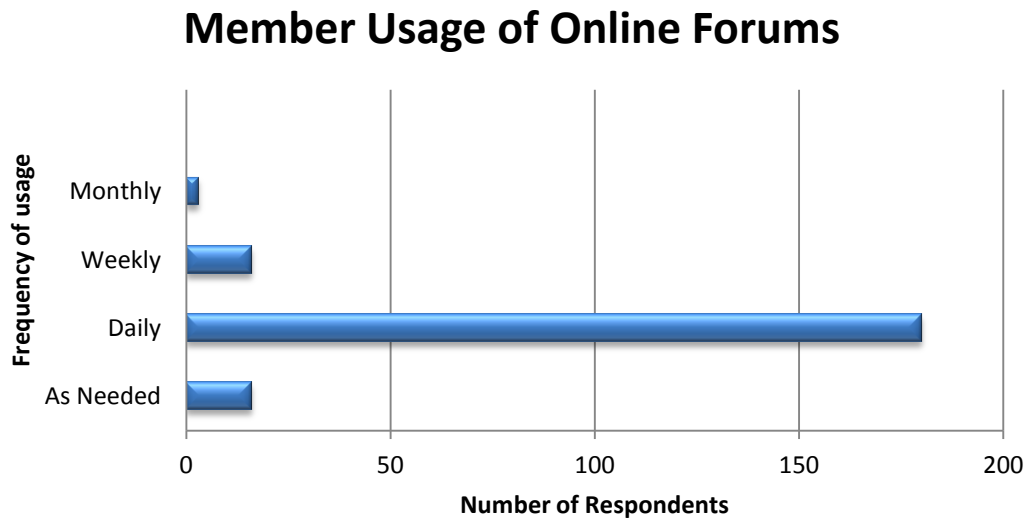


Figure 6 shows how often members use online forums, 180 respondents use online forums daily (84 percent) with 16 (7 percent) using them weekly or as needed and 3 (2 percent) using online forums monthly.

Figure 6: Member usage of online forums



The qualitative findings reveal that members use online forums for discussion (R1 and R3), accessing information about a shared interest (R4) and/or to share and learn new information (R2). Previous literature found that online forums are used for; discussion (Raban and Rafaeli, 2007), research (Evans *et al.*, 2001), pastime (Lu and Hsiao, 2007), feedback (Ridings and Gefen, 2004) and/or advice (Chen and Qi, 2011; Pitta and Fowler, 2005). This new research shows that members mainly use online forums for discussion (77 percent), pastime (67 percent), advice (65 percent) and research (56 percent). With a lower number of respondents using online forums for; feedback (13 percent) other (4 percent) and job (3 percent). 'Other' responses include; entertainment, friendship, gossip, craic, information search, campaigning and external validation, (Figure 7).

Figure 7: Why use online forums

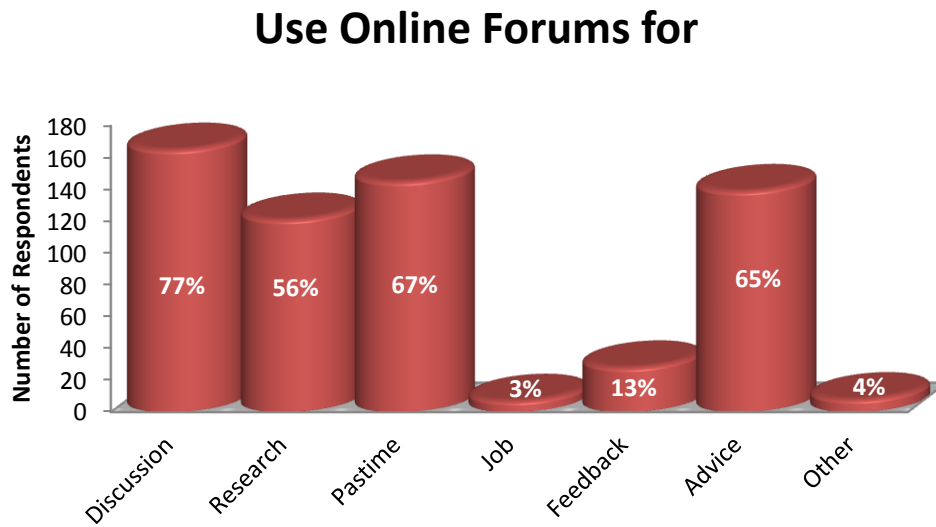


Figure 8 illustrates the findings of frequently of usage against what members use online forums for. Discussion, research, pastime and advice ranked highly for daily users of online forums while these elements factored lower for weekly and monthly users. Members who used online forums ‘as needed’ were seeking discussion and research with advice and pastime ranking low.

Figure 8: Frequency & usage of online forums

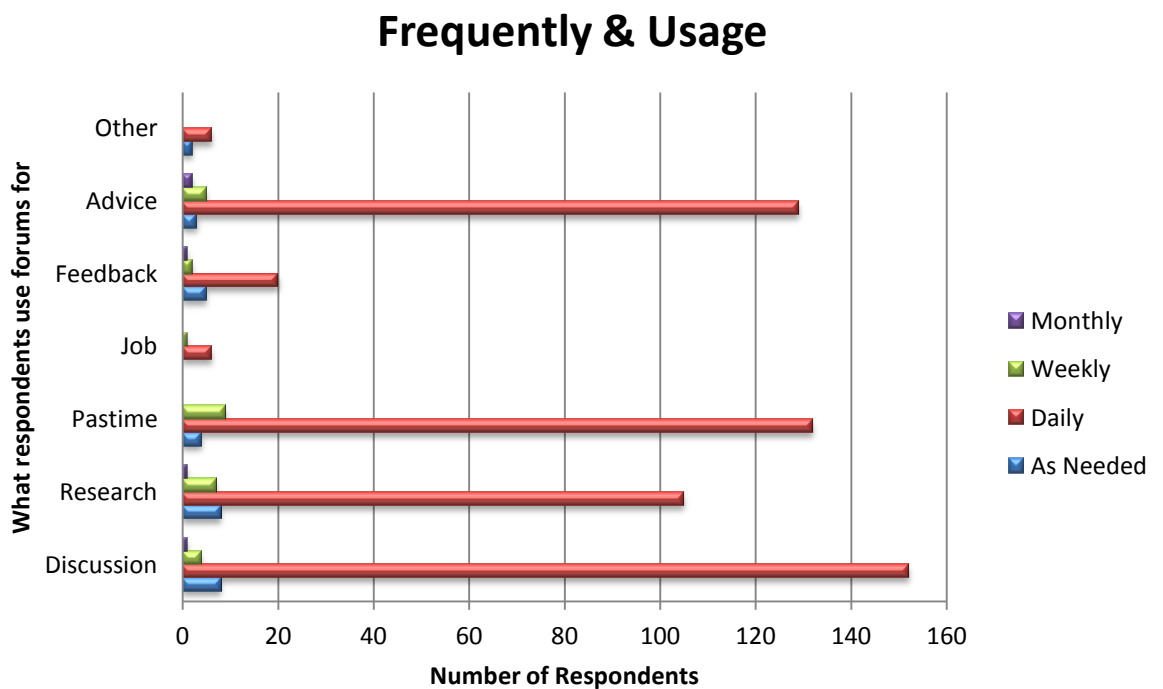
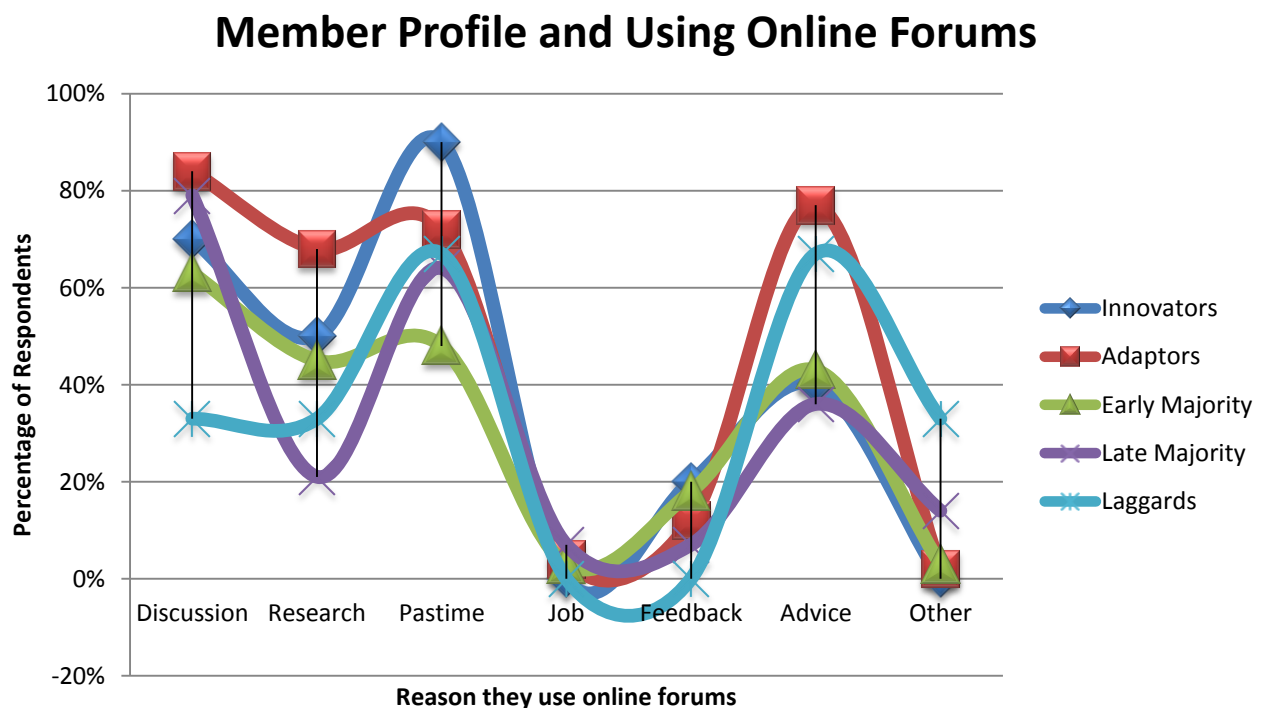


Figure 9 shows the relationship between the profile of users and the reason that that profile use online forums. Innovators use online forums mainly for pastime (90 percent) and discussion (70 percent), while 50 percent use them for research, a smaller number of innovators use them for feedback and advice. Early adopters use online forums for discussion (84 percent), advice (77 percent), pastime (72 percent) and research (68 percent) with 12 percent using them for feedback. Early majority mainly use forums for discussion (62 percent), pastime (47 percent) and advice (42 percent) while the late majority also use forums for discussion (79 percent), pastime (67 percent) and advice (36 percent). Laggards counted pastime (67 percent) and advice (67 percent) as the reasons they use online forums.

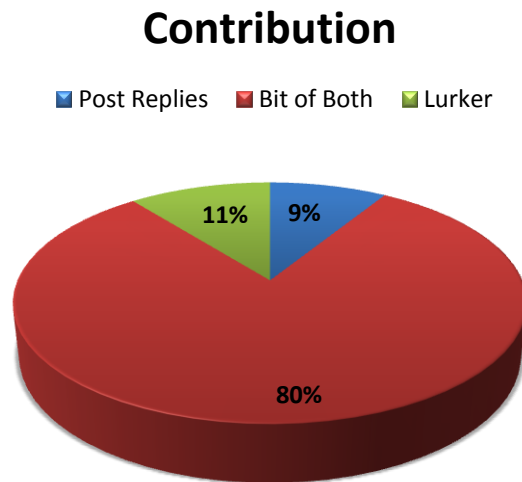
Figure 9: Profile of users and online forum usage



4.3.2 Contribute to Online Forums

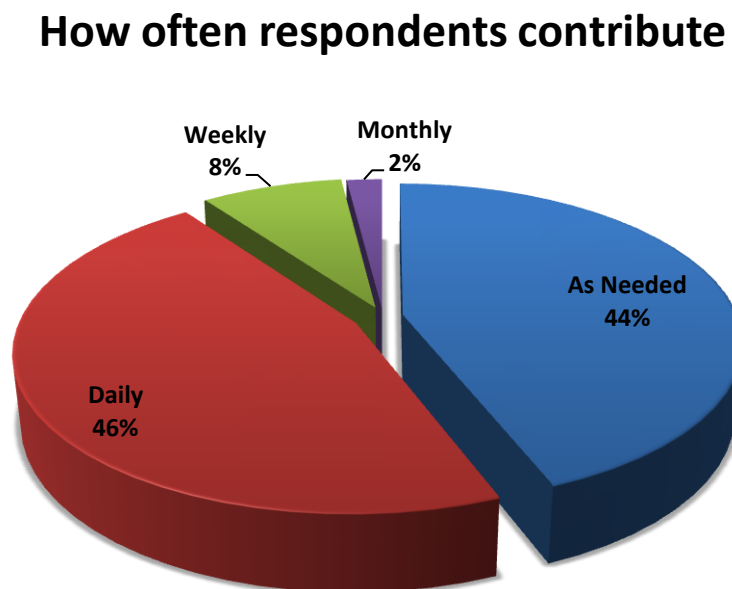
When asked what do members usually do within online forums, 173 (80 percent) chose a bit of both, being, post new threads and/or post replies. 23 (11 percent) don't contribute or post within forums, they just read and are therefore categorised as 'lurkers'. 19 (9 percent) stated that they post replies to topics within online forums (Figure 10).

Figure 10: Contribute to online forums



When asked how often users contribute towards online forums 46 percent said they contribute daily, 44 percent contribute ‘as needed’ and 8 percent contribute on a weekly basis. The remaining 2 percent contribute monthly, Figure 11.

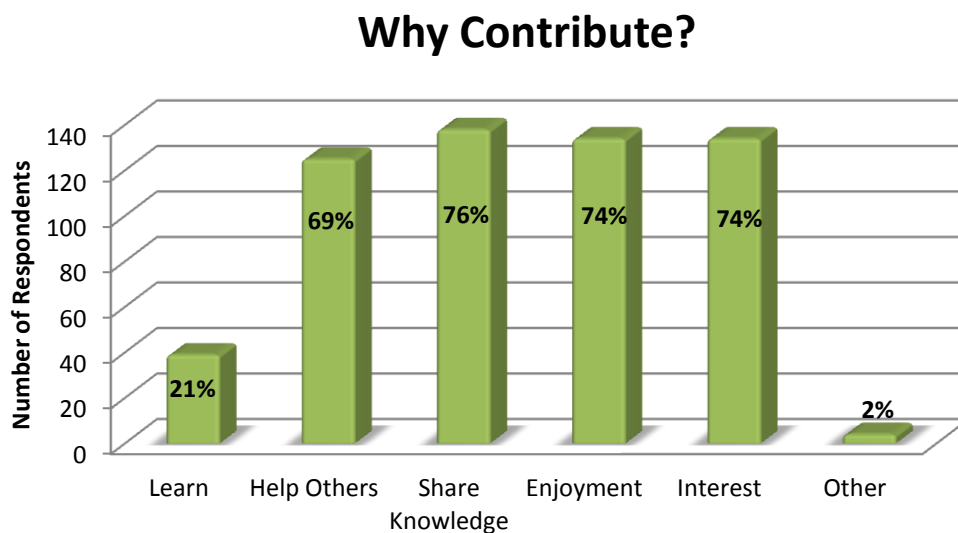
Figure 11: How often users contribute



The qualitative findings show that members contribute to online forums to be part of a community (R1), share knowledge (R2), to learn (R3) and/or shared

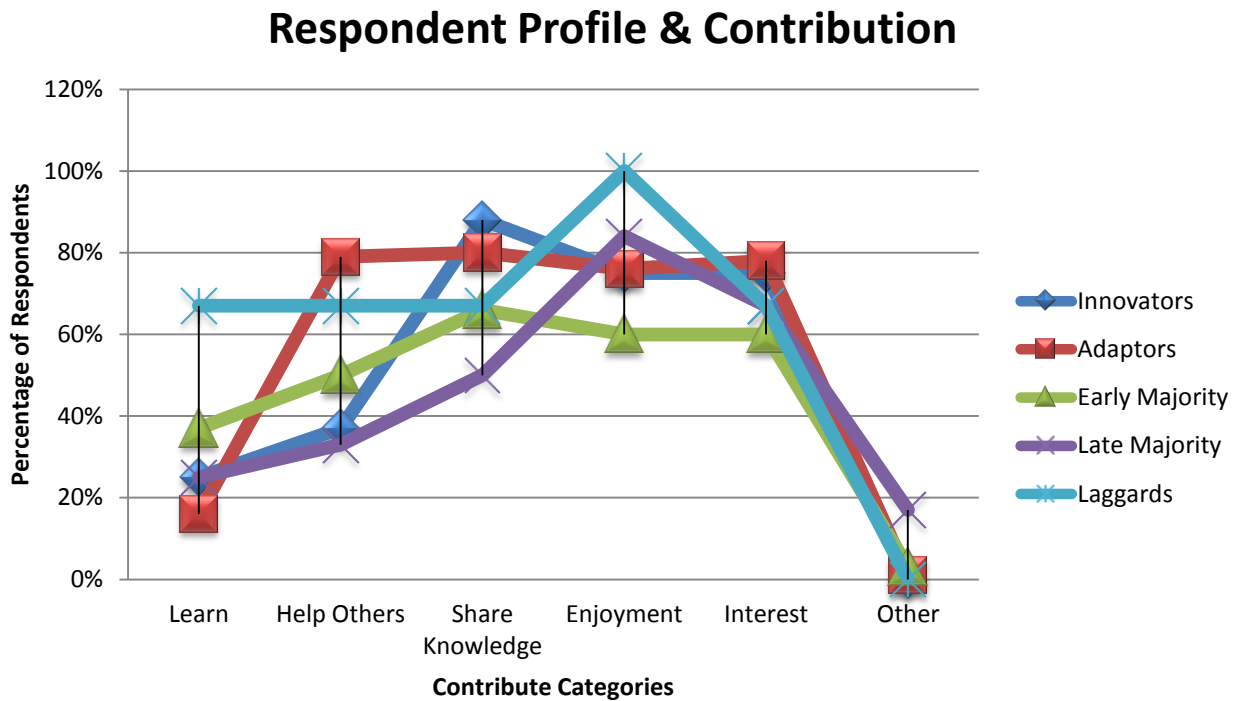
interest (R4). De Valck (2005) found four main frames of discussion; (1) sharing knowledge, (2) negotiating norms, (3) opposing values and (4) celebrating similarities. Hsu *et al* (2012) found that members identify with an online community because it provides a source of information and helps in achieving tasks and goals. This research shows that Irish users contribute towards online forums to share knowledge (76 percent), for enjoyment (74 percent), interest (74 percent) and to help others (69 percent). A lower level of respondents said they contribute towards online forums to learn (21 percent) and 2 percent of respondents chose 'other' and stated they contribute for (1) craic, (2) the social side of things, (3) campaigning, (4) education, (5) a safe space and (6) boredom in work, (Figure 12).

Figure 12: Why users contribute to online forums



A cross tabulation of why respondents contribute to online forums and the profile of users can be seen in Figure 13, Innovators contribute mainly to online forums to share knowledge (87 percent), which is the same for early adoptors (80 percent) and the early majority (66 percent). However the late majority (83 percent) and laggards (100 percent) contribute to online forums for enjoyment.

Figure 13: User contribution & profile



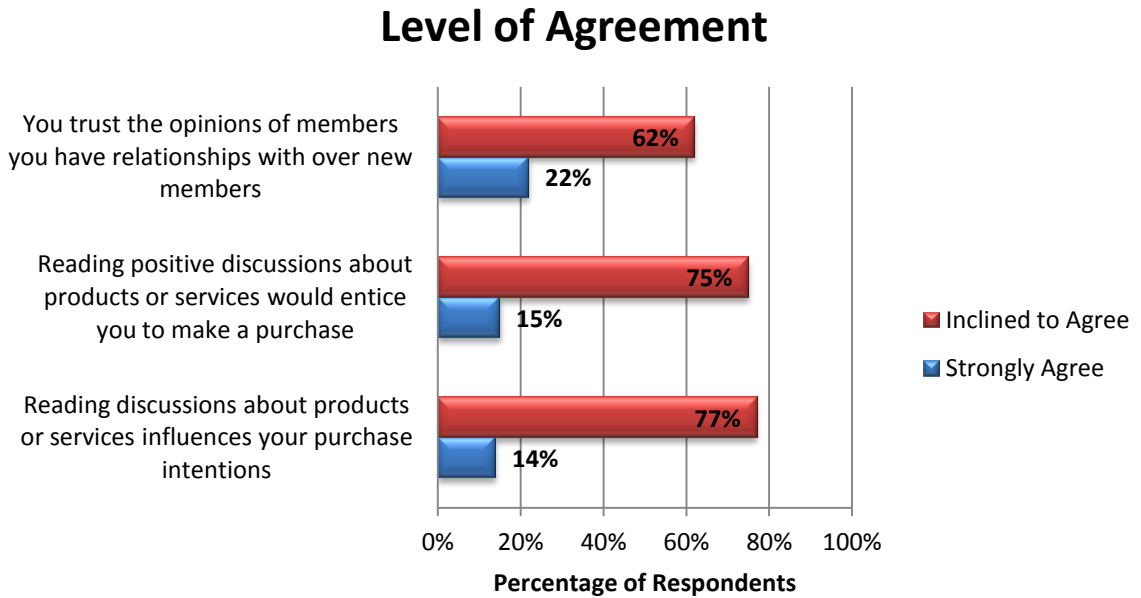
4.3.3 Influence of Online Forums

According to Bughin *et al* (2010), it's the opinions of people we trust that are valued more. The qualitative findings reveal that established members are highly trusted (R1) and that those who are highly active within online forums will generally be trusted (R4). This new research found that 62 percent of Irish online forums users trust the opinions of members they have relationships with over new members, Figure 14.

Online recommendations are regarded as very trustworthy (Bickart and Schindler, 2001) and the greater the level of trustworthiness, the higher the intension of making a purchase (Lee *et al.*, 2011). Figure 14 shows that 75 percent of respondents said reading positive discussions about a product or service would entice them to purchase that item. 77 percent agree that reading discussions about products or service influences their purchase intentions. This reflects the literature in that trustworthiness influences consumers' positive attitudes towards a brand and their buyer behaviours (Lascu *et al.*, 1995; Petty and Wegener, 1998). The qualitative findings also state that online forums are a big influence in purchasing decisions (R3) and consumers are researching

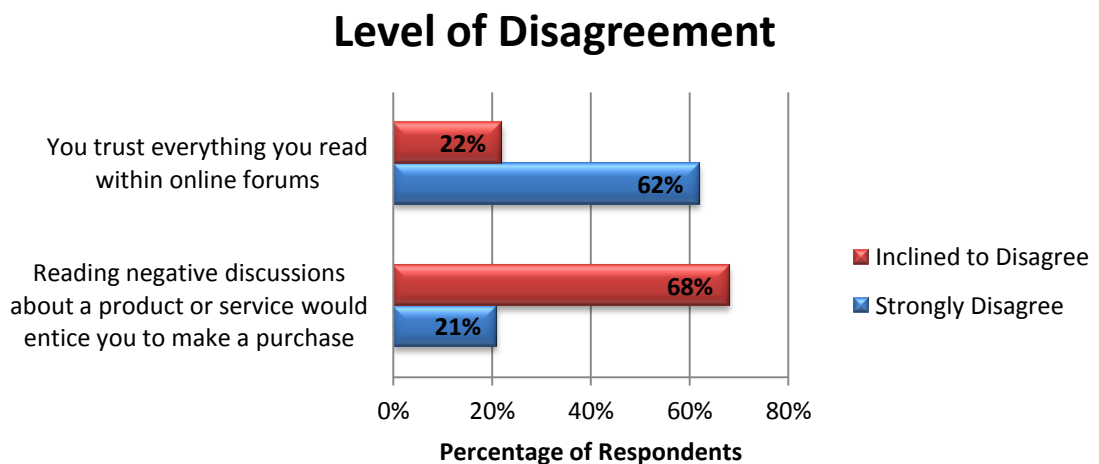
products before making a purchase with the majority of the reviews coming from online forums (R2).

Figure 14: Statements Respondents Agreed with



According to Horppu *et al* (2008), members do not always trust the information given in online forums. This research reflects those findings as 62 percent of Irish users strongly disagreed when asked if they trust everything they read within an online forum. 68 percent of respondents wouldn't be influenced to purchase a product or service after reading negative discussions about it, Figure 15.

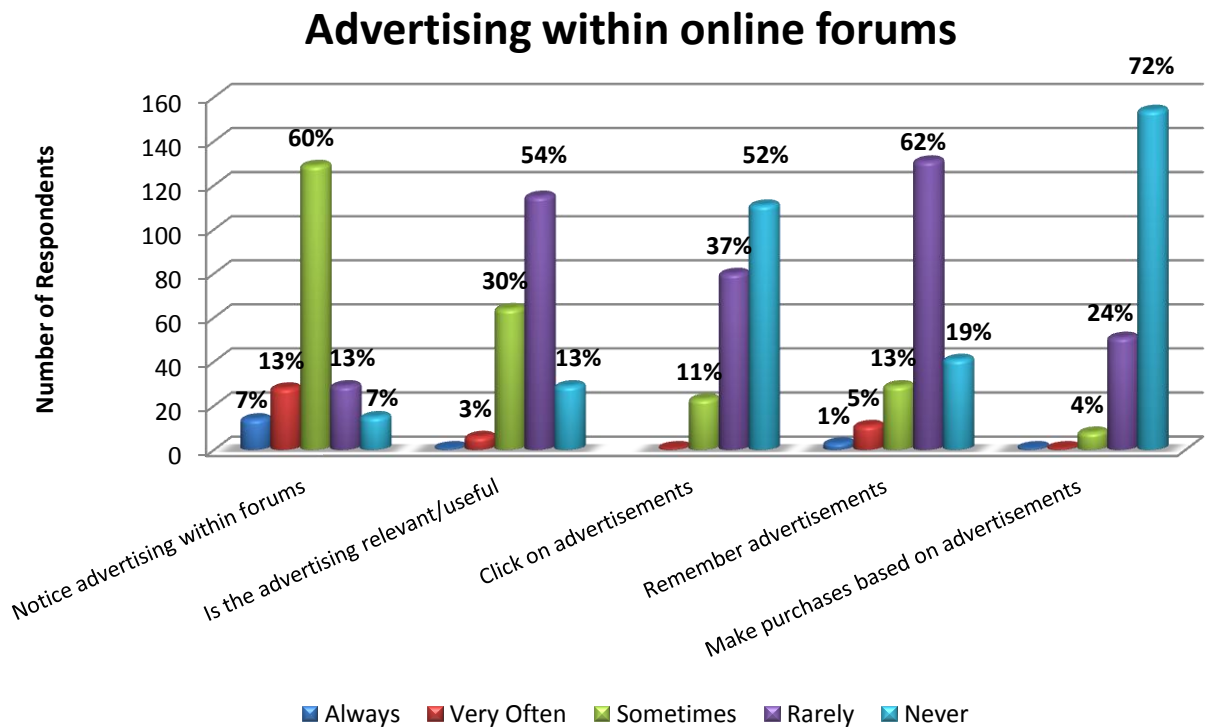
Figure 15: Statements Respondents Disagreed with



4.3.4 Awareness of Advertising

Pitta and Fowler (2005) highlight that consumers get irritated by advertisements within online communities which results in them being ignoring. Hadija *et al.*, (2012) found that users of online communities do not dislike advertisements, but they simply do not notice them. This research found that 60 percent of Irish online forums users sometimes notice advertising within online forums. 54 percent found that the advertisements were rarely relevant or useful and 62 percent said they rarely remember advertisements. 52 percent of respondents never click on advertisements with 72 percent never making purchases based on the advertisements, Figure 16.

Figure 16: Advertising Influence within Online Forums



Chapter Five – Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1 Introduction

The objective of this chapter is to report and present the results from the findings and analysis and to make recommendations. This chapter is formulated based on the findings and will relate, where applicable, back to the literature and thus aid the proposal of practical recommendations for Irish marketers and academics researching online forums.

5.2 The Influence of Online Forums in Shaping Consumer Buyer Behaviour

Results from both the qualitative and quantitative findings indicate that online forums have an influence in consumer buyer behaviour. Findings from the questionnaire reveal that reading discussions within online forums influences consumers purchase intentions. Granitz and Ward (1996) found that purchases are influenced by discussions or recommendations and that through discussions within online forums, consumers directly influence each other's opinions and therefore their purchasing decisions (Kaiser and Bodendorf, 2012).

Literature has also highlighted online forum influences are high during the information search and evaluation stages (Rowley, 2000; Shim *et al.*, 2001; Wright and Jayawardhena, 2001; De Valck, 2005; Vazquez and Xu, 2009). The interview findings show that we live in an age where consumers now research products and services before making a purchase. Online forums are highly influential during the information search and evaluation stage of the decision making process, not just for the members of the online forums. Information discussed within online forums appear within the results of search engines, therefore are influential for non-members also.

Literature shows that word of mouse (WOM) has a high impact towards the influence of behaviours (Xia and Bechwati, 2008; Ahonen and Moore, 2005) and that information created within online forums is just as influential in customers'

decisions as their own experiences and is more influential than traditional word of mouth (Burgee, 2009).

The interview findings and literature show that consumer WOM is more influential than brand interactions, in that consumers trust what other consumers say about a product, brand or service over what that product, brand or service says about themselves (Brown *et al.*, 2007; Schiffman and Kanuk, 1995; Arndt, 1967).

5.3 Profile of the Members of Online Forums

The overall profile of online forums users consisted mainly of females (64 percent) and males (36 percent) with the average age bracket of 30-39. Users of online forums spent, on average, less than four hours a day on the internet and accessed it via a laptop. The findings show that laptops and desktops were popular choices to access the internet for long periods of time, while phones and tablets were used for shorter periods of time.

The majority of users of online forums (67 percent) would rate themselves as early adopters. Early adopters are those who benefit from using new products or services and are keen to maintain their edge over the rest of the population by seeking out new products or services (Godin, 2002). In this research the profile of early adopters was mostly female with an average age of 35.

Early adopters have found to use online forums for discussion (84 percent), advice (77 percent), pastime (72 percent) and research (68 percent). They contribute to online forums mainly to share knowledge (80 percent).

5.4 Why People Use Online Forums

84 percent of users of online forums access forums on a daily basis. The main reasons members use online forums is for; discussion (77 percent), pastime (67 percent), advice (65 percent) and research (56 percent). The findings reflect previous literature which has also found that online forums are used for; discussion (Raban and Rafaeli, 2007), pastime (Lu and Hsiao, 2007), advice (Chen and Qi, 2011; Pitta and Fowler, 2005) and/or research (Evans *et al.*, 2001). The interview findings also reveal that members use online forums for discussion (R1

and R3) along with; accessing information about a shared interest (R4) and/or to share and learn new information (R2).

5.4.1 Why do People Contribute to Online Forums

The questionnaire, interview and literature show some similarities as to why people contribute to online forums. The results of the questionnaire show that 80 percent of users post new threads and/or post replies within online forums. 11 percent of the respondents are categorised as 'lurkers' who don't post and just read the content within online forums. The majority of 'posters' (Nonnecke and Preece, 1999) contribute to forums on a daily basis (46 percent) or on a 'as needed' (44 percent) basis.

This research found the main reason why users contribute towards online forums is to share knowledge (76 percent) as also found in the interviews and by De Valck (2005), for enjoyment (74 percent), interest (74 percent) and to help others (69 percent). The interview findings also found that members contribute to be part of a community, to learn and/or have a shared interest.

5.6 The Awareness and Effectiveness of Advertising within Online Forums

The findings from the questionnaires, interviews and literature are all similar when discussing advertising within online forums. The findings from the questionnaire reveal that users of online forums sometimes notice advertising within online forums (60 percent). 54 percent of users found that the advertising within online forums was rarely useful and that 52 percent of users never click on advertisements. Overall it was found that users rarely remember advertisements (62 percent) and that 72 percent of users would never purchase a product based on the advertisements within online forums. This reflects the findings of Pitta and Fowler (2005) and Hadija *et al* (2012) who found that consumers ignored advertisements and simply did not notice them.

The interview findings reveal that online forums shouldn't be used as a promotional tool but instead to be used for discussion and listening. Companies should consider if they should be using online forums, it's not universal for all

organisations. The success of advertisements within online forums relies on the creative and execution with direct marketing and promotion being kept to a minimum. It is suggested that companies should use online forums as customer service and feedback systems and to build relationships in the community by offering advice and guidance. Relationship marketing was highlighted by Pitta and Fowler (2005), who found that forums have the potential to offer an exceptional link between marketer and consumer, using online communities can strengthen these relationships (Farquhar and Rowley, 2006).

5.7 How Companies Should Use Online Forums

The interview findings reveal that, when handling negative discussions within online forums, companies should first consider what impact the discussion is having and how visible it is. Don't remove the discussion removed immediately, try to resolve the problem in public first, then after a few weeks, when the discussion has died down, and look to have it removed if necessary.

Consumers are using online forums to exchange their opinions on products, providing a valuable source of information for companies (Kaiser & Bodendorf, 2012). Hong-Youl Ha (2004) suggested that marketers conduct ongoing updates of online communities because it will increase customer value and brand loyalty. The findings from the interviews also found that marketers should monitor online forums, even if companies decide to ignore the content at least be aware of what is being ignored. The majority of large organisations are now monitoring online forums and any company not doing this is at a disadvantage to their competitors. The findings also reveal online forums are a vital resource for research, NPD and a source of innovation for companies and marketers. Listening to consumers will enable companies to market better, develop better products and become a better company. Previous research has also highlighted the benefits of online forums to marketers; market research giving insights into consumer behaviour (Pitta and Fowler, 2005) which could service as a focal point for product development (De Valck, 2005).

5.8 Recommendations

Based on the previous findings and conclusions related to the research objectives, a set of recommendations for marketers are outlined below;

Companies should monitor online forums for the purposes of research bringing to light areas for new product development and innovation. Listening to consumers will enable companies to market better, develop better products and become a better company. Savvy businesses should take advantage of the content within online forums in order to learn, exploit, add value and maintain a competitive advantage.

When looking at Moore's Curve, it was traditionally common for marketers to target the largest section, that being the early and late majority. In this research, the early adopters are the influencers and marketing to them is the vital tool. The early adopters will then in turn, embrace your product/service and sell it to the early and late majority.

Marketers should use online forums, not as a promotional tool but more for relationship marketing, discussion, listening and/or customer service and feedback systems. Adding value to consumers by providing them with expert knowledge and advice while interacting and engaging to build brand loyalty and a position of expertise.

Companies should develop an online PR plan which should include; forum monitoring, procedure for handling discussions, engagement plan and measurement system.

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Appendices

A. Consent Form



Academic Research Consent Form

Research Title: Evaluating the Power of Online Forums in Consumer Buyer Behaviour

Researcher & Student: Jennie Byrne (L00084717)

Research Supervisor: Vicky O'Rourke

Letterkenny Institute of Technology | MSc in Marketing Practise

Purpose of Research

This research aims to examine the power and influence of online forums in shaping consumer buyer behaviour within Ireland.

This research aims:

1. To understand the power and influence of online message forums in shaping consumer buyer behaviour.
2. To profile the members of online message forums.
3. To understand why people turn to online message forums.
 - Why do people contribute/what motivates them.
4. To measure the awareness and effectiveness of advertising within online forums.
5. To investigate how companies should approach using information and handling reviews within online forums.

Confidentiality of Research

The data from this research may be published however; all parties that participate in this research will remain unnamed and confidential unless directly requested in writing to the researcher to be named.

I agree to participate in this research.

Signature _____

Printed Name _____

Date _____

B. Interview Theme Sheet

Why do you think members use online message forums?

What benefits do users get from using these forums?

Do you think members influence other members purchasing decisions?

Do you think the information within online message forums can influence 'Lurkers' purchasing decisions?

Do you feel online message forums have an influence in consumers overall purchase decisions? If so, how? – If not, why?

Do you think everything discussed within an online message forum is correct, factual and ethical? (false reviews etc)

How should companies handle negative online discussions?

Should companies monitor online message forums for their industry or association?

Should companies use online message forums as a marketing/promotional tool?

In your opinion, is advertising within online forums effective?

Should companies use online message forums as a form of customer research, new product development or a source of innovation?

How should companies use online message forums to their advantage?

Any advice you would give companies in relation to online message forums?

C. Questionnaire

Online Message Forums Exit this survey

1. How often do you use online message forums?

As needed Daily Weekly Monthly One time only

2. What do you mainly use message forums for?

Discussion
 Research
 Pastime
 Job
 Feedback
 Advice
 Other (please specify)

3. Which message forums do you use the most?

Boards.ie
 Weddingsonline.ie
 Politics.ie
 Irishhealth.com
 Rallyforums.com
 Mummypages.ie
 Other (please specify)

4. What do you mostly do in online forums?

Post new threads Post replies Bit of both I just read and don't contribute

5. How often do you contribute towards online forums?

- As needed
- Daily
- Weekly
- Monthly
- Every few months

6. Why do you contribute towards online forums?

- To Learn
- To Help Others
- To Share Knowledge
- Enjoyment
- Interest
- Other (please specify)

7. Which of the below best describes you?

- Always the first to try out new products or services
- Willing to try new products or services
- Price sensitive and take my time making purchase decisions
- Take my time making purchase decisions and more comfortable with established products or services
- Don't like using new products or services

8. Please indicate your degree of agreement / disagreement with the following statements:

	Strongly Agree	Inclined to Agree	Neither	Inclined to Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Reading discussions about a product or service influences your purchase intentions	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Reading negative discussions about a product or service would entice you to make a purchase	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Reading positive discussions about a product or service would entice you to make a purchase	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
You trust everything you read within online forums	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
You trust the opinions of members you have relationships with over new members	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

9. How often..

	Always	Very often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
Do you notice advertising within online forums?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Do you find it relevant/useful?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Do you click on advertisements?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Can you recall advertisements you have seen within online forums?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Do you purchase products or services based on advertisements within online forums?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

10. Gender

- Male
- Female

11. Which category below includes your age?

- 17 or younger
- 18-20
- 21-29
- 30-39
- 40-49
- 50-59
- 60 or older

12. How do you access the internet most often?

- Phone
- Tablet
- Desktop
- Laptop
- Other (please specify)

13. In a typical day, how many hours do you spend on the internet?

- Less than 1 hour
- Less than 2 hours
- Less than 4 hours
- Less than 7 hours
- More than 7 hours

Prev Done

D. Evidence of Questionnaire

