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The Emergence of a new Actor Category in Electronic Word of Mouth Communication

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A thesis submitted to the University of Edinburgh Business School for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Management.

Edinburgh, 2015
Declaration

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_______________________
Abstract

Digital platforms such as blogs and social networking sites provide new means for individuals to gather and spread information about products and services through electronic Word of Mouth (eWOM). Within those platforms, individuals have the potential to emerge to become influential actors with the power to affect the behaviours and attitudes of others. Despite the growing interest in online influence, there is still a limited understanding of how key individuals share and engage in eWOM. This study looks at tech-bloggers as an emerging actor category that create and develop consumption oriented online content such as product reviews using blogs and associated technologies.

This thesis presents an in depth qualitative investigation to understand how this emerging actor category have been able to establish an influential status. Existing literature often labelled bloggers as “opinion leaders” obscuring what is new and different about them. Building a practice based discussion of these emerging actors aims to capture activities and processes in a wider, natural setting. Paired with the exploratory nature of research, this thesis draws on a conceptually grounded, qualitative research approach utilising interviews with key tech-bloggers, marketers and blog analysis.

Findings show that these emerging actors engage in three distinct but interrelated practices centred on audience construction, content development and network formation. Audience construction requires emerging actors to develop quality content utilising existing networks composed of other actors within the same category and the audience. As a consequence, emerging actors are socially embedded in a multiplicity of interactions online and offline to develop their blog and their content. This study contributes to existing concepts in eWOM by showing how
emerging actors develop a particular expertise, distinct from consumers, in attracting an audience. Furthermore, these emerging actors transform from being knowledge replicators to become knowledge producers developing communication content in line with a wider audience. As tech-bloggers become more established as emerging actors, tech companies are adapting their marketing to account for these practices.

The result is a co-creation of product news and advice on new products between emerging actors, marketers and the audience. Thus, this work gives a more nuanced account of eWOM and the role of emerging actors shaping communication in this sector.
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Prologue - A new Actor in the market?

Berlin, 2014: The conference “Re:publica” has become the biggest of its kind in Europe dealing with Web 2.0 in particular blogs, social media and information society. The interest in Web 2.0 platforms is reflected in conference attendance. In 2007, the conference had its first iteration with only 700 visitors; as of this year, over 6,000 people registered to listen to 350 sessions on 18 stages.

In between conference venues, I meet up with Sascha, a 43 year old German living in Taipei (Taiwan). He refers to himself as a fulltime “tech-blogger” aiming to “blog about technology for adults.” His appearance is casual – he wears a hoodie with a checkered shirt and a baseball cap which has become his trademark. Sascha suggests sitting down near a power source and he unloads two pairs of Google glass, a netbook and a variety of smartphones that need to be recharged from his Asus-branded backpack. He starts talking about his career and how he ended up blogging in the first place. Our conversation is constantly interrupted by a variety of people who want to say “hi” or to express their appreciation of his work. He refers to some of these as friends, others as business partners. It seems that almost everyone at this conference knows him or at least has heard of him. When asked if he experiences a celebrity status, he replies “offline, usually nobody recognises me but with conferences like these it changed.” However, online he is recognised – 400,000 people are reading his blog every month, 27,000 users follow him on Twitter and he even has his own Wikipedia page. In 2009, Tech Evangelist Robert Scoble named Sascha the “German King of Netbooks”, the computer magazine Computerbild refers to him as the “Netbook Pope”, he is featured in Time Magazine, New York Times, ABC News and is frequently mentioned on “Who to follow on Twitter” regarding mobile and technology.
Sascha talks about the importance of keeping in touch with his readers and he is repeatedly checking his smartphone to see if there are new notifications on his Twitter account. He apologizes for continuously sending tweets but this has become an integral part of his life as a tech blogger. He constantly gets emails from his readers claiming they are jealous of his job: “It is not as easy as it seems (chuckles), it has become a competitive business.” Apparently most people think he is the cool “nerd” who reviews devices for fun, but there is more to it than that. This has become a full time job for him. Less visible is the amount of stress he encounters in the days around the conference: meeting with companies, fans and chatting with other bloggers. After the conference, he is travelling to another product presentation. He calculates that half of the year he is living out of a suitcase, but he is really grateful. When he started blogging nobody visited his blog and his readership only increased gradually. As he notes, “This is not something that happens overnight, it is a long process where you have to build a reputation.” Part of his reputation is his very critical approach when reviewing products. Who is this new influential market actor? Sascha is not unusual. He represents the phenomenon of a new actor that is emerging through new media, thereby gaining an influential status in the marketplace. During my study I met many people like Sascha. How he has been able to establish himself and to build up such a large following is what I want to discuss in this thesis.
Chapter 1  Introduction

1.1  Background of research

The shift of communication to digital platforms such as blogs and Social Networking Sites (SNS) has resulted in significant changes to information distribution. These channels provide new means for individuals to gather and spread information about products and services. Information such as product news or advice is commonly referred as Word of Mouth (hereafter WOM) communication. WOM is said to have a critical impact on consumer behaviour, which “generates over 3.3 billion brand impressions each day” (Berger, 2014, p.587). It influences consumers in multiple domains from the books we read (Chevalier and Mayzlin, 2006), the movies or TV shows we watch (Godes and Mayzlin, 2004) or the restaurants we eat in (Godes and Mayzlin, 2009; Trusov, Bucklin and Pauwels, 2009). A study by the consulting firm McKinsey (2010, p.8) outlined that “word-of-mouth is the primary factor behind 20 to 50 percent of all purchasing decisions” and that “word-of-mouth generates more than twice the sales of paid advertising in categories as diverse as skincare and mobile phones.” Interpersonal communication such as WOM is seen to increase product awareness and product adaption respectively (Berger, 2014). Although the importance of WOM has long been established, in the arena of Web 2.0, it appears to have been amplified to a surprising level. Whilst the offline consumer may tell ten people about their product experience in an everyday setting, the online consumer has the potential to reach limitless people online (Wiedmann, Walsh and Mitchell, 2001). Individuals are now able to exchange product information whilst seemingly being location and time independent. Due to the asynchronous form of communication and the ease of transmission, electronic Word of Mouth (eWOM) can diffuse further where information is available on a permanent basis. The internet is seen to have a high transformative power with the ability to alter the outcome of
communication activities by changing structures, eliminating gatekeepers, or
redistributing the control between sender and receivers of information (Blank and
Dutton, 2013). Circumstances are altered such as the geography of access which
seems to make it easier to connect with friends and reinforce social relationships or
build new ones. Due to the apparent ease of content creation it enables consumers to
transform from information retrievers to information creators (Blank and Dutton,
2013). These transformations have been documented in various domains such as
online communities (Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001; Kozinets, 2002) or consumer
referrals (Godes and Mayzlin, 2004) and have been more recently found in social
networking sites (Trusov, Bucklin and Pauwels, 2009) and blogs (Kretz, 2010;
McQuarrie et al., 2013). Both have received sustained interest with more than
seventy percent of internet users on Facebook (Duggan et al., 2014) and over 180
million blogs estimated in 2012, with thousands added every day (Nielsen, 2012).

Blogs are a prime example of online transitions as they empower one-to-many
interactions. Blog authors (hereafter bloggers) create information that can, theoreti-
cally, be read by an infinite amount of people (Berger and Schwartz, 2011). Techno-
logical allowances make it possible for them to construct sizeable audiences.
McQuarrie et al. (2013, p. 136) claim that bloggers are able to create the “megaphone
effect”, where “average consumers” can reach a mass audience. Bloggers “create and
disseminate news, opinions, reviews, advice, and other information developments via
the internet using blogging and associated technologies” (Vaast, Davidson and
Mattson, 2013, p.2). Of particular interest are blogs that are primarily concerned with
consumption and which aim to diffuse news and evaluate particular products on a
regular basis. Readers ask for advice, consult the blogs during complex decision
making and participate in an established online community. As a consequence, Gillin
(2009) refers to the bloggers as “new influencers” enabling them to build cohesive
communities with their opinions. They are known to have a critical effect on
consumer purchasing decisions (Lyon and Henderson, 2005; Watts and Dodds,
2007), to influence policies (Valente and Pumpuang, 2006; Gillin and Moore, 2009)
and have an impact on companies and products (Pan, MacLaurin and Crotts, 2007).
Instances have been found in the areas of fashion (Kretz, 2010; McQuarrie et al.,
2013), food (Zhao and Belk, 2007) and consumer electronics (Kozinets et al., 2010;
Vaast, Davidson and Mattson, 2013). More important, they are seen as a credible source of information compared to other forms of reviews and are able to engage with their audience in various ways. Many bloggers have transformed what was once a leisure pursuit of blogging into a full-time and resource-intensive activity. Contrasting with the initial notion of “blogs” as a tool for personal consumption (Blood 2004), bloggers today have created an online presence where the blog has become an object very much for “public” consumption and use. As a consequence of the public nature of blogs, many bloggers have attracted a large number of followers (McQuarrie et al., 2013), while these individuals are becoming increasingly important to the overall market (Vaast, Davidson and Mattson, 2013). Bloggers are not only gaining attention from the wider public, there is also a critical interest from company representatives e.g. marketers and other practitioners. The underlying assumption behind this interest is that if marketers are able to influence bloggers, then they are able to market through a trusted source. As indicated in traditional WOM, seemingly the marketer is able to trade on the ‘credibility’ of these individuals to disseminate information that is seen as more accurate and authentic than traditional forms of advertising (Katz and Lazarsfeld, 1955; King and Summers, 1970). Thus, translated to eWOM, it might be argued that the blogger appears to be a “friend who recommends a tried and trusted product” instead of a “salesman who tries to get rid of merchandise” (Kozinets et al., 2010).

Whilst the importance of these individuals has become established in certain circles, we know surprisingly little about them, what they actually do, how they construct their reviews, and how they have emerged to establish their influence in the market in such a short period of time. Since the influence of eWOM is seen as dependent on the person (e.g. who is talking to whom) there is a need to gain a better understanding of the key individuals involved in online activity (Godes and Mayzlin, 2004). In the traditional WOM literature, such individuals are identified as “opinion leaders” (Katz and Lazarsfeld 1955; Arndt, 1967), “market mavens” (Feick and Price, 1987) or “social hubs” (Goldenberg et al., 2009). They are considered to be highly influential as they gather information from a variety of sources and diffuse that information via advice to others in their social nexus (Weimann, 1994). Similarly, McQuarrie et al. (2013) argue that bloggers, as one category of influencer
(albeit online), have the potential to attract large audiences to influence the behaviours and attitudes of others through their online communication channels. However, they are critical of the straightforward importation of existing offline WOM concepts to these new actors by noting that “[o]ne could label the phenomenon electronic word of mouth and call these bloggers opinion leaders or market mavens (Feick and Price, 1987; Kozinets et al., 2010), but [that] this [would] obscure what is new and different about their consumer behavior” (McQuarrie, 2013, p.137).

Since these bloggers have managed to establish influence so quickly, the pertinent question is how they have been able to do so. Traditional understandings characterise such processes by foregrounding how actors interact within and establish influence through building on existing social networks (King and Summers, 1970) where it seems that these individuals have been able to construct an audience from scratch (e.g. with no prior social connections). The implications of being online, such as the ease of transmission (Phelps et al., 2004) and information diffusion (Watts and Dodds, 2007), might enable individuals to attract a following, but the activities involved are not clear. Xia and Bechwati (2008) suggest that due to limited non-verbal communication and assessment, the only source from which a reader can draw inferences about the usefulness and credibility is from the message itself. Thus, content and particularly content production might be a key indication of how bloggers attract audiences. Although content has been intensively studied, scholars have mainly focussed on the blog as a form of technology (Herring et al., 2004; Schmidt, 2007) or the content of blogs (Zhao and Belk, 2007; Kretz, 2010; Vaast, Davidson and Mattson, 2013), devoting less focus on underlying practices of those individuals. McQuarrie et al. (2013) highlight this literature gap by underlining the lack of understanding of the distinct practices, which has remained largely “black boxed” to date (Mackenzie, 1993). By opening this black box, this thesis sets out to provide a better understanding into the question as to how these actors have been able to obtain their surprising position.

As one of the few studies in this area, McQuarrie et al., (2013) argue that blogging enables these individuals to gain access to an inner system they refer to as a “fashion
system.” Transferred to the area of consumer electronics, this system is composed of marketers of device manufacturers, media institutions that report about these products, and celebrities who engage in electronics discussions (McCracken, 1986; McQuarrie et al., 2013). Historically, the inner marketplace was only available to institutionalised professionals (McCracken, 1986). Thus, the role of these bloggers and their relationships with other members are not yet well understood. Studies have looked at blogger cooperation with marketers in the form of “seeding campaigns” (Hinz et al., 2011, Libai, Muller and Peres, 2013) but have not addressed the nature of interaction and cooperation within this inner system. Moreover, it is argued that once these bloggers attract a sizeable audience and are part of this system, they are no longer “ordinary consumers” (McQuarrie et al., 2013). As a consequence these individuals may no longer be understood using traditional concepts such as consumers, opinion leaders, etc. given recent developments.

1.2 Research objectives and questions

There is a clear need for an empirically- and conceptually-grounded understanding of these individuals. This study draws on the theoretical understanding proposed by Vaast, Davidson and Mattson (2013) regarding how a “new actor category emerges through new media”. In contrast to concepts such as opinion leaders or market maven, they provide a more open conceptualisation of these individuals by describing them as actors who gained exceptional influence in a specific area. These areas can span politics, health to consumption-focused topics such as fashion or consumer electronics. Similarly to Vaast, Davidson and Mattson (2013), this study concentrates on “tech-bloggers” as an emerging actor category characterised by using blogs to diffuse product- or service-related information. As the first detailed account of those individuals in the realm of WOM, this thesis attempts to provide an in-depth examination of this emerging actor. It aims to extend the current understanding of WOM theory and eWOM. As an integral part of WOM theory, any new understanding should be able to provide further insights into the role and practices of these actors; it should also be able to assess how existing concepts in face-to-face communication such as opinion leaders or market mavens apply.
Furthermore, this study draws inspiration from a multidisciplinary literature stream including information systems to gain a deeper understanding and to enable reflections beyond tech-blogs but also on blogs in general. Scholars (Blood, 2002; Herring et al., 2005) introduced different types of blogs based on their distinct communicative purposes and practices. Some blogs are used for personal purposes whilst others are to present professional information (commonly referred to as corporate blogs) which either rely on filtering information or represent personal journals. However, it remains unclear to what extend tech-blogs can be compared to the traditional view of blogging. These reflections aim to give an alternative account of the current understanding of blogs by asking:

_What are the practices of tech-bloggers as emerging actors and the implications to our current understanding of electronic Word of Mouth?_

This study argues that there is a gap in our understanding concerning what is new and different about these individuals and their associated practices (McQuarrie et al., 2013). More specifically, the sub-objectives of this research are:

- How these actors have been able to establish an audience. The process of audience construction seems key to how they have been able to gain an influential status and is found to be important in traditional concepts such as opinion leadership (King and Summers, 1970) and in blogging (McQuarrie et al., 2013).

- Similarly, rather little is known about the actual ‘content’ produced by these actors. Existing studies discuss content in terms of valence and volume (Berger, 2014), rather than unboxing underlying practices of content production.

- Part of these practices may also be interactions with other individuals apart from blog readers. In particular the interaction with marketers highlighted in WOM marketing (Kozinets et al., 2010) and seeding campaigns (Hinz et al., 2011) is critical to actors. As a consequence this study aims to shed further light on how the surrounding environment shapes actor’s practices.
1.3 Approach to study

The form of inquiry needs to both fit the purpose of the study as well as addressing the main research question. Practice-based studies are becoming increasingly prominent in management research in areas such as strategy (Molloy and Whittington, 2005), organisational (Nicolini, Gherardi and Yanow, 2003) and technology studies (Orlikowski, 2000), as well as marketing (Holt, 1995; Allen, 2002). The common interest across these studies is the understanding of various fields including those activities that “constitute[s] them in contrast to abstract representations of process” (Thorpes and Holt, 2008 p.164). Marketing studies have characterised practices as being complex and difficult to describe. This study aims to capture the various activities the actors are engaged in on a day-to-day basis. These do not need to be extraordinary activities, but rather routines and processes that emerge in a wider field of practices on which actors draw. Practices in general have been found to be volatile, constantly transforming and reflexive in terms of the development process. Another aspect is the incorporation of a wider setting where actors form a shared understanding and interact with other members of the same system. In this study, these are technical settings which refers to their blog or social settings such as the marketplace including marketers. Thus, practices in this study are seen as complex and thus difficult to simplify. The advantage of a practice-based approach hereby is to lay stress on observation and the elicitation of activities in a natural setting rather than generating introspective self-reports (Holt, 1995). The particular nature of these actors needs to be accounted for which has not been considered in prior research. Thus, there is a disconnection between the output (blog content) and the underlying practices involved. This is validated by the dominant use of a content analysis-based approach in the existing research (Zhao and Belk, 2007; Kretz, 2010; McQuarrie et al., 2013; Vaast, Davidson and Mattson, 2013). Despite the convenience of using content analysis, which can be conducted without the bloggers consent, the individual actor’s motivation and behaviour in the process remains unclear. Hence, there is a need to capture the actor’s experiences and shift the focus of research back onto the actor rather than their blog. Studies of traditional concepts such as opinion leadership have focussed on the individual rather than the
conveyed message, but have not accounted for new techniques\(^1\). These have been widely critiqued by scholars, as they result in similar findings obscuring what is new and different about these individuals. Thus, new forms of analysis need to be applied to make use of the possibilities that arise with eWOM.

This research attempts to provide a methodologically-comprehensive study that explores the practices of these emerging actors in eWOM. Those interactions will be explored using a qualitative approach which are commonly used to explore and understand a social or human phenomenon (Belk, 2007; Bryman and Bell, 2007; Wilson, 2011; Daymon and Holloway, 2011). Due to the recent developments and transformations in eWOM, these emerging actors have been underrepresented in research where the degree of uncertainty is high, thus calling for a research design that is more elastic. This study uses an inductive research approach with the aim of theory extension and testing of irregularities, by investigating these actors and their surroundings. By drawing on multiple qualitative methods this research aims to build a practice-based discussion, thereby avoiding difficulties outlined in existing research (McQuarrie et al., 2013) and ensuring the validity of the findings. It should further enable the verification of patterns observed in existing studies and simultaneously allows the identification of emerging themes.

### 1.4 Thesis outline

This thesis is divided into nine chapters. The outline below will give a brief description of each chapter and how these are linked.

*Chapter 1* – The current chapter provides an overview of the study, it underlines the importance of examining this phenomenon and provides an outline of how this study is intended to be carried out. Literature and methodological gaps are indicated, which will be addressed in detail in the next sections.

*Chapter 2* – The literature review situates the phenomenon in the context of electronic Word of Mouth and Word of Mouth literature, which is intended to serve

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\(^1\) Lyon and Henderson’s study (2005) is one of the few investigating opinion leaders online using Childer’s self-assessment scale within a survey-based approach.
as a basis of inquiry. Various constructs in existing studies will be highlighted with a central focus around practices and processes.

Chapter 3 – The phenomenon of an emerging category will be further conceptualised in this chapter by drawing on additional literature. Implications identified in Chapter 2 will be addressed in alignment with the formulated research question and sub-research questions with a focus on audience construction, content development and network formation.

Chapter 4 – The research questions will be operationalized in this section using a qualitative research approach. Justifications of this research approach, including its philosophical grounding of interpretive research are elucidated. The intended research design will be outlined, including the methods used and distinct stages of research.

Chapters 5-7 – The subsequent chapters will present the findings and analysis derived from the empirical data collection. Sections are divided by main themes that adhere to the sub-research questions and the overall alignment with the actors’ development processes. Thus, distinct stages are reflected in empirical findings.

Chapter 8 – Empirical findings are subject to further discussion in the following chapter. This section aims to link the empirical results with theoretical underpinnings and to provide further theoretical insights based on empirical developments.

Chapter 9 – The conclusion will summarise findings and address the research questions by considering the existing literature. Based on this final analysis, contributions and methodological reflections will be outlined. A significant part of this section is also intended to discuss the limitations of this study and to indicate new directions for future research.
Chapter 2  Literature review

2.1  Introduction

Research within consumer behaviour attempts to get a better understanding of a buyer’s decision-making process (Katz and Lazarsfeld, 1955; Arndt, 1967; Engel, Kegerreis and Blackwell, 1969; Richins, 1983; Herr, Kardes and Kim, 1991). In this context, “one of the most widely accepted notions in consumer behavior is that word-of-mouth communication plays an important role in shaping consumers' attitudes and behaviors” (Brown and Reingen, 1987, p.350). Word of mouth (WOM) is hereby acknowledged as a major influence on what people know, feel and do. Whilst WOM has been investigated widely, including varying degrees of social influence between individuals (King and Summers, 1970; Feick and Price, 1987; Weimann, 1994), less is known about individuals in computer-mediated environments. Referred to as electronic Word of Mouth (eWOM), recent developments have enabled transitions of consumer-to-consumer communication (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004; Trusov, Bucklin and Pauwels, 2009). This environment enables individuals to emerge through computer mediated communication. Although the importance of new actors has been highlighted in existing research (Zhao and Belk, 2007; Kozinets et al., 2010; McQuarrie et al., 2013) it is not well understood.

This chapter reviews the broad canvas of literature to provide the basis on which to situate this emerging phenomenon. The aim is to commence with traditional concepts of WOM, particularly WOM theory, which should give a better understanding of the nature of this form of communication. Further, key concepts within traditional WOM will be elaborated with a substantial focus on practices. The second part of the chapter will then discuss the main implications of eWOM in contrast to traditional
face-to-face settings. Transmission and message implications in this context play a critical role in confirming the transformation of communication in this new and rapidly changing arena. As the literature stream of eWOM is still emerging with only little information on specific communication channels such as blogs, further literature will be drawn from various disciplines. Particularly, literature on information systems aims to develop further insights into the arena of blogging and its distinction from other platforms that are of value to this study.

2.2 Word of Mouth (WOM)

WOM is most commonly referred as an informal form of communication directed at other consumers about products and services (Dichter, 1966; Westbrook, 1987; East, Hammond and Wright, 2007). Embedded in everyday activities, WOM is transmitted via face-to-face communication (Arndt, 1967) without commercial incentives (Stern, 1994), thus different to traditional advertising. The message itself can include product-related discussions (e.g. personal experience of a product) or sharing product information (from mass media). However, both are dependent on verbal and non-verbal cues (Arndt, 1967).

2.2.1 Scope and significance

Scholars (Mangold, 1987; Buttle, 1998) support the claim that WOM is more influential than marketer initiated sources. For instance, Herr, Kardes and Kim (1991) observed that WOM is more influential than print sources or traditional consumer reports. The potential reasoning is that personal sources are perceived as more trustworthy (Buttle, 1998). In particular, in terms of high perceived risk, a person is more likely to be influenced by WOM. Turnbull and Meenaghan (1980) described four circumstances where informal forms of communications about products and services have a significant influence on the purchasing decision:

- if the investment for test consumption is too high;
- if too little objective information about the product is available;
- if the product has social and symbolic value and;
- if the perceived risk is high.
One of the first studies specifically about WOM was conducted by Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) where they found out that WOM is seen as the most important source of information for household products. Since then scholars have contributed findings across many different products (Engel, Kegerreis and Blackwell, 1969), such as groceries (Feick and Price, 1987) or automobiles (Richins and Root-Shaffer, 1988). Consequent studies (King and Summers, 1970; Granovetter, 1973; Brown and Reingen, 1987; Rogers, 2003) have focussed on different forms of WOM and their different characteristics, such as the impact of social structures and the importance of influential consumers (e.g. opinion leaders).

WOM is argued to influence the decision-making process either positively or negatively (Arndt, 1967; Richins, 1983). To date there is still mixed evidence regarding the prevalence of positive versus negative WOM perception (Angelis et al., 2012). On the one hand, findings show that consumers are more likely to share negative WOM as a result of their dissatisfaction of a product or service and moreover to prevent others from buying (Anderson, 1998). Other studies demonstrate the opposite, e.g. consumers are more likely to share positive WOM as an outcome of involvement, self-enhancement or dissonance reduction (Dichter, 1966). However, Anderson (1998) has argued that negative WOM has a greater impact on consumer behaviour than positive WOM.

In terms of social structure, WOM communication is found to take place within social relationships that may be categorised according to the closeness of the relationship (Brown, Broderick and Lee, 2007). Granovetter (1973) defined relationships between a sender and a receiver of WOM communication as being “strong” or “weak”. Those relationships or ties are based on frequency of contact and social relation. Granovetter (1973) argues that in terms of information diffusion, “weak ties” are more important as they can bridge different social circles and thus information can reach further, however individuals with weak ties may be less influential in terms of WOM activities. In contrast, strong ties are much more important in terms of WOM influence. Strong ties are well connected with each other as a result of similar interests, social structures, etc. Therefore, the opinion of those ties is seen as much more credible (Brown and Reingen, 1987). Furthermore, Duhan
et al. (1997) stated that weak-tie sources are mainly utilized when the consumer already has previous knowledge and only needs a confirmation of his or her opinion. In contrast, “[c]onsumers who perceive great difficulty in the decision tasks are likely to look toward strong-tie sources for recommendations” (Duhan et al. 1997, p.292). Reingen et al. (1984), for instance, investigated the role of influential consumers in terms of brand preferences within sorority houses and found that those who lived together have more common brand preferences than those who lived alone.

2.2.2 Types of Word of Mouth

Another well-researched aspect of WOM is the distinction between different dimensions of WOM in terms of its content (news or advice) and its nature of diffusion (organic or amplified) (Arndt, 1967; Richins and Root-Shaffer, 1988; Godes and Mayzlin, 2004).

Product news and product advice

The central element of WOM communication is the creation and diffusion of information regarding products or services to others (Arndt, 1967). As part of the communication process, Richins and Root-Shaffer (1988) divided WOM content into product news or product advice categories corresponding to studies on opinion leadership (Reynolds and Darden 1971; Rogers and Cartano, 1962). Product news includes advances of products or services, differences between similar products in the same category and information about the development of new products. Richins and Root-Shaffer’s (1988) work concerned advances in car technology, car model difference and related areas. Advice giving WOM is rather related to an individual’s personal experiences while also complimented by comments and information about a tested product. In contrast, product news is based less on personal experience and more on general knowledge about items in one product category. Thus it can be assumed that product news is more dependent on processes regarding information acquisition, whereas product advice is rather about expertise in evaluating a product and forming an opinion. This, in turn, suggests that each of these types is probably more important in different stages of a consumer’s decision-making process. Product
news is regarded to be critical in terms of creating awareness. Hearing about a product experience or a product advice will help to inform the receivers purchase decision. Thus product advice is seen as more influential than product news, as it not only combines factual with experiential knowledge.

Organic and amplified Word of Mouth

Godes and Mayzlin (2009) outline that WOM not only occurs naturally, it can also be externally amplified. “Organic” WOM takes place naturally during a conversation when an individual wants to share their experience about a product or company. The potential reason is either that they are satisfied with a product or have a natural desire to share news or advice. In contrast, amplified WOM is endorsed with intervention from a vendor or marketer (Godes and Mayzlin, 2009). Marketers launch campaigns that should encourage or accelerate WOM in existing or new communities. On the one hand, scholars have demonstrated the profitability of amplified WOM due to increased information diffusion (Libai, Muller and Peres, 2010; Godes and Mayzlin, 2009).

On the other hand, there is a concern about the extent to which amplified WOM is perceived as less trustworthy and the ethical issues that occur in the use of such methods (Libai, Muller and Peres, 2010). With increasing marketer-initiated campaigns through various forms (i.e. amplified WOM) illustrates a more prominent role of marketers in the WOM communication process (Libai, Muller and Peres, 2010), which is addressed in the subsequent section.

2.2.3 WOM theory

Word of Mouth theory (WOM theory) is mainly concerned with the communication flow between individuals. In the first study on WOM theory, Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet (1944), explored the information flow involved in the decision-making process of voters during the American presidential election. The authors expected to find a positive correlation between mass media and voting intentions. However, they revealed that the flow of mass communication is less directed than assumed. Instead, findings showed that personal contacts had a greater influence on people’s voting
decision than mass media (as postulated in the hypodermic needle model). Therefore, findings questioned the Hypodermic Needle Model which suggests that a message is directly received and accepted by mass media.

The two-step flow of communication

![Diagram of two-step flow of communication](image)

Figure 2.1 – Two-step flow of communication (Lazarsfeld et al., 1940)

Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet’s (1944) study describes a two-step flow of communication that first stretches to individuals they refer to as opinion leaders. The mission of opinion leaders is to filter information from mass media and pass it on to their peers with their own interpretation attached as shown in Figure 2.1. The concept of a two-step flow of communication was partly verified by four subsequent studies that are commonly referred to as the "Columbia Studies" (see Katz, 1957). Although these studies confirmed the significance of interpersonal communication (WOM) and the existence of opinion leaders, they indicate that the flow of communication is more complex. In these studies it could not be verified if there is a form of communication between opinion leaders and all individuals. Therefore, it could be argued that some individuals are directly receiving information through mass media or from both. This could result in a one-step flow of communication (as described in the Hypodermic Needle Model) or in a multi-step flow of communication (Rogers and Shoemaker, 1971; Robinson, 1976).
The multi-step flow of communication

Figure 2.2 – Multi-step flow of communication (Robinson, 1976)

For instance, Menzel and Katz (1955) found that opinion leaders are in constant interaction with each other e.g. in their work, doctors mainly gather information at medical conferences. Similarly, Troldahl and Van Dam (1965) argue that there is a two-way communication between opinion leaders and opinion receivers, e.g. opinion leaders can also be influenced by opinion seekers; 3) Lastly, opinion receivers are able to get information direct from mass media. Thereby the multi-step flow of communication contrasts the two-step flow of communication as opinion leaders are not isolated between mass media and opinion receivers as they form their opinions in communication with others and pass them on. Hence, the perspective has changed from an asymmetric opinion leadership concept to a symmetric opinion exchange concept. This concept concentrates on the central position of opinion leaders within communication and moreover enabled insights regarding the role of other communication participants.
The Linear Marketer Influence Model

Similar to the multi-step flow of communication, the linear marketer influence model builds on the importance of influential individuals but refer to them as consumers (Kozinets et al., 2010). However, unlike the multi-step flow (Robinson, 1976) or two-step flow (Katz and Lazarsfeld, 1955), marketers have been given a more prominent role. This model describes that – apart from other marketing elements (mass media advertising, etc.) – marketers influence particular consumers indirectly through advertisements and promotions in the expectation that they will talk to their peers. A benefit is seen given that WOM is perceived as more credible than advertising (Buttle, 1998). Instead of a salesman who tries to sell products for provision (Kozinets et al., 2010), consumers are indirectly encouraged to evaluate a product and talk from experience. However, this model postulates a one-way communication and assumes that marketer information is diffused by those consumers without any alteration (Engel, Kegerreis and Blackwell, 1969). Moreover, it neglects any exchange of information between consumers (Brown, Broderick and Lee, 2007).

The Network Coproduction Model

The most recent understanding of WOM theory is the network coproduction model (Kozinets et al., 2010). It overcomes the limitations of the linear marketer influence model by incorporating a two-way communication between consumers. Thus WOM communications are “coproduced” in consumer networks (Kozinets et al., 2010).
This model provides a more concise explanation of amplified WOM by claiming that there is a direct influence from marketers to targeted individuals (Lehmann and Estaban-Bravo, 2007). Similarly other studies (Hinz et al., 2011; Libai, Muller and Peres, 2013) found an increasing interest on the part of marketers in a direct management of WOM activities. Campaigns and programs coined as “referral marketing” (Buttle, 1998) or “seeding campaigns (Hinz et al., 2011) have been introduced which enable marketers to measure and organise marketing activities more effectively. These programs have the potential to evolve from one-time cooperation to longstanding relationships with increasing similarities to brand communities (Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001). Targeted consumers are now actively shaping marketer-initiated information either positively or negatively. Thus, “marketers are just beginning to understand the formation, reaction, and effects of communally based marketing promotions” (Kozinets et al., 2010 p.73). These campaigns neglect the empowerment of those individuals as they are given unique access to products and information as part of those campaigns. As such there is a closer relationship between the marketer and these consumers as these communicate and interact directly in contrast to the previously described concepts (Rogers, 2003).

2.3 Opinion Leadership

In Word of Mouth theory, it has been found that the information flow is largely dependent on influential individuals albeit opinion leaders (Katz and Lazarsfeld, 1955; Robinson, 1976) or targeted consumers (Kozinets et al., 2010; Hinz et al., 2011). Scholars introduced a variety of other terms (e.g. social hubs, connectors or
Literature review

market maven)² describing individuals in alignment with WOM theory to examine what makes them distinct (Feick and Price, 1987; Gladwell, 2000; Goldenberg et al., 2007). These have been characterised as individuals who gain an influential status within WOM communication as they either act as a centre of their social group or have a higher degree of knowledge in a certain segment. Nevertheless, opinion leadership (Flynn, Goldsmith and Eastman, 1996; Rogers, 2003) combines both attributes mentioned. Opinion leaders have a large number of social contacts, but seemingly attract them based on their knowledge. This knowledge, however, is not limited to market information where opinion leaders are found to draw on a variety of sources (product information and personal experience with products) and to evaluate those (Rogers, 2003). Further, as an integral part of WOM theory, an examination of opinion leadership may lead to a better understanding of the WOM communication process (Flynn, Goldsmith, and Eastman, 1996; Reynolds and Darden, 1971). The term “opinion leader” is defined by Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet (1944, p.3) as “individuals who were likely to influence other persons in their immediate environment.” This definition has gone more or less unaltered in later research (King and Summers, 1970; Childers, 1986; Flynn, Goldsmith, and Eastman, 1996; Watts and Dodds, 2007). However, it has to be noted that opinion leadership is not a personality trait, but rather a degree of influence that results in the communication process, exemplified by Rogers (2003, p.300) who defines “opinion leadership as the degree to which an individual is able to influence informally other individuals’ attitudes or overt behaviour in a desired way with relative frequency.”

² Goldenberg et al. (2007) coined the term “social hubs” to refer to individuals with a large number of social ties. Gladwell (2000) introduced “connectors” as being connected to a variety of people. He claims that connectors not only have a larger network, they also have weaker rather than stronger ties than average individuals (Granovetter, 1973), and thus are able to diffuse information on an even wider scale. In contrast to social integration, “market mavens” are defined as individuals who “have information about many kinds of products, places to shop, and other facets of markets, and initiate discussions with consumers and respond to requests from consumers for market information” (Feick and Price, 1987, p.85). Based on this notion, market mavens are market- rather than topic-specific (Feick and Price, 1987), which makes them more influential in terms of prices and information concerning durable goods (for example food).
2.3.1 Practices and traits

In order to get a clearer understanding of opinion leadership practices, one must know what “distinguishes one from the other” (Katz, 1957, p.71). Identification methods (King and Summers, 1970; Childers, 1986) began to outline what makes opinion leaders distinct, thereby having the potential to explain their influence. These methods have been developed based on the basic assumption that opinion leaders spend more time on a specific product, they are asked for advice and they are more willing to share.

Involvement and information search

Opinion leaders are characterised as being more interested in a particular product category than others. Feick and Price (1987, p.84) argues that “the implicit assumption in examining the personal influence of opinion leaders is that they are motivated to talk about the product because of their involvement with it.” Thus it is assumed that if opinion leaders are more involved with a specific product and will diffuse information to a higher extent (Dichter, 1966). Due to this interest, they are actively seeking information about their area of interest, e.g. their information search is more systematic and thorough. Similarly, information processing is more in-depth than individuals with low involvement (Richins and Root-Shaffer, 1988). Bloch, Sherrel and Ridgway (1986), for example, demonstrated a strong relationship between opinion leadership and sustained search for information in the areas of clothing and computers. Sustained search includes search activities that are not restricted to a single purchase intention and therefore do not directly serve the solution for a decision problem – but they can lead to impulse buying (Bloch, Sherrel and Ridgway, 1986) Enduring involvement is seen as a prerequisite for on-going search (Richins and Bloch, 1986; Venkatraman, 1990). Opinion leaders include personal sources in their information search, exchange information with other opinion leaders and are influenced by them (Feick and Price, 1987). Moreover, information search is characterised by intense and active information search and processing of high-quality mass media. Furthermore, Chan and Misra (1990) found that opinion leaders have different media habits than others, despite being more exposed to mass media. They argue that opinion leaders prefer niche or more specific
news in contrast to general newspapers and they inform themselves through information-oriented magazines compared to entertainment-oriented magazines. Chaney (2001) added that niche media is preferred, based on the fact that opinion leaders have a desire to acquire information that is less known to their intended social group, e.g. opinion leaders focus their information search for content that is relevant to their social group. Thus it can be concluded that opinion leaders form their opinion based on information from mass media and personal contacts alike.

**Product knowledge and expertise**

King and Summers (1970) suggests that opinion leaders continuously need to commit to time consuming information searches in order to acquire the extensive knowledge necessary and to maintain their leadership position. Expertise is found to be a critical characteristic in opinion leadership determination (Jacoby and Hoyer, 1981). Knowledge and familiarity are prerequisites to give advice in this regard (Goldsmith, Flynn and Goldsmith, 2003). Further, Leonard-Barton (1985) found that expertise is not necessarily domain specific. He argues that individuals choose information from sources, i.e. opinion leaders who are close to specific values. In this context, Katz (1957) argued that the perception of “what one knows” is linked with “who one is”. The personification of values or “who one is” is mostly explored through demographics such as age, gender or social status. Katz (1957) uses female fashion leaders as an example where younger and more attractive individuals may be perceived as experts because they appear to be more familiar with this specific product category. In addition, it has been found that opinion leadership in complex products such as technology is more concentrated among educated individuals implying the importance of competence (Katz, 1957; Robison, 1976). Also, opinion leaders are often perceived to have higher credibility than mass media due to their social closeness. Leonard-Barton (1985) further outlined the concept of “homophily” in which he argues that opinion leaders are more trusted when they are closer to an individual’s own values. It is assumed that due to the closeness between opinion leaders and their followers, as well sharing values, the information transmitted is informal with no intention to sell products. This seemingly makes opinion leaders more credible and their arguments important for decision making (Rogers, 2003).
Social interaction

Katz (1957, p.71) summarised early studies (the “Columbia Studies”) and argues that opinion leadership influence is related to three things: “(1) to the personification of certain values (who one is); (2) to competence (what one knows); and (3) to strategic social location (whom one knows).” Although competences (as in product knowledge) as well as values have been discussed, individually both are insufficient to account for an opinion leader’s influential position. Katz (1957, p.438) expressed this succinctly: “It takes two to be a leader – a leader and a follower.”

“Whom one knows” is not only characterised by the number of contacts an opinion leader has. It is also a question regarding if the people with whom the opinion leader is in touch are interested in the area and seeking (or following) an opinion. Thus, it has to be noted that social interaction is not restricted to an opinion leader’s willingness to share content (King and Summers, 1970), rather it is based on the ability to have access and be heard by a large network (Rogers, 2003). Katz (1957) divided those networks by social location into a specific social group and “outside”. Within a social group, opinion leaders are most likely to represent a specific group, thus conforming to group norms. They are more interested in the behaviour of group members and the group overall which determines the degree of integration of the opinion leader (Rogers, 2003). The importance of social integration within the group is verified by opinion leadership identification techniques such as the sociometric and key informant technique as they are limited to one specific social group. However, Rogers and Shoemaker (1971) generalised that opinion leaders are more active than non-opinion leaders in and outside a social group. King and Summers (1970) as well as Reynolds and Darden (1971) confirmed that opinion leaders are more active and the number of social contacts is significantly higher than for other individuals.

Burt (1999) and Roch (2005) identified this aspect as “social capital”, where the interplay of strong and weak ties (Granovetter, 1973) obtained and maintained by an opinion leader plays a pivotal role in the diffusion of information. In the context of weak ties, Childers (1986) found that opinion leaders are part of a variety of social groups such as clubs and organisations, and thus have the ability to know a large
number of people “outside” their main social group. This leads to a large number of social contacts (Reynolds and Darden, 1971) and based on those weak ties they can diffuse information not only to these contacts but also to the whole social group they are connected with. Opinion leaders can utilise these networks to gather further information. Burt (1999) indicated that opinion leaders act as opinion brokers who connect people and therefore have an information advantage.

Thus, it can be concluded that a strong involvement and knowledge combined with a high degree of social interaction makes a person a natural channel for influence (Darden and Reynolds, 1971). It enables both to send and receive information from a large number of social ties, thereby building their knowledge repository.

### 2.3.2 Identification methods

Practices and traits have been found to inform methods to identify opinion leaders. Studies have incorporated three different methods to identify opinion leaders based on two key assumption: 1) opinion leaders are leaders within a specific social group (Katz, 1957); and 2) opinion leaders are more willing to share WOM with others (King and Summers, 1970; Childers, 1986). Aligning with the first assumption are “socio-metric techniques” where all members of a social group will be asked to identify a person who acts as a source for advice and information to them. In a similar fashion, the key informant technique asks well-informed group members to point out opinion leaders (Rogers and Carano, 1962). Both techniques, however, are only suitable when a social group is clearly subscribed (Valente and Pumpluag, 2007). The disadvantage of the socio-metric technique lies in the evaluation of the entire social group which can lead to extensive survey results (Rogers and Cartano, 1962). The third method referred to as self-designation uses survey respondents report to what extent they see themselves as influential. This makes the self-designation method cheaper and quicker – as they are easy to perform as they can be applied to any predetermined sample (Weimann, 1991). Respondents assess themselves based on scales regarding to what extent they can be regarded as influential, which includes questions not only about their group but also concerning their willingness to share. Thus, the self-designation method is the most widely used
technique to identify opinion leaders (Rogers and Cartano, 1962; King and Summer, 1970; Childers, 1986; Flynn, Goldsmith and Eastman, 1996). A survey approach was used with various scales that range from a two item scale (Katz and Lazarsfeld, 1955) to a thirteen item scale (Weimann, 1994).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Product Class</th>
<th>Identification (scale)</th>
<th>Survey items</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Katz and Lazarsfeld</td>
<td>1955</td>
<td>Household items</td>
<td>Developed own scale</td>
<td>2 items</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rogers and Cartano</td>
<td>1961</td>
<td>Across products</td>
<td>Adapted version of Katz and Lazarsfeld scale</td>
<td>6 items</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>King and Summers</td>
<td>1970</td>
<td>Across products</td>
<td>Adapted version of Rogers and Cantaro scale</td>
<td>7 items</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Childers</td>
<td>1986</td>
<td>Cable television</td>
<td>Adapted version of King and Summers scale</td>
<td>7 items</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feick and Price</td>
<td>1987</td>
<td>Food and drugs</td>
<td>King and Summers scale</td>
<td>7 items</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Richins and Root-Shaffer</td>
<td>1988</td>
<td>Automobiles</td>
<td>King and Summers scale</td>
<td>7 items</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weimann</td>
<td>1991</td>
<td>General news and gossip</td>
<td>Personality Strength scale</td>
<td>10 items</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iyengar, Van den Bulte and Valente</td>
<td>2011</td>
<td>Prescription drugs</td>
<td>Childers scale</td>
<td>7 items</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2.1 – Main WOM research with focus on opinion leadership

As illustrated in Table 2.1, apart from the thirteen item scale (personality strength scale), the most used scale was developed by King and Summers (1970) with a later modification by Childers (1986). Questions have been posed to different product classes such as: clothing; household cleaners and care products; cosmetics; small appliances; as well as large appliances (King and Summers, 1970). Product classes have been extended to more complex products such as automobiles (Richins and Root-Shaffer) as well as market information intense products such as food (Feick and Price, 1987). A key assumption of illustrated studies is that opinion leadership is domain specific. However, due to the application of measures to different product categories, general trends and key features could be obtained (see Section 2.1.1) which are generally applicable.

Although those studies gave a further account of opinion leadership, the validity of self-designated opinion leadership has been critiqued due to inaccurate judgements. Valente and Pumpuang (2007), for instance, have argued that respondents were not
able to accurately self-estimate their degree of knowledge. This could give further reasoning why scales are limited to willingness to participate and if they are asked about products in their social group (taken from the King and Summers scale) neglecting “social interaction” as a distinguishing factor, particularly as the degree of social interaction seems to have a greater effect on the determination of opinion leadership than other factors (Rogers, 2003).

### 2.4 Electronic Word of Mouth (eWOM)

Interpersonal communications such as WOM are increasingly found in computer-mediated environments (Kozinets, 2002). Consumers are able to exchange information about products or product advice by engaging in electronic Word of Mouth (eWOM). eWOM has been defined as “any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual, or former customer about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the Internet” (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004, p.39).

It is considered as an extension of interpersonal communication that contemplates traditional WOM. Computer mediated communication is divided by different channels that shape how individuals share eWOM (Trusov, Bucklin and Pauwels, 2009). Accordingly, “Traditional word-of-mouth has been extended to electronic media, such as online discussion forums, electronic bulletin board systems, newsgroups, blogs, review sites, and social networking sites” (Cheung and Lee, 2012 p.219). These channels provide new means for what people share and whom they share it with. Thus, there is a need to explore the unique characteristics of information and communication within computer-mediated environments to understand how these affect WOM behaviour (Dellarocas, 2003).

Whilst eWOM communication might share characteristics with traditional WOM, they are distinct in several ways, namely the transmission of information and the information itself (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004; Berger and Schwartz, 2011), which need to be further addressed.
2.4.1 Transmission implications

EWOM communication is considered to be more powerful as it can information can be diffused with exceptional scalability and speed (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004). Whereas traditional WOM may reach up to eight people on average, eWOM could potential reach an infinite amount of people (Walsh and Mitchell, 2001; Assael, 2004).

As information can be diffused asynchronously (Cheung and Lee, 2012), messages are not limited to small groups. Information offline is shared within private conversation or a group in “temporal synchronicity” (Hoffman and Novak, 1996), thus making it difficult to pass along information to individuals that are not present when the information is diffused. To resend this type of information individuals need to remember information and transmit it to others. In contrast, eWOM communication is characterised by its ease of transmission (Phelps et al., 2004). Via hyperlinks, information can be shared with others without any alteration. Moreover, electronic WOM does not need to be exchanged at the same time as individuals are able to read online reviews long after they have been created. Hoffman and Novak (1996) argue that online information can also be non-linear. Each offline conversation is perceived as a single entity (Hoffman and Novak, 1996,) whereas in online communications discussions and information exchange can take place without time constraints. Computer-mediated communication can reduce the “temporal distance between an experience and talking about it” (Berger and Schwartz, 2011, p.878). Consumers can directly talk to others after they have had an experience about a product or a service as they are not limited to a specific geographical location (Berger and Schwarz, 2011).

Based on the assumption that information can be stored for an infinite period of time, eWOM can potentially diffuse further based on its time and location independence (Phelps et al., 2004). Due to the interactivity and non-linearity of the internet it widens the ripple effect of eWOM, reaching further than traditional WOM (Phelps et al., 2004; Huang et al., 2011). The ripple effect also enables individuals to diffuse
information outside their social group. In a traditional setting, individuals have a variety of social ties where information can be diffused via friends, family, colleagues or acquaintances. As pointed out in the literature, research distinguishes between strong ties – people we know well and trust versus weak ties – acquaintances with whom we don’t have an on-going interaction with (Granovetter, 1973; Berger, 2014). Huang et al. (2011), however, has outlined that most ties in computer-mediated communication are “virtual ties” implying that weak relationships dominate. Phelps et al. (2004), have claimed that the absence of visual cues within online communication allows the sender of information to conceal their identity. Thus, eWOM communication is critiqued as being less trustworthy than face-to-face communication (Cheung and Lee, 2007) as “virtually anyone can both access and provide content on the internet due to lowered entry barriers (Hoffman and Novak, 1996 p. 51). In addition, the weak/virtual relationship between sender and receiver of eWOM communication might seem valuable in terms of transmission (Hoffman and Novak, 1996), however information might be perceived as less credible. Park and Kim (2007), for example, found that if the sender is not known it decreases the validity of information that is transmitted, and vice versa.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Word of Mouth</th>
<th>electronic Word of Mouth</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Medium</strong></td>
<td><strong>One-to-one/many communication</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talk, telephone, personal meeting</td>
<td><strong>Many-to-many communication</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E-mail, text chatting, social networks</td>
<td>Discussion forums, blogs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Form</strong></td>
<td><strong>Synchronicity</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oral</td>
<td>Synchronous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Written</td>
<td>Asynchronous or synchronous or synchronous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Type of interaction</strong></td>
<td><strong>Format</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Face-to-face</td>
<td>Linear communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Virtual interaction</td>
<td>Linear or non-linear communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Virtual interaction</td>
<td>Non-linear communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Relationship between sender and receiver</strong></td>
<td><strong>Ease of transmission</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Real social ties</td>
<td>Difficult to transmit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mostly real social ties or virtual ties</td>
<td>Easy to transmit or forward</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mostly anonymous or virtual ties</td>
<td>Easy to transmit or forward</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2.2 – Comparison WOM and eWOM
The transmission implications of both WOM and eWOM are summarised in Table 2.2. Hoffman and Novak (1996) divided computer-mediated communication into one-to-one/many communication and many-to-many communication. Whereas the former is represented through a more direct and private form of communication such as chats and emails, many-to-many communication is associated with computer-mediated communication designed for public use, e.g. publicly available online information (Huang et al., 2011).

### 2.4.2 Message implications

Traditional WOM communication takes place in a face-to-face context, including spoken words. In eWOM, personal experiences and opinions are diffused through written messages. Thus, people can seek for information in an asynchronous manner as information online can be stored, searched through and accessed for an infinite time, at least theoretically (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004). Berger and Iyengar (2013) observed that the asynchronous form of communication plays an important role as “it allows greater time to construct and refine communication” (p.11). An advantage of written information is that it can be altered afterwards in contrast to verbal information (Sun et al., 2006). Therefore, it is argued that written information is perceived as more logical and formal (Cheung, Lee and Rabjohn, 2008). Drawing on transmission implications such as a wider reach, the weak relationship between sender and receiver has to be considered in eWOM communication. According to Wilson and Ney (2012) it is increasingly difficult to determine if messages such as reviews can be trusted or not. Xia and Bechwati (2008) further argue that receivers of eWOM messages tend to look for credibility cues within the information that is conveyed. As there appears to be a mostly weak or virtual relation, the only source from which a eWOM reader can draw inferences about the usefulness and credibility is the message itself.

Scholars (Moe and Trusov, 2011; Chevalier and Mayzlin, 2006; Dellarocas, 2003) have tended to collect eWOM messages because they are easy to acquire. On a macro level, these studies decomposed eWOM messages into volume and valence. Volume refers to the number of reviews of a particular product where more postings
are associated with increased sales. Valence is referred to as the average rating a product receives (Dellarocas, 2003). This is based on the fact that most consumer opinion platforms such as Amazon or Tripadvisor have implemented ratings (e.g. 1-5 stars) in addition to written reviews. Evidence is cited regarding a close correlation between high book ratings and purchasing behaviour on the Amazon and Barnes and Noble websites (Chevalier and Mayzlin, 2006). Moreover, Resnick and Zeckhauser (2002) have found that sellers on the e-commerce platform “eBay” with a good reputation sell their products faster. In terms of content, the importance of information quality and source credibility has been confirmed and validated in prior research. To determine usefulness, Cheung and Thadani (2012) introduced an integrative framework of factors that influence information quality and source credibility. They argue that information quality is mainly evaluated in terms of: argument strength, comprehensiveness, accuracy and timeliness.

Argument strength is based on how convincing and persuasive arguments are (Bhattacherjee and Sanford, 2006). If arguments are perceived as valid, message receivers will develop a positive attitude implying a higher extent of influence (Cheung and Thadani, 2012). Thus, critical messages may be preferred as long as arguments are convincing. The extent to which arguments are convincing is in close relation to the comprehensiveness of content. If eWOM messages are more elaborative they are more likely to be read and trusted. Comprehensiveness not only refers to the explicit length. Cheung et al. (2009), for instance, have argued that if arguments are justified in terms of breadth and depth, they are perceived as more convincing. Thus, apart from the length of a message, accuracy is seen as a critical indication.

Nelson, Todd and Wixom (2005) defined accuracy as the extent to which information is presented correctly. Additional information or external sources are seen as indicators of accuracy, e.g. if a message refers to confirming messages it might be perceived as more useful (Cheung and Thadani, 2012). Timeliness means up-to-date and current information (Nelson, Todd and Wixom, 2005). Thus, if a website is not updated regularly, the information “cannot deliver the expected performance and therefore provide no added value to users” (Cheung, Lee and
Overall, studies indicate that more useful news articles are more likely to be shared (Berger and Milkman 2012), even more when these messages derive from personal sources as they are received as more credible (Berger, 2014). This also depends on whether a relationship is strong or weak which is influenced by the channel eWOM is transmitted (Trusov, Bucklin and Pauwels, 2009).

2.4.3 eWOM channels

Individuals can communicate via eWOM in many ways such as opinion platforms, blogs or discussion forums (Hennig-Thurau, 2004). Different channels shape what individuals share and how they “consume” eWOM (Berger and Iyengar, 2013; Berger, 2014). A limitation of Berger and Iyengar’s (2013, p.12) study is that “although they were grouped together in our field data, sharing on Facebook is not the same as sharing on Twitter, which is not the same as sharing on a blog.” Channels shape the type and amount of content that is shared. Twitter, for instance, is limited to 140 characters whereas YouTube allows uploading content in video format.

Although every platform has its unique characteristics and conversational nature (Berger and Iyengar, 2013), according to existing literature there various ways to categorise them. Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004) categorised channels based on varieties of control. They argue that platforms are company controlled, consumer controlled (such as blogs) or third party controlled. Cheung and Thadani (2012) refer to company-controlled channels as e-commerce platforms where consumers have the ability to comment on products or services (Amazon, eBay). They further distinguish third party-controlled platforms between review sites, discussion forums and social networking sites (Cheung and Thadani, 2012), as illustrated and adapted in Table 2.3.
Table 2.3 – eWOM channels

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>eWOM channels</th>
<th>Examples</th>
<th>Control</th>
<th>Diffusion</th>
<th>Studies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>E-commerce platforms</td>
<td>Amazon, Barnes and Noble, eBay</td>
<td>company</td>
<td>Discovery</td>
<td>Chevalier and Mayzlin, 2006; Resnick and Zeckhauser, 2002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Review sites</td>
<td>Epinions, Tripadvisor</td>
<td>third party</td>
<td>Discovery</td>
<td>Godes and Mayzlin, 2004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussion forums</td>
<td>Zapak</td>
<td>third party</td>
<td>Discovery</td>
<td>Moe and Trusov, 2011; Dellarocas, 2006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Networking Sites</td>
<td>Facebook, MySpace</td>
<td>third party</td>
<td>Influence</td>
<td>Riegner, 2007</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blogs</td>
<td>Bloggers.com</td>
<td>consumer</td>
<td>Discovery</td>
<td>Kozinets et al., 2010</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In addition, the type of diffusion has been added to Table 2.3 as evidenced in Garg, Smith and Telang (2011). They argue that the type of diffusion is critical and classify this as “discovery” and “influence”. Discovery in this context refers as a specific search for a product or service that Moe and Fader (2004) have defined as “hedonic browsing”. This can be accomplished with the use of search engines or by seeking help when searching for a specific product in an online discussion forum. Influences from others occur when information for a product or a service is received from a sender. This can include when a consumer receives a review of an interesting product review as passed on by a friend (Senecal and Nantel, 2004) or referrals from other platforms.

Thus, ”influence” has been associated predominantly with the concept of Social Networking Sites (hereafter SNS) such as Facebook, Twitter and Google+. In contrast to other platforms, SNS allow users to maintain and build networks of friends for social or professional purposes. The core includes personal user profiles and newsfeeds through which consumers can share information with their network (Trusov, Bucklin and Pauwels, 2009). Individuals receive information from their network without an active approach to searching for it. Thus, SNS can be categorised as both influence and discovery. Another aspect is the nature of SNS platforms. Contacts within SNS are found to be members of an individual’s offline social

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3 Table based on distinction of channels drawn from Cheung and Thadani (2012), type of control drawn from Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004) and type of diffusion (Garg, Smith and Telang, 2011).
network that might then overcome concerns regarding credibility due to the relatively strong ties between sender and receiver compared to other platforms. (Trusov, Bucklin and Pauwels, 2009). Conversely, these messages are only visible to their social contact, which limits their diffusion. On Facebook, messages are not visible in relation to search engines. Thus, if individuals are not registered at the platform or not a member of another person’s network, they may not be able to obtain information. Conversely, on Twitter information is available predominantly to the public resulting in differences between platform segments.

2.5 Blogs as part of eWOM communication

Blogs have received increasing attention in scholarship as advances of personal publishing allowed the “average consumer” to become a content creator (McQuarrie et al., 2013). Blogs are considered to be “the published voice of the people” (Ferdig and Trammell, 2004, p.1), while they are also increasing in number with over 180 million worldwide and thousands being added every day (Blogpulse, 2012). Weblogs or blogs as hereby defined as a discussion or informational website that is published by individuals. Blogs typically consist of dated entries that are displayed in chronological order (Blood, 2004; Vaast, Davidson and Mattson, 2013). Most blogs are in textual form, although a majority include rich media such as videos, audio, music and photography. A majority of blogs are interactive as they allow visitors to leave comments and give feedback on the content. As blog readers visit and engage with specific blogs regularly (Schmidt, 2007) it could raise eWOM to a higher level of opportunity to influence their audience. As a consequence, there is an increasing emphasis on understanding the consequences of those interactions (Libai et al., 2010).

2.5.1 Blogging as a genre

Herring et al. (2004, p.2) has indicated that “blogs are related to – and some would claim, replacing – personal home pages: both are typically created and maintained by a single individual, and their content tends to focus on the creator or his/her interests.” This study found that blogs and homepages share similar characteristics
such as the inclusion of personal information about the creator, personalised layout and the presence of a welcome message. Warschauer and Grimes (2007) have raised the importance of blog authorship, arguing that blogs are distinct based on the strong identification with a person or display name.

In contrast to a static personal homepage, however, blogs are characterised as being updated regularly (Herring et al., 2005) and conversational in nature (Warschauer and Grimes, 2007). Blogging can be seen as a form of social networking as it not only generates content, but also builds relations with readers and other bloggers (Gaudeul and Peroni, 2010). Although similarities with discussion forums or newsgroups may seem logical, author and readership roles are distinct (Herring et al., 2005). As blogs only allow limited exchanges such as comments, their role is more asymmetrical in contrast to discussion forums; the blogger retains full ownership and control over content. Based on these distinct traits, blogs have been identified as a new genre of computer-mediated communication situated between homepages and discussion forums (Herring et al., 2005; Schmidt, 2007).

Different types of blogs have been introduced based on distinct communicative purposes and practices (Herring et al., 2005). Some blogs are for personal purposes whilst others are to present professional information (commonly referred to as corporate blogs). Blood (2002) distinguishes three basic blog types: 1) filters; 2) personal journals; and 3) notebooks. The content of bloggers that “filter” is mainly external information such as news, events and other happenings and presents these in an unbiased fashion (Krishnamurthy, 2002). Bruns (2007) found that trending news stories were the most common type of content in a sample of 125 blogs. On the other hand, the content of a personal journal is primarily based on internalised personal experience and bloggers’ thoughts. Notebooks both include internal and external sources, but are characterised by longer, essay type content.

Apart from those having a personal or topical focus, Krishnamurthy (2002) has divided blogs by the degree of participation that takes places within them. He argues that blogs can be further classified as being individual or community driven. However, Herring et al. (2005) found that community-driven blogs are not well presented overall. Another aspect of differentiation is based on audience size.
Bloggers read by a large population are referred to as “A-List bloggers” (Trammel and Keshelashvili, 2005) that are seen as an “elite minority of blogs” (Herring et al., 2004). A-List blogs have been characterised as being filter-type blogs but are also linked to different forms of mass media and other blogs resulting in a sizeable audience (Herring et al., 2005). Farrell and Drezner (2004), for example, found that some blogs are characterised as “focal point blogs,” e.g. they had a high number of incoming links implying a large audience. Due to their connectedness these blogs might shape and influence shared blogging practices. Similarly, Schmidt (2007) identified a “power law” indicating that bloggers with a larger network have more power to influence others. The reference to A-List blogs is mentioned in most blog studies (Blood, 2002; Herring et al., 2004; Herring et al. 2005; Trammel and Keshelashvili, 2005), however these have been found to be less relevant to the wider population of blogs as a whole.

2.5.2 Blogging practices

A considerable amount of research in information systems has been centred on the use and impact of blogs (Herring et al., 2005; Huffaker and Calvert, 2005; Schmidt, 2007). A significant part has been devoted to the motivations and habits of individuals engaging in blogging activities (Lenhart, 2006). Nardi et al. (2004) has claimed that blogs are utilised to “document someone’s life”. This includes personal activities and events that have been made available for friends. As an example they cite exchange students who update their blog with posts and pictures about their experience. Closely related to sharing personal experiences is the blog as a tool for “self-expression,” i.e. the ability for bloggers to “express their own opinions” (Nardi et al., 2004). Bloggers can express themselves and reveal emotions based on their level of anonymity (Lenhart, 2006). In contrast to offline communication, blogs allow the choice of revealing or unveiling someone’s identity, thus shaping that blog’s motivations and practices (Blood, 2002). Although these studies provide valuable insights into the uses of blogs, it has been found that most blog studies (Nardi et al., 2004; Huffaker and Calvert, 2005; Lenhart, 2006) display and somehow characterise blogs as an online diary (Blood, 2002) neglecting the variations in blogging. Thus, Bruns (2007, p.3) has noted that “our discussion of blogs, bloggers,
and blogging must become more sophisticated”. There is a need to associate uses with routines and practices in this new and unique communication genre (Herring et al., 2005). Schmidt (2007) has introduced a framework for blogging practices relying on three different dimensions, namely “rules, relations and code.”

**Rules**

Schmidt (2007) defines rules as routines and procedures that have been established where shared expectations guide situational performance. An expectation in this context is the choice of using blogs to satisfy certain needs such as “self-expression” or “documenting someone’s life” (Nardi et al., 2004). Referred to as “adequacy rules” they provide a further account of the use and gratifications of blogs and blogging. Schmidt has also highlighted that these procedures can be divided into three separate blogging episodes: selection, publication and networking. They refer “to different actions, different roles, and different strategy sets” (Schmidt, 2007, p. 1412).

“Selection” refers to the information selection of media content. Specific sources are used that can inform content production (Schmidt, 2007). To a degree, these are routinized, whereas bloggers have a set of online sources (regularly reading a specific blog or specific mass medium) that are influenced by their thematic interests in order to be informed. Particularly filter-type blogs are dependent on information management routines (Blood, 2002). It is assumed that due to the form of information diffusion, information selection derives predominantly from online sources Technical features such as RSS feeds (Really Simple Syndication) allow bloggers to manage the vast amount of online sources, thereby creating a “media palette”. An information repository is seen as a basis to develop information-gathering routines where information sources are continuously added and deleted (Schmidt, 2007).

“Publications” refer to the blogger as the content creator. A blogger needs to decide what type of content he or she wants to publish which is mainly informed by their information selection. In addition, decisions need to be made about the content presentation, e.g. if content is contemplated with pictures and video and the overall
design of the blog (Schmidt, 2007). Significant differences have been found in writing styles, which could be based on different blog genres (Herring et al. 2005) or blog types (Blood, 2002). For instance, a journal-type blog is characterised by a personal writing style that is more engaging to potential readers (Schler et al., 2006), whereas filter blogs tend to be written in the third person. This is also referred to as a “character narrative” and is seen as constituting the distinct pattern of how a blogger presents content (Kozinets et al., 2010). Therefore, publishing blog content can be seen as a means of self-presentation correlated with expectations about personal authenticity (Nardi et al., 2004; Scheidt, 2006).

Networking is seen as a critical component of a blogging episode. It refers to the blogger as a networker who establishes relations, either through incorporating links from other blogs (Schmidt, 2007) or by engaging in comments on their blog (Efimova and de Moor, 2005). Incorporating links within their blog post acknowledges information sources and enables the reader to read further information or to verify statements. As blogs are discursive in nature, readers and other bloggers comment on a published blog post which leads to further discussion. Blog comments can also include further references to other blogs. In both cases, hypertextual relations can convey aspects of social relations such as “expressing consent or dissent with the cited source, being a sign of friendship or professional affiliation, or just giving more context to the original posting by providing links to additional information” (Schmidt, 2007, p. 1415). Thus, a blog post may be the start of a discussion rather than a completed article as the blogging episode does not end with its publishing as such (Schmidt, 2007).

Relations

A critical aspect of blogging practices is referred to as “relations” (Schmidt, 2007). On a micro level they appear in a blogging episode through hypertextual relations or comments, whereas on a macro level, relations are similarly formed outside of a blogging episode either on other blogs (Schmidt, 2007), engaging on social networking sites (Trusov, Bucklin and Pauwels, 2009), exchanging emails, or via offline communication through face-to-face communication. The blogger mainly interacts with their readers or with other bloggers. By allowing readers to post
comments on individual entries, their content has become more conversational in character. Thus, Blood (2002) found that blogging is socially interactive and community-like in nature. Regarding journal-type blogs, she found a high degree of interactivity. Similar Krishnamurthy (2002) found that filter-type blogs are highly interconnected. Similarly, bloggers can create social ties with each other by commenting on other blogs or including links in their blog posts (Schmidt, 2007). By commenting on other blogs, they express their opinion on a certain post or show a sign of friendship or affiliation. Increased interaction between blogs has been found to evolve into a community (Nardi et al., 2004). Schmidt (2007) noted that the aggregated result of interaction between blogs result in a networked structure referred to as “the blogosphere” (Schmidt, 2007). These communities are basically formed due to similar interests leading to topical clusters (Herring et al. 2005) that sustain over time. Moreover, these communities develop rules as an indicator for affiliation (Schmidt, 2007). If bloggers do not follow shared expectations they will not be considered a part of the community. However, those expectations are less known (see Section 3.5.2). In one of the few studies conducted on this topic, Perlmutter and Schoen (2007) identified issues around “Weblog Ethics” which are a critical part of these shared expectations. Similarly, Schmidt (2007, p.1414) emphasized that it was necessary to identify “who decides upon and who reinforces these rules”.

Code

Code or source code is the underlying blogging software that needs to be installed and configured in order to enable blogging as well as being customised to distinguish one blog from another. A variety of free and commercial blogging software packages are available (Nardi et al., 2004). These packages can be further distinguished in terms of blogging script package and blog service. Whereas a script package is installed on a blogger’s own server, a blog service is offered by a third party to host the blog on their platform. Nardi et al. (2004, p.223) noted that blogs differ widely in their underlying software: “Some used only the most basic features of the blogging software; others used more advanced features to track who was reading their blog, to collect statistics on the number of hits they received, to discover who linked to their
blogs, to change the format of the blog, or to post photos.” Schmidt (2007) found that the choice of software is dependent on the degree of technical expertise required for installation and further maintenance. He further noted that the underlying software is critical to blogging practices as it allows or restricts certain actions, such as including multimedia, changing the layout or mode of communication on a blog. While these software packages are standardized and have a similar technical structure, a blogger, depending on their technical ability is able to modify and personalise a blog in terms of layout and design. One modification of these packages that is possible relates to privacy. A blog can be password protected and therefore private. Otherwise blogs are publicly available. Nardi et al. (2004) found that blogs can be altered to be invisible to search engines. Without the direct URL a reader would not be able to find the blog. Other blogs specifically want to be found on search engines and focus their wording and content to be located according to keywords. This may be directly related to the type of blogs found in existing studies (Blood, 2002).

2.5.3 Identification and selection

The identification techniques used in blog studies varies substantially. In “interview focussed” studies, a description of how authors have been identified has revealed the latter to be mainly undocumented or opportunistic. For instance, Nardi et al. (2004) investigated blogging practices and motivations where a sample was drawn based on convenience, e.g. a specific geographical area around Stanford University. Furthermore, samples may be skewed towards a similar socio-economic status between the blogger and the researcher, e.g. “well-educated, middle-class adults in school or employed in knowledge work” (Nardi et al., 2004, p.42). Likewise Lenhart (2006) has targeted well-educated professionals as interview participants with no clear sampling strategy in evidence.

In order to identify blogs, there is a need to understand how blogs are connected. As identified in blogging practices, through relations, communities are formed based on similar interests (Herring et al. 2005). These topical clusters are divided by specific topic areas. As a consequence, studies have focussed on blogging about political themes (Farell and Drezner, 2004; Lawson-Borders, 2005) or as a part of corporate
blogging (Schmidt, 2007). With regards to consumption blogs, studies have focussed on fashion blogs (Kretz, 2010; McQuarrie et al., 2013) or technology (Vaat, Davidson and Mattson, 2013). Apart from a topical distinction, studies used blog networks to identify blogs within a certain cluster. For instance, Davidson and Vaast (2009) used “Techmeme”, a blog aggregator for tech-blogs. Similarly, Kretz (2010) used the platform “Hautefort” in the area of fashion. Within these platforms, researchers are able to search for specific blogs and keywords and sort them based on their popularity. However, blogs need to register at these platforms in order to be incorporated. Thus, it has to be noted that only a certain percentage is registered which makes it difficult to account for the whole blog population.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Product Class</th>
<th>Identification</th>
<th>Methodology</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nardi et al.</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>Across categories</td>
<td>Geographical location</td>
<td>Interviews</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lawson-Borders</td>
<td>2005</td>
<td>Politicians</td>
<td>Platform (Technorati)</td>
<td>Content analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trammell and Keshelavili</td>
<td>2005</td>
<td>A-List bloggers</td>
<td>Referrals</td>
<td>Content analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zhao and Belk</td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>Food bloggers</td>
<td>Platform (Blogen)</td>
<td>Content analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kretz</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>Fashion bloggers</td>
<td>Platform (Hautefort)</td>
<td>Content analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>McQuarrie et al.</td>
<td>2013</td>
<td>Fashion bloggers</td>
<td>Platform (Bloglovin)</td>
<td>Content analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vaast, Davidson and Mattson</td>
<td>2013</td>
<td>Tech bloggers</td>
<td>Platform (Techmeme)</td>
<td>Discourse analysis</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2.4 – Main research on bloggers in IS and Marketing

As displayed in Table 2.4, this type of identification is most common in content analysis studies (Lawson-Borders, 2005). Due to the form of data, there is no restriction in terms of visibility and accessibility compared to SNS and microblogging sites, which enable a systematic scraping of blog content. For instance, Trammel and Kiashvili (2005) used content analysis to investigate the self-presentation of A-List blogs. With a clear focus on blog content, in some cases studies (as in Table 2.4) make claims about the author’s motivations and their practices that seem to require further evidence to support these statements. Especially as their information is publicly available, it may assemble publicly accepted behaviour. A greater focus on the individuals behind the blogs would provide a way to validate claims made about bloggers’ understandings of their practices.
2.6 Conclusion

The literature review highlighted several conjectures that require further evidence. First, WOM has been shown to have an important influence on consumers’ decision-making processes. Opinion leaders are specific individuals with unique characteristics and traits that exert exceptional influence through: 1) their social ties; 2) their knowledge; and 3) their persona (Katz and Lazarsfeld, 1955). Although these characteristics have been elaborated in detail it is not known if those individuals behave similarly in computer mediated environments. With the rise of eWOM, consumers are increasingly incorporating online sources to inform potential purchases. The major implications in terms of transmission and message have been reviewed, which will potentially transform practices. In particular, the blog as a eWOM channel has been found to be distinct. Based on their conversational nature and increased connectivity, blogs are seen as a critical arena of eWOM where product news and advice could be diffused.

Second, this chapter highlighted those methodological gaps that need to be addressed in this study. Both in offline and online WOM, a quantitative approach has been predominant, frequently using surveys (opinion leadership) or content analysis (blog studies). Moreover, existing research focusses on the identification process of those individuals which has been mainly linked to their characteristics (opinion leadership) or they have been less documented (blog studies). Paired with the exploratory nature of this phenomenon, there is a clear need for a qualitative inquiry with a structured sampling process.
Chapter 3  An emerging actor category

3.1  Introduction

The literature review outlined implications that need to be considered for an examination of emerging individuals in electronic Word of Mouth (eWOM). With a move to computer-mediated environments, the literature outlined transmission and message implications that could be of transformational factor. Due to the nature of online communication, it is acknowledged that it reaches further, thus enabling it to attract a wider audience. However, relationships are found to be weaker as in traditional settings. Moreover, messages can be refined and developed where practices potentially differ from a traditional face-to-face setting.

The aim of this chapter is to build a conceptual grounding to address literature gaps that will lead the research process and empirical investigation. This thesis has used Vaast, Davidson and Mattson’s (2013, p.1070) understanding of tech-bloggers in the arena of eWOM with the aim to investigate this “new actor category.” These “new actors” are characterised by on-going communications through their blogs with “a mass audience of strangers” (McQuarrie et al., 2013, p.307). The majority of this communication is transmitted through blog content that has yet only been studied in terms of valence or volume (Berger, 2014), and not in regards to its underlying content practices. Furthermore it is still unclear whether these new actors are solely communicating with a mass audience or if they also interact with other individuals (such as marketers or other actors) (Kozinets et al., 2010). To address this gap, additional literature is required as the previously reviewed concepts may not sufficiently explain this phenomenon.
3.2 Tech-blogging as an emerging actor category

As previously mentioned, computer-mediated communications has opened up new channels for the creation and dissemination of product news and advice. However, there is still a limited understanding of the role and practices of influential individuals (such as opinion leaders) in online environments, particularly with relation to eWOM. Vaast, Davidson and Mattson (2013, p.1070) indicate that existing concepts of influential individuals continuously change and new actors are formed. They also argue that “the diffusion of web blogging is a notable example of field disruption as new media actors take form within established fields”.

3.2.1 Linking existing concepts to new actors

Scholars have tried to examine these individuals using various means and over a wide range of areas from influential blogs in politics (Adamic and Glance, 2004), to medicine (Valente and Pumpuang, 2007) or travel (Pan, MacLaurin and Crotts, 2007).

Use of existing concepts have led to similar findings – The majority of these studies are based on existing concepts such as opinion leadership (Watts and Dodds, 2007; Lyon and Henderson, 2005; Roch, 2005; Tsang and Zhou, 2005) and neglected to identify distinct practices. For instance, Lyon and Henderson (2005) conducted a study of opinion leadership online using similar methods (for review see Section 2.3.1) where they have found that online practices are not distinct from offline concepts. They claim that online opinion leaders possess a similarly higher level of involvement and exploratory behaviour when compared to non-leaders. Overall studies seemingly result in similar practices based on their conceptual foundation and empirical methods (Iyengar, Van den Bulte and Valente, 2011). Self-reported and sociometric techniques, which have been predominant in the analysis of traditional WOM, correlate weakly in computer-mediated environments (Iyengar, Van den Bulte and Valente, 2011). Thus, there is a need for new methods to identify these actors. In the same vein, McQuarrie et al. (2013) critiqued the use of existing concepts to explain new actors. They claim that new forms of analysis need to be
applied to reveal appropriate findings as these actors cannot be explained using existing concepts.

“One could label the phenomenon electronic word of mouth and call these bloggers opinion leaders or market mavens (Feick and Price 1987; Kozinets et al. 2010), but this obscures what is new and different about their consumer behaviour”

McQuarrie et al. (2013, p.137)

**The implications of eWOM have been neglected** – Although these studies recognised a high level of internet usage in acquiring and diffusing information, they ignored implications in terms of message and transmission of eWOM channels. With regards to acquiring information, Tsang and Zhou (2005) addressed high internet use by arguing that due to online anonymity, these individuals feel more comfortable to ask for information compared to face-to-face communication. However, online sources may be chosen due to their distinct message characteristics that have been identified as being more timely, far-reaching and asynchronous. Likewise regarding the diffusion of information, due to the advances in web technologies, the characteristics of blogs have moved towards greater flexibility in terms of display, design and functionality (Hookway, 2008). Blog features influence how bloggers communicate with others (Schmidt, 2007). Furthermore, due to the limited cues available in computer-mediated communication, their visual blog format has implications for how a blog – and consequently how an actor – is perceived. Schmidt (2007) suggests that blogging technologies affect identity, information and relationship management respectively. The interplay of these three dimensions is rather complex in nature (Schmidt, 2007), whereas existing studies have been restricted from providing more profound insights due to their pursuit of textually-focused empirical inquiries, e.g. blog content rather than an examination of these actors.

**Existing inquiries are insufficient in terms of examining practices** – As scholars outline, textual analysis does not fully map the potential landscape of blogs (Scheidt and Wright, 2004; Hookway, 2008). Despite the convenient use of this type of analysis (which can be conducted without consent), actors’ motivation and behaviour remains unexplored. Studies that have made assumptions about practices (McQuarrie et al., 2013) that have been widely critiqued based on the form of inquiry that have
adopted. Hence, there is a need to capture actors’ experiences and the information provided by those actors, which consequently should return the focus of research to the blogger rather than their blog.

### 3.2.2 Emergence and new actors

This study builds on the theoretical understanding proposed by Vaast, Davidson and Mattson (2013) focusing on how a new actor category emerges through new media. They investigated discursive practices and identity formation of tech-blogs as new actors under the transformative conditions of new media platforms. Vaast, Davidson and Mattson (2013) define tech-bloggers as an emerging actor category which focus on using blogs to diffuse product- or service-related information that could be of eWOM nature:

“Tech bloggers create and disseminate news, opinions, reviews, advice, and other information about technology developments via the Internet, using blogging and associated technologies.”

*Vaast, Davidson and Mattson (2013 p.1070)*

The term “emergence” is used by Vaast, Davidson and Mattson (2013, p.1070) to illuminate those social and technical processes associated with the identification of a new actor category. They claim that a “new actor category may draw on the practices and identity of established actors but is also distinct from them.” With regards to bloggers, McQuarrie (2013) found that it is necessary to find what is new and different about these individuals. This chimes with Vaast, Davidson and Mattson (2013) who claim that new online communication channels are innovative in nature.

Vaast, Davidson and Mattson (2013) further note that these actors are emerging based on two critical implications:

1) Based on this new and vastly changing environment, actors form new practices to accommodate this environment. According to Lamb and Kling (2003), the use of new technologies has major implications on the practices of such actors. Although the challenging implications of these new actors have been identified (Lamb and Kling, 2003; Davidson and Vaast, 2009), an examination of their practices and in particular their development has not yet been explored;
2) The emergence of such actors dramatically disrupts the field of online communication where they can become part of an established ecosystem and could threaten the position of established actors (Davidson and Vaast, 2009). From a managerial perspective, they have gained the attention of established actors such as technology firms or journalists (Vaast, Davidson and Mattson, 2013). Marketers become increasingly keen to cooperate with bloggers as they attract a large audience. From a marketer’s perspective, tech-blogs are especially significant as product news and reviews diffuse through blogging technologies and eWOM to potential consumers. Similarly, Zhao and Belk (2007) have found that consumption-oriented blogs have a major influence on their readers as they not only provide a basis for factual assessment and express how these products are used in their everyday lives.

Rapid technology developments such as Web 2.0 led to a constant transition in the technology use of actors (Vaast, Davidson and Mattson, 2013). They further claim that these actors continuously experiment with new media technologies as they become available. New media provides additional opportunities to create and disseminate information and to interact with readers. Practices are shaped and tied to technical features and affordances of new media (Vaast, Davidson and Mattson, 2013) where new media is likely to attain distinct practices (Schmidt, 2007). It can be argued that the use of new channels directed actors away from “traditional blogging” by finding new ways to interact and diffuse information.

The work of Vaast, Davidson and Mattson (2013) highlights the emergence of novel roles and identities as well as the importance of audiences. However, their empirical work is limited to an investigation of technology discourse neglecting practices such as the construction of audiences. As part of their technology discourse focus, they investigated discussions about technology advances but have not investigated these actors with a specific focus on eWOM. Thus, Vaast, Davidson and Mattson’s (2013) conceptual understanding will be applied to the arena of eWOM where additional literature is reviewed in the following sections to extend the discussion of tech-blogs as an emerging actor category.
3.3 Actors and audiences

A fundamental interest in both offline and online WOM deals with who people share information with (Berger, 2014). Within the context of opinion leadership it a higher frequency of interaction has become apparent which results in significantly higher social contacts (Reynolds and Darden, 1971). With a shift to computer-mediated communication such as eWOM, the type of interaction differs from traditional forms of communication. As noted in transmission implications (Section 2.4.1), information can be shared without time and location constraints (Phelps et al., 2004). Moreover, information can also be shared via hyperlinks (Hoffman and Novak, 1996), thus reaching further than immediate social circles.

This enables actors to diffuse eWOM to sizeable audiences (McQuarrie et al., 2013), which affects the type of communication between individuals (Berger, 2014). When individuals talk to small audiences they are more conversational in nature, often referred to as narrowcasting whereas larger audiences are more broadcasting in nature. This might indicate a form of communication that is more mass media-based in character. Although it is not clearly defined how many people qualify as a “mass”, it is further characterised by temporal distance, impersonal, and one-to-many forms of communication (Thompson, 1995) that aligns with transmission implications of eWOM. Moreover, mass media requires a vehicle that allows information diffusion to a sizeable audience (Thompson, 1995), whereas blogs can equally be seen as such a vehicle (Schmidt, 2007).

Meyrowitz (1985) identified an orientation towards a mass media aspect of interpersonal communication. He primarily uses a television audience to locate his theory within modern electronic media, emphasizing that the “evolution of media has changed the logic of the social order by restructuring the relationship between physical place and social place and by altering the ways in which we transmit and receive social information” (Meyrowitz, 1985, p. 308). He grounds his theory on the fact that new media have removed barriers in contrast to print publications. In the same vein, McQuarrie et al. (2013, p.137) have claimed that “the web has made it possible for ordinary consumers to reach a mass audience.” Computer-mediated
communication such as eWOM enables individuals to reach thousands of other people at no cost (Schmidt, 2007). Likewise, Meyrowitz (1985) argues that the ease of use and the universal access to this type of information removes barriers to entry.

3.3.1 Types of audiences

In the context of audiences, scholars (Meyrowitz, 1985; McQuarrie et al., 2013) have referred to a “mass audience”. A mass audience, often termed a “broadcast audience” consume mainstream or popular texts. Thus, Thompson (1995) emphasizes that for actors to produce mass-mediated information, their audience is crucial (Brake, 2009). He further remarks that they are “dependent on recipients for their continued existence as performers” and that their spectatorship “is the sine qua non of their own existence as producers” (Thompson, 1995, p. 99). Therefore, it may be expected that there is an interest for actors to reduce their audience’s uncertainty regarding tastes, likes and dislikes. Through the construction of audiences, different types of communication may evolve that are more conversational in nature. As confirmed by Thompson (1995, pp. 81-82), “the development of communication media creates new forms of action and interaction and new kinds of relationships.” To accommodate distinct relationships he introduces three different types of interaction:

1) **Face-to-face interaction** takes place in the “context of co-presence” (Thompson, 1995, p.82) where conversation participants are immediately present. Face-to-face conversation is dialogical and allows a multiplicity of symbolic cues to transmit information. Words can be contemplated by gestures, frowns, smiles etc., thereby reducing the ambiguity of information. In addition, gestures may allow greater judgement of the sincerity of the sender.

2) **Mediated interaction** shares characteristics with face-to-face interaction as it is dialogical in nature but involves a technical medium. Mediated interaction narrows down symbolic cues but enables individuals to transmit information that is “stretched across space and time” (Thompson, 1995, p.83). Thus, additional information must be provided in contrast to face-to-face interaction where Thompson (1995) mentions introducing yourself (telephone conversation) or including date information (letter writing) as examples.
3) **Mediated quasi-interaction** is often referred to the interaction established in mass media communication. Similar to mediated interaction, it is location and time independent where content is mainly diffused in terms of verbal cues either written or oral. It is distinct in terms of the monological nature of interaction, e.g. the flow of communication is one-way. Mediated quasi-interaction is produced for an indefinite range of potential recipients that do not share the same degree of reciprocity and intimacy as in mediated or face-to-face interaction. Instead it is a structured production of information to individuals that are not physically present (Thompson, 1995).

In particular mediated quasi-interaction has been found to be more complex due to the absence of reflexive monitoring. In other words, the sender of information is not able to determine how other individuals receive the content. Televisual messages are one example that demonstrates mediated quasi-interaction where content is created for an intended or ideal audience (Thompson, 1995). Imagining such an audience allows the producer to formulate and channel information that appeals to the future particular audience. It may be argued that writing for an ideal audience can influence future conditions in terms of an audience’s size, demographics and shared beliefs respectively. Wimmer and Dominik (1987) have acknowledged ideal audiences, but qualify that audiences can only be formed to a certain extent. One might therefore expect that producers attempt to match their information to the audience and consequently try to reduce uncertainty about an audience’s reception, which can be achieved with mediated interaction such as on-going conversations with their audience.

### 3.3.2 Blogs and audiences

Like most written publications, bloggers have been found to write for a “cognitively constructed” audience that greatly influence their writing, vocabulary and subject matter (Marwick and Boyd, 2010). It further resembles an imagined or ideal audience who may or may not read the blog. Actual readers are only present through mediated communication such as blog comments, resulting in a distinct relationship between blog authors and their audience. Characterised as dialogical in nature,
bloggers are able to reach their audience through mediated communication. However, the identity of their audience is less known as information about a reader’s identity might be incomplete or false. Comments made by readers can be “composed of anyone with a Web browser who could accidentally or intentionally come across a blog posting” (Warschauer and Grimes, 2007). Conversely, identity plays a large role in relation to blog authors. Although identity may be flexible online, Huffaker and Calvert (2006) found that the inclusion of name, age and other personal information in blogs is critical to readers.

Blogs are seen as an online form of identity presentation where their presence is highly managed in “fixed, singular, and self-conscious ways” (Marwick and Boyd, 2010, p.115). As a result, blog content could provide additional personal information or a degree of personal experience in addition to information bloggers want to convey (Blood, 2004). Moreover, Schau and Gilly (2003) note that computer-mediated communication such as homepages are constructed for the public, which acknowledges their potential for diffusing information to an unlimited and undefined audience. Although blogs may be more personal and less isolated than personal homepages (see Blogging as a Genre, Section 2.5.1), it presumes ongoing communication to envisage these audiences.

The technology-enabled interactivity of blogs paired with personal features make blog content more intimate and targeted to their audience, thus exchanges are possible that were previously unattainable. Moreover, technological features may enable the further development of audience measurement through quantitative analytics (Schmidt, 2007). In other forms of mass media, such as online news media, there is a discussion of envisaging an ideal or intended audience, instead of taking technological advances into account in order to accurately identify audiences. Scannel (1996) outlines that online media authors produce information for themselves as a form “self-expression” rather than taking advantage of technological features.

A qualitative way of envisaging audiences online involves encouraging communication. Similar to Thompson’s (1995) example of television stations, mail and telephone calls could be used to receive further information about an audience’s
tastes and needs. Regarded as impractical, online feedback mechanisms are extended to emails, comments, ratings and other forms of interaction. The enhanced possibilities for readers to participate and connect in various ways allow interactive online audiences to emerge from mass audiences (Belk and Llamas, 2013). Kozinets et al. (2010) found that an interactive audience consists of fans that not only consume content but also enrich and co-create the output. The importance of interaction – particularly in blogs – has been identified by Nardi, Schiano and Gumbrecht (2004, p.224) who found “that blogs create the audience, but the audience also creates the blog.” Relationship-building has been detected in various activities: readers let bloggers know that they are waiting for articles, bloggers producing articles with their audience in mind and on-going discussions with readers on their blog. Nardi, Schiano and Gumbrecht (2004, p.224) theorise the blog not as a broadcasting medium, but rather a social activity, a “form of social communication in which blogger and audience are intimately related through the writing and reading of blogs.”

**Quantitative ways** of online audience measurement received little academic attention to date. Using television programs as an example, Nielsen introduced a device referred as the Audiometer that was installed in a sample audience. The device sent viewing information daily to the company’s computers using phone lines. With regard to blogs, authors are able to measure and monitor web data. Often referred to as web analytics in less normative works, data can be captured for the purpose of identifying patterns in order to optimise a reader’s blog usage. Main measures include overall page views, unique visits and returning visitors. Moreover, average duration and click paths are captured (Kaushik, 2007). Phippen, Sheppard and Furnell (2004) found that online analytics influence the success of a website. The measurement of traffic overall helps website editors plan for future growth. Website editors are able to differentiate and segment site visitors based on behaviour on the platform and thereby are able to improve processes (e.g. content change or website redesign). Third, website editors can obtain information flow through their website. However, web analytics need to be embedded within a blog or website. Thus, blog ownership plays a critical role in web analytics. Blogs are consumer controlled
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and enable blog authors to install or embed additional analytic tools (Schmidt, 2007).

3.3.3 Audiences and advertising

Web analytics are not only used to identify readership taste and preference. On the one hand, it allows blog authors to detect patterns and make decisions concerning how to increase audience size on the platform (Phippen, Sheppard and Furnell, 2004). On the other hand, it is also used as a tool for market research (Kaushik, 2007). With increasing traffic on websites, web analytics have become a critical arena of online advertising (Danaher and Mullarkey, 2003). The most common form of advertising on the web is banner advertising where a “small billboard-like graphic appears on a website that can be clicked to go to another site or to buy a product” (Danaher and Mullarkey, 2003, p.252). Through strategically-placed banners on a website, advertisers can exploit new audiences and market their products and services. Businesses are utilising online media to generate further reach (Kozinets et al., 2010). Although this might be akin to television advertising, banners are compensated per view or banner click. Thus, in the same way that television ratings estimate an audience for respective commercials, website audience measurement is used to estimate and negotiate advertising placements on a website.

As blogs are subject-focused in nature, it groups potential internet shoppers with similar interests together, making it easier to advertise to a concentrated target audience (Hsu and Lin, 2007). Pagett (2010, p.126) outlines that “for retailers it may soon make more sense to advertise on blogs that are getting over 12000 hits a day versus hundred thousand dollar double page spreads in a print magazine.” Similarly, Napoli (2011) finds that advertising revenues from user generated content online is increasing. He concludes that reaching an audience and then selling advertisements on these platforms embody the core business models of most Web 2.0 platforms.
3.4 Actors and content

Within computer-mediated communication such as eWOM, written blog content is the main source of communication that derives from mediated quasi-interaction (Thompson, 1995) resulting in a weak relationship or virtual ties (Hoffman and Novak, 1996). Between actors and their readers, it is becoming difficult for readers to trust actors and their content. Xia and Bechwati (2008, p.3) argue that “the only source from which readers can draw inferences about trustworthiness and usefulness is the review itself.” Between actors and their readers, content becomes the main source of information not only about information, but also about an actor’s identity. Expressed in writing style and tone of communication, it can enhance the credibility of content (Li and Du, 2011). In eWOM, content has been mainly studied as a fixed entity rather than by examining outcomes including underlying practices. Confirmed by a dominant content analysis approach, scholars (Zhao and Belk, 2007; Kretz, 2010; McQuarrie et al., 2013) have found a variety of factors that influence the success of eWOM content such as argument strength, comprehensiveness, accuracy and timeliness (Cheung and Thadani, 2012). What is less known is what practices need to be developed in order to accomplish these factors, particularly as eWOM messages are studied in general, thereby neglecting different types of messages.

A distinction is made in traditional face-to-face settings where WOM is divided in two dimensions: 1) product news and 2) product advice, both of which may have similar outcomes in terms of content but the underlying practices can be entirely different. Richins and Root-Shaffer (1988) have proposed that product news is focussed on product and service advances or on differences between models, whereas product advice is clearly distinct. Product news is seen as rather fact-based whereas product advice is sourced from an individual’s prior experience. Thus products or services need to be tested before advice can be given (see Section 2.2.2). A correlation has been found in that two main types of blog articles (Blood, 2002) have been found: filters and personal journals. Filter types can be compared to a gatekeeping role that an actor potentially inherits. Bloggers review external information such as product news or event-related information and present
information relevant to their audience. In contrast to filter type blogs, personal journals rely heavily on a blogger’s personal experience.

3.4.1 Product news

Information provided in product news is in most cases regarding advances in a product category or product differences (Richins and Root-Shaffer, 1988). It is argued that product news seems to be based less on personal experience but rather on general knowledge about a product category. Thus information search and sources might be regarded as key practices within product news. Drawing on concepts from traditional settings, it may be argued that actors are highly motivated to seek new product information (Bloch and Richins, 1983; Goldsmith, Flynn and Goldsmith, 2003). In this context, enduring involvement is a prerequisite for product news. Thereby, actors may have more knowledge based on their involvement, and given this have a higher degree of interaction about specific products and services. Hence, Black (1982) outlines that practices go beyond simply diffusing content to followers, which strongly suggests influence.

Drawing inspiration from blog studies, actors’ practices can be divided in terms of three distinct activities that are essential in blogging: 1) sourcing; 2) filtering; and 3) posting (Ferdig and Trammel, 2004). Actors may visit multiple other sites relating to his or her topic in order to find information that they may then respond to or critique. This counters the argument of Bloch and Richins (1983) that these individuals tend to have an on-going interest that is not related to advice. As outlined by King and Summers (1970), maintaining an influential position requires a commitment to acquire necessary extensive knowledge. It could be argued that actors might favour online information sources as they diffuse information in the same way. In particular due to the advent of Web 2.0, a variety of information sources can be accessed online. However, Wei (2009) outlines that bloggers are heavily reliant on mass media information. He argues that blogs are instead mediated reports in contrast to first-hand reporting as reasoned by the insufficient resources and expertise available to conduct the latter. According to Ferdig and Trammel (2004), a blogger then filters information according to a reader’s interest. Based on rather contradictory findings,
there is a limited understanding of how actors gather information and it remains unclear how their content is presented which requires further investigation and evidence.

### 3.4.2 Product reviews

Whilst the generation of product news may be linked to existing concepts, less is known about the development of product reviews either in opinion leadership or blogging strands. Blank (2007), however, provides an elaborative account of product reviews focussing on processes through which reviews are constructed and in what forms these evaluations can be expressed. He views product reviews as “mechanisms, through which social status is made publicly visible” (Blank, 2007 p.1).

Blank (2007) has further postulated that reviews can be developed through two different approaches: connoisseurial reviews and procedural reviews. In his work, he consistently deploys restaurant reviews as connoisseurial reviews where taste plays a large role, and hardware (pc and consumer electronics) reports as being procedural in nature. The first is characterised by being mostly discursive and well written. Blank (2007, p.29) emphasises that “the key to the method is dependence on the ability of a person – a reviewer – who, because of unusual talents, extensive experience, or special training, has developed a refined sensitivity with respect to a certain product genre.” This type of review is characterised by being very opinionated and shaped by the reviewer. The style of writing is adjusted accordingly and resembles a novel or essay. As connoisseurial reviews consist entirely of texts, they allow the reader flexibility and can be adapted to a variety of settings. In contrast, a procedural review is less dependent on a personal response. Their reliance is on “explicit tests” and on the development of “systematic procedures” to transform opinion into facts. Blank (2007) uses a PC magazine consumer report as an example. A computer is tested in a stable environment focussing on the performance of different parts (e.g. CPU, RAM, etc.). The credibility of connoisseurial reviews derives from the reputation of the reviewer whilst procedural reviews are qualified due to their transparent nature and mechanical testing. The latter is seen as less flexible as it allows readers to compare
reviews. Thus, tech-bloggers may be more likely to adopt a procedural review approach as used in existing practices in this category.

Blank (2007) further concentrates on the practical and strategic requirements of the review process itself. The first strategic decision is what products to review. He argues that experienced reviewers maintain a “mental list” of products in their category that are important to their readers. In procedural reviews general demand is more critical. Market-leading products or products from market-leading companies are reviewed first. Depending on the type of product category, Blank (2007) argues that it could be possible that a reviewer simply wants to review all products in his area if possible. If products have been chosen, they are evaluated in different ways. Predominant in procedural reviews is the fact that products are often evaluated by more than one person in order to speed up the reviewing process. In contrast to connoisseurial reviews, the main boundaries of reviews are set by testing times and certain procedures that have been developed. Moreover, these products or services are mainly evaluated in a non-experimental fashion. This should enable connoisseurial reviewers to get an overall feeling for a product or service, compared to experimental tests. Blank (2007) further notes that practices derive from the type of product or service tested. He argues that restaurant reviews are more connoisseurial in nature, whereas computer software or hardware appraisals are more related to procedural reviews.

Blank (2007) suggests that even though critics review a product, they may not write about it. He found that only 60-70 per cent of evaluations are written up in a review. As for example products could be not unique enough to spend a whole article reviewing it, or there has been an unusual experience that requires further evaluation. This is particularly the case for connoisseurial reviews. The writing process of the review also differs; although very qualitative in nature, the text is separated into certain segments. Furthermore, the conclusion of a connoisseurial review tends to compare other products at a similar performance or price level. On the other hand, procedural reviews tend to have a consistent set of criteria; the overall focus is also on consistency and trying to quantify the evaluations made. Moreover, almost every procedural review includes a large summary table. This can consist of a list of overall
specifications, or a rating in a specific category. The development of numerical ratings has been found to be a fundamental component of procedural reviews. To make products easily comparable, main features are grouped together and then evaluated on a certain scale. In restaurant reviews it has been found that star ratings (1-5) have been most prominent whereas in technology reviews, numerical ratings from 1-10 are most common.

3.4.3 Channel influence

With regards to product tests, Blank (2007) acknowledges that reviews are predominantly found in written format. However, new channels can complement these reviews with additional material (Schmidt, 2007) and the way in which content is presented can vary widely (Berger and Iyengar, 2013). Thus, the diffusing channel has major implications on content length and format. Schmidt highlights the importance of what he calls “code” – the source code where a blogging package is written (see Section 2.5.2). Du and Wagner (2006) found that blogging technology is designed mainly to reduce effort required in terms of communication and publication. They claim that technology takes care of publishing and storage in order for actors to focus and devote their time to content. Less effort in blog maintenance allows actors to focus on providing content. However, Du and Wagner (2006) found that bloggers have rather contradicting attributes. They found that these platforms can restrict actors from performing specific actions or can allow actors to distinguish themselves from other actors. Although still predominantly text-based, blogs are moving towards becoming multimedia platforms that include pictures and videos (Schmidt, 2007). In addition, Schmidt (2007) highlights how technology differences are associated with the success of a blog as technology provides additional content and social value respectively.

Platforms enable readers to actively participate and engage in blog content. They can feature subscriber lists and thus help to maintain a social circle of readers. Schmidt (2007) argues that technology, therefore, is characterised by lowering barriers to communication and engagement with an unknown audience. This may include feedback on content or suggestions for further development. Du and Wagner (2006)
for instance have outlined that integrated applications can be developed to provide further functionality, such as allowing users to bookmark entries, save content or receive alerts regarding a given topic. Thus, there is an indication that the type of channel used shapes the format of the content and consequently affects content practices.

3.5 Actors and networks

As part of an actor’s social interaction, they communicate and diffuse information to their audience, and recent accounts of their practices have been devoted to interaction with others, such as marketers or other actors (McQuarrie et al., 2013). In contrast to their blog communications, other forms of interaction could be of a more traditional character, i.e. face-to-face conversation or email. Tsang and Zhou (2005), for instance, claim that influential online individuals are specifically choosing computer-mediated environments as they have access to information they would be unable to obtain otherwise. This indicates an information advantage for actors but it also construes them as isolated entities rather than being socially-embedded as outlined in traditional concepts (i.e. opinion leadership). Conversely, McQuarrie et al. (2013) suggest that bloggers gain a role within the larger network they are interacting in. They argue that they access the larger “system unavailable to an ordinary consumer” (p.149). Due to the increasing interest of marketers in cooperating with actors (Kozinets et al., 2010) there is an indication of an on-going communication with other members of the larger network, resulting in receiving benefits such as gifts or acquiring access to unique information (McQuarrie et al., 2013).

What is less known is who these actors interact with and how these relationships are formed. It could be argued that actors enter an established ecosystem, however their pure existence disrupts communications and relationships within them (Davidson and Vaast, 2009). For instance, actors can threaten the position of established actors in those ecosystems. A potential account of network relationships is given in current WOM theory consisting of actors, marketers and other consumers (Kozinets et al., 2010). One of the main changes in WOM strategy as Vargo and Lusch (2004, p.7) argues, is based on the observation that “customers are active participants in
An emerging actor category: relational exchanges and coproduction.” The power of influence has shifted from the marketer to the consumer. To be able to obtain and assess influences, an in-depth investigation of relationships within this ecosystem is necessary.

### 3.5.1 Type of networks

Although existing WOM theory has been primarily applied to traditional face-to-face settings (see Section 2.2.3), it also provides insights into the various roles of individuals within the ecosystem. Within the network coproduction model (see Fig. 3.1), referred to as the most recent development of WOM theory, Kozinets et al. (2010) postulate the existence of three main individuals: 1) the marketer who tries to directly influence targeted individuals through a strategic attempt, such as WOM marketing or seeding campaigns (Libai, Muller and Peres, 2013); 2) targeted individuals who diffuse marketer-initiated information to other individuals using their own interpretations; and 3) other consumers who are the main recipient of information by targeted individuals. In the context of this study, actors share similarities with targeted individuals because their main content is consumption-oriented (Zhao and Belk, 2007) and they attract a relatively large audience (McQuarrie et al., 2013), they are the prime target of marketers.

![Network coproduction model (Kozinets et al., 2010)](image)

A specific application of network coproduction to an online setting is studied by Kozinets et al. (2010). Focusing on 83 bloggers for a six month period during a seeding campaign based on smartphones. First, they confirmed Vargo and Lusch’s (2005) argument of a power shift between marketers and targeted consumers by positioning the latter as acting nodes. Bloggers receive products from marketers and
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diffuse product information with their own meanings to readers of their blog, thereby devoting a central role to bloggers in this model. Second, an increasing influence from marketers leads to bloggers’ dual role, thereby causing commercial and communal tensions (Kozinets et al., 2010).

**Commercial networks** – Commercial networks are mainly referred to as communication between marketers and bloggers where there is a direct influence from marketers on targeted individuals (Lehmann and Estaban-Bravo, 2007). Aligning with other studies (Hinz et al., 2011; Libai, Muller and Peres, 2013), marketers try to formalise these interactions to directly manage WOM activities, predominantly conducted through WOM marketing or seeding campaigns (see Section 3.4.3).

**Communal networks** – This refers to the communication with other individuals. Within the network coproduction model, communal networks represent interaction with other bloggers and blog readers. Similarly, other studies such as Kumar et al. (2004) note that there is a high density of communication between blogs in terms of comments and linkage creations, thereby resulting in a fairly homogenous group referred to as the “blogosphere” (see Section 3.4.2).

The network coproduction model devotes a primary role to consumer interaction where the overall ecosystem is non-existent. McQuarrie et al. (2013) highlight that bloggers do not form an alternative community; they are embedded in a traditional ecosystem including mass media such as journalists. Actors may learn and imitate established professions, whilst simultaneously threaten the position of such professions. Domingo et al. (2008) argue that bloggers enter a journalistically dominated field and therefore are influenced by the latter and their practices. This is partly reasoned as some journalists have their own blogs and, on the other hand, certain bloggers such as actors are maintaining weblogs that resemble news journalism to a certain extent. However, Hass (2005) notes that although the published content may be similar, traditional news media are bound by journalistic norms and practices, and in particular those practices need to be established in order to overcome “communal” and “commercial” tensions.
3.5.2 Blogs and the blogosphere

As illustrated within the network coproduction model, the main form of communication is between actors and consumers via blog content. In blog studies, interconnectivity between blogs has been found to be critical. Schmidt (2007) coined the term “blogosphere” when speaking about aggregated communication. He further argues that blogs are conversational in nature and discussions are a fundamental part of their existence. Blood (2002) goes even further arguing that a blog needs to link to other blogs to be characterised as such, which assumes that conversations are critical if not fundamental.

Different social status between bloggers – It is assumed that there is a hierarchy of actors divided by social status. Du and Wagner’s (2006) study outlines a blog’s social capital, e.g. a blog’s readership as a potential differentiator of social status. Most studies on communication between blogs have been captured online via blog referrals or comments on other blogs. Other forms of interaction, such as email or offline communication, have been neglected thus far. Therefore, only assumptions can be made about the nature of relationship between blogs. Drawing on offline WOM, it could be argued that there are different levels of actors. Dressler and Telle (2009) found that there is a “level one” opinion leader that receives information directly from other sources whereas “level two” leaders predominantly gather information from level one opinion leaders. Thus, it can be argued that there are individuals that pass on information to each other, information that then diffused by the latter (level two opinion leaders). Moreover, this could mean that actors may adapt the information and practices of other actors.

Blogging Ethics – Shared practices have been found in particular around blogging ethics. Perlmutter and Schoen (2007) in their work identified three issues which are not only limited to blogging, but have prompted discussions in that domain. The first is the use materials from other blogs without acknowledgement. Plagiarism, hereby, is not restricted to text. This can also include using pictures or videos from other blogs. Another concern is based on the affordances of blogging technologies. As blogs are hosted by bloggers, the latter can edit all content on their platforms. This can lead to censorship of comments, including editing history such as articles or...
comments made in the past. Consequently, they can cover up mistakes or manipulate conversations. Lastly and most important in the context of this study, is cooperation with third parties. Perlmutter and Schoen (2007, p.39) outline that this includes “accepting funds from commercial interests or advocacy groups without disclosure of such and continuing to offer themselves as independent local voices.” This increasing engagement has caused a debate in whether cooperation between marketers and bloggers are ethical as actors may lose independence. In response to these issues, Perlmutter and Schoen (2007) argue that a number of “professional” bloggers are trying to establish a code of ethics. They found that a declaration of ethics around blogs is required; otherwise they will not be taken seriously. Due to the novelty and emergence of these actors, norms need to be established. Most norms are taken from the field of journalism, including journalistic standards, routines and practices that guide actors through their activities (Haas, 2005). However, less is known about how these ethics are shaped by the blogosphere and the consequences actors have to face if they do not conform to them. Furthermore, less attention has been paid to the unstated code of ethics, such as communication and behaviour outside of blog content.

3.5.3 The role of marketers

As identified earlier, in recent WOM theory there has been an increase of marketer-initiated campaigns to influence consumers with regards to eWOM. As part of these “commercial networks”, Godes and Mayzlin (2009) distinguish between different types of marketer interaction with influential individuals online. One indirect approach is to “engineer” WOM among their customer base and thus increase the number of conversations that take place (Godes and Mayzlin, 2009). Another and more direct approach is marketer-initiated but consumer-diffused, in other words to target product samples at selected consumers (Kozinets et al., 2010). These seeding campaigns (Lehmann and Estaban-Bravo, 2007) aim to target product sampling at selected consumers, thus they are product specific campaigns run over a certain period of time. Often used interchangeably, WOM marketing (Godes and Mayzlin, 2009) has a similar focus on specific individuals but is less formulated in terms of duration and focus (Kozinets et al., 2010).
Both WOM marketing and seeding campaigns are developed to help marketers exploit new audiences by attracting a group of targeted customers in order to adopt and review the product at an early stage in the product lifecycle with the hope of attracting other consumers (Libai, Muller and Peres, 2013). As the information in these campaigns is diffused by the targeted individuals, this tends to be more cost effective compared to traditional mass media advertising (Hinz et al., 2011). Increased attention has been paid to these campaigns as a new tool that could add (or even replace) traditional advertising, particularly aimed at a younger target group (Godes and Mayzlin, 2009). According to Hinz et al. (2011) there are four factors that have a major influence in the success of a seeding campaign: First, the content that is diffused can be either product advice or news; Second, the structure of the network should contain a large audience to reach more potential consumers; Third, marketers have to find individuals who are willing to participate in the review process and share content; Finally, an incentive must be given to those influential individuals to participate in these seeding campaigns.

According to Hinz et al. (2011), the third factor is seen as fundamental to the success of a seeding campaign that focuses on the seeding strategy itself. It is mainly characterised by a complex identification process that targets potential individuals as chosen by the marketer (Libai, Muller and Peres, 2013). The issue of finding optimal target individuals has generated much attention. Part of research regarding seeding strategies has focussed on which markets to seed (Libai, Muller and Peres, 2013) or which channels to use, for instance in SNS or blogs. Other studies devoted attention to the role of seeding campaign participants. Libai, Muller and Peres (2013) found that one logical aim is to find individuals who have acquired a sizeable audience. Another type to target could be experts who have a relatively high effect not based on their audience size but on the influence they exert to their audience. Typically, this is found in specific topics or niches (Iyengar, Van den Bulte and Valente, 2011). Watts and Dodds (2007) concluded that audience size as a factor is not sufficient as in does not create large cascades of influences. Libai, Muller and Peres (2013) conclude that expertise linked with a large audience is a main indicator for influence.
In existing research, the number of individuals has not been purposive, but rather indicates those who were willing to participate (Hinz et al., 2011). Seeding campaign studies are often limited to empirically capture single campaigns devoted to one specific product (Kozinets et al., 2010) and do not capture the dynamics of the relationship between marketers and bloggers (Libai, Muller and Peres, 2013). Examining the nature of relationships might be essential to understand the profitability of such seeding campaigns. Programs have the potential to evolve from one-time cooperation to relationships with increasing similarities to brand communities (Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001) and actors might become a permanent member of the marketplace. However, this leads to further questions about the nature of WOM marketing such as seeding campaigns where “marketers are just beginning to understand the formation, reaction, and effects of communally based marketing promotions.” (Kozinets et al., 2010, p.73).

3.6 Formulating research questions

Considering the high potential for innovation in eWOM and the opportunities for the disruption of existing fields, the emergence of these new actors has been validated. Vaast, Davidson and Mattson (2013) found that gaining a better understanding of these actors is a critical issue in information systems research. Similarly, McQuarrie et al. (2013) highlight that investigations of such individuals have a major influence in the area of consumer behaviour, thus the main focus of this study is to investigate the underlying practices of actors, specifically tech-bloggers in order to make claims about the current understanding in eWOM:

Research Question:

What are the practices of tech-bloggers as emerging actors and the implications to our current understanding of electronic Word of Mouth?

Existing concepts are not able to fully explain the phenomenon. Both blog studies and the research conducted on opinion leadership have not addressed the unique practices that may evolve in this emerging actor category. This study draws on additional literature strands relating to three main areas of practice that are in
correlation with existing practices (audience, content, networks). Iyengar, Bulte and Valente (2011), for instance, claim that social interaction drives information diffusion. Although social interaction has been evident in blog studies as well as opinion leadership, the communication of actors widely differs. McQuarrie et al. (2013) outline that these blogs are characterised by the construction of a large audience. This is reinforced by claiming that a distinct feature of actors is their “ongoing communication by ordinary consumers to a mass audience of strangers” (p.307). McQuarrie et al. (2013) describe the increasing visibility of ordinary consumers who are managing to get hold of the “megaphone.” The megaphone refers to communication channels such as blogs that allow individuals to attract a mass audience. Turner (2010) also proposes that audiences are more similar to radio or reality television as they are predominantly monological. There is a need to know how these actors attract audiences and interact with them in order to maintain their audience leading to the first sub research question:

*Sub Research Question 1:*

*How does this emerging actor category construct and maintain its audience online and how does their audience shape the actor’s practice?*

In order to attract audiences, it has been found that involvement and knowledge is key and a driver of social interaction. In particular the involvement has been found to be a prerequisite to build of knowledge. Whilst knowledge is predominantly topical, it is mainly gathered through own experiences and information searches. In blog studies, information searches, sources and networking have been identified as key practices. When comparing both research strands, blog research has ascribed a much more prominent role to information gathering compared to the concept of opinion leadership. However, involvement and knowledge as well as information searching and sources are closely linked to product news and the diffusion of advice. Thereby, investigating how actors develop their content correlates with their practices leading us to ask:

*Sub Research Question 2:*

*What are the strategies and routines involved in content development and to what extent is technology shaping the content?*
Part of actor’s practices is established in compliance with communal norms (Kozinets et al., 2010), who are actively communicating with other blogs (Nardi et al., 2004) or marketers (McQuarrie et al., 2013), thus actors may be influenced by the parties that form communal norms. In this context, interaction with other actors needs to be further examined. In the same way, McQuarrie et al. (2013) has found that communication with marketers triggers the emergence of unique processes and activities that are too complex to be standardized. Thus, there is a need to understand how new actors communicate with existing actors and what their position in the network is leading us to ask:

Sub Research Question 3:  
*What are the relationships involved in network formation and to what extent is interaction shaping practices?*

Overall this study aims to capture practices both in relation to social interaction in the form of eWOM or other modes of communication. These interactions should provide further insight into the activities involved in the production and disseminating of news and product advice to others via eWOM through the use of blogs. However, when these individuals start blogging, these practices do not exist (Vaast, Davidson and Mattson, 2013). Whether and how those actors construct and develop practices is fundamental to understanding the emergence of a new actor category in eWOM communication. Therefore, a distinctive aspect of this study is its attempt to capture the emergence of these actors and it centres on the development and construction of audience, content and interaction.

3.7 Conclusion

This chapter outlined an alternative method to study the phenomenon of tech-bloggers as an emerging actor category in eWOM communication, one that will inform further theoretical development and empirical investigation. Theoretical grounding is provided by Vaast, Davidson and Mattson (2013) who have postulated how a new actor category emerges through new media. New forms of online media such as blogs provide innovative means for the dissemination of information. With a
particular focus on tech-bloggers, they claim that actors may draw on identities from existing concepts or establish new concepts. Engaging with additional literature, this chapter argues that actors can be distinct in three areas: audience construction; content development; and network formation.

As actors have been found to construct large audiences, the literature discussed here has been drawn from mass media studies where audiences are rather imagined in nature due to their weak connection. Actors may know some of their readers through interaction but the majority remain anonymous. There is a need to further explore actors’ practices to envisage this unknown audience and tie them to their blog. Audience construction is closely related to content development as this is the main form of information that is diffused from actors to their readers. Drawing on types of eWOM, such as product news and advice, it has been argued that actors require a different set of skills and thus expertise. In particular, product advice is closely related to information generation where product news may be more similar to information-filtering processes. Finally, networks have been reviewed in the context of an actor’s interaction, where it may be argued that actors enter an established ecosystem and – due to their existence – they transform the type of relationships that already exist. With a particular focus on relationships with marketers often referred to as seeding campaigns, there is a clear lack of understanding regarding how practices are shaped and influenced and what this means for our current understanding of WOM theory. By looking at an actor’s practices through three distinct lenses, this study sets out to generate a better understanding of their day-to-day activities in order to understand how they gain influence.

This chapter has further demonstrated the need for a methodologically sound study that captures actors’ practices rather than narrowly focussing on their blog content. As a consequence, the next chapter lays out how these questions were operationalized, including the ethical and methodological problems that were encountered and addressed during this study.
Chapter 4  Research Methodology

4.1 Introduction

The existing literature revealed significant gaps in our understanding of techbloggers as an emerging actor category. With a clear focus on a practice-based discussion there seems to be a methodological need for a qualitative grounded-research approach. However, existing studies in WOM (Section 2.3.2) have mainly investigated influential individuals (e.g. opinion leaders) using a quantitative approach. With the predominant use of survey methods, scholars looked for particular traits that make opinion leaders distinct from others, an approach which is time and resource intense. Transformed to computer-mediated environments, these techniques are widely critiqued by scholars (Iyengar, Bulte and Valente, 2011) where it is argued that they have a weak correlation to an online context. Due to the ease of data extraction, content analysis has been identified as the main method of inquiry in blog studies (see Section 2.5.3). However, these studies provide little insight into the underlying practices, particularly as they do not account for social interaction.

These methodological gaps will be further addressed in light of the formulated research questions. Drawing on the emerging actor category, the methodology needs to fit the overall purpose of the study and to specifically address issues identified in the three research areas: audience construction, content development and network formation. The aim of this chapter is to position the reader in relation to the research methodology that has been developed and followed. In this sense, a research methodology can be seen as a logical plan dealing with four key issues: what questions to study; what data are relevant; the valid methods to collect data; and how the results are analysed (Yin, 2011). It will provide an overview of the philosophical and methodological choices made within this research. An outline will be provided
which opens with a justification of the research approach leading to an outlining of the underlying assumptions of the research paradigm. In alliance, the research design will include methods used with further elaboration at each stage of the empirical data collection. Lastly, this chapter will give a further account of the data analysis, including how the collected data is organised and the validity and generalizability of the findings was accomplished respectively.

4.2 A qualitative research approach

Overall there is still an on-going debate about “quantitative and qualitative research in the social sciences, in particular the relative merits and disadvantages of these two styles of inquiry the debate” (Bryman, 1988, p.1). Whereas quantitative data is used when explaining a phenomena by collecting numeral data that is analysed using statistics, a qualitative inquiry is more concerned about the exploration and understanding of a social or human problem (Belk, 2007; Bryman and Bell, 2007; Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2003; Daymon and Holloway, 2011). Qualitative research builds a more complex picture as it analyses words and reports views on information as provided by participants. As Rowlands (2005, p.82) argues, “qualitative research is a diverse term covering an array of techniques seeking to describe, decode, translate, and somehow come to terms with the meaning, rather than the measurement or frequency of phenomena in the social world”. Although both strategies have their distinct uses and strengths, various factors affect the choice of the research approach, such as prior research and the degree of uncertainty surrounding the phenomenon (Trauth, 2001; Rowlands, 2005).

In the literature reviewed it has been found that opinion leadership studies were dominated by a quantitative approach using surveys (King and Summers, 1970; Childers, 1986; Feick and Price, 1987; Iyengar, Van den Bulte and Valente, 2010). Similarly, in computer-mediated communication, studies have been of a predominantly quantitative nature, either using surveys (Lyon and Henderson, 2005) or content analysis (Trammell and Keshelashvili, 2005; Kretz, 2010; McQuarrie et al., 2013). Particularly due to ease of use, a systematic scraping of blog content might seem beneficial. For instance, McQuarrie et al. (2013) have examined tastes
and audiences in fashion blogs, whereas Trammel and Keshelashvilli (2005) have looked at self-presentation within blogs. With a clear focus on blog content, these findings are mostly resonant but in some cases make claims about authors’ motivations and their practices that seem to require further evidence to support their statements. On the one hand, their information is publicly available which may symbolise publicly accepted behaviour. On the other hand, involvement is only limited to articles that have been published, thus obscuring other forms of activities. A greater focus on the individuals behind the blogs would provide a way to validate claims made about bloggers’ understandings of their practices.

A second aspect is the exploratory and flexible nature of research where a qualitative approach may be more suitable (Wilson, 2011) based on the limited number of studies and relatively new developments in this area (McQuarrie et al., 2013; Vaast, Davidson and Mattson, 2013; Berger, 2014). As a consequence of new insights and the underrepresentation of actors in the existing research, the degree of uncertainty is high. There is no predefined set of questions available as the studied phenomenon is not known in detail and only assumptions can be made. Hence, “the more ambiguous and elastic our concepts, the less possible it is to quantify our data in a meaningful way” (Dey, 1993, p.28). In complex social science phenomena, using quantitative research could lead to incorrect findings (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994). In addition it has been suggested that representative sampling is more complex as the number of participants is limited. As this actor category represents specific individuals rather than a big population, in-depth information has been seen as more valuable than generalizability.

Based on identified factors, this research adopts a qualitative approach where the assumptions of qualitative work will be incorporated throughout the empirical research process. In this context, Denzin and Lincoln (1994, p.2) summarise that “qualitative research is multi-method in focus, involving an interpretive, naturalistic approach to its subject matter.” A qualitative approach seems helpful in an in-depth examination of these emerging actors in order to gain a better understanding of their activities and ecosystem in a natural setting. Yin (1984) agrees that qualitative approaches are suitable for investigations of unknown areas or to examine familiar situations from another perspective. In particular, the flexible nature of the research
is seen as an advantage as the direction and focus may be refined during the empirical data collection as a result of new insights that are unveiled during the process (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2003).

4.2.1 Interpretive research paradigm

The qualitative research approach is consistent and compatible with the epistemological and ontological assumptions. Scholars (Blaikie, 2009; Daymon and Holloway, 2011) have focussed on three categories based on an underlying research epistemology which are interpretive, positivist and critical in nature. An interpretive paradigm follows the view that people socially and symbolically construct their own realities (Berger and Luckman, 1966). This contrasts with a positivist view rooted in the belief that an objective reality exists (Bryman, 1988). Hence, a distance between the researcher and the phenomena is preferred in order to be “objective”. Similar to an interpretive view, critical realist researchers support the view that individuals socially construct their realities. However, along with positivists, they rely on an observable external world that is independent of human perception (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994; Blaikie, 2009).

In this study, assumptions are drawn by an interpretive worldview where the world is experienced as subjective and best understood in terms of individuals’ subjective meanings rather than the researcher’s objective definitions, thus distancing from a critical realist paradigm (Rowlands, 2005). A critical assumption of subjectivity and interpretivism in research is that the investigated phenomenon seems too complex to define and measure with standard instruments. To gain a better understanding of a phenomenon is a process that can never be complete. Therefore, the outcome of research is always provisional, falling between interpretive worldviews. Within an interpretive paradigm, the ontological assumption claims that the researcher and reality are inseparable, whereas epistemological assumptions indicate a socially constructed world based on a researcher’s lived experience (Cepada and Martin, 2005). Despite this, assumptions raise questions of the style of involvement within qualitative interpretive research. Walsham (2006) distinguishes between the interaction within participants as either involved or independent. An independent
interaction with a study’s participants is often portrayed as a “neutral” observer, which doesn’t mean that this view is unbiased. Nevertheless, an independent researcher is perceived as more neutral in the sense that the researcher does not need to be aligned in terms of agreeing with the views or processes of the participants (Walsham, 2006). With regards to a practice-based study there is a risk of losing critical distance between the researcher and the participants who may, perhaps, be represented in a too positive light. Although there was a close involvement due to the choice of methods in this research, the form of interaction needed to be kept independent to increase validity within the research design.

Research within an interpretive paradigm begins with inductive reasoning and adopts a particularistic approach, “going from the particular – individual instances, incidents or the unique – to the general” (Daymon and Holloway, 2011, p.104). Moreover, Reichardt and Cook (1979) claim that qualitative research is developed for the task of discovering or generating theories. An inductive research strategy has been viewed as particularly suitable for a small sample. This reasoning is more likely to be used in the context of qualitative research to allow researchers a variety of methods to collect data and thus enable different views of the phenomenon, e.g. emerging actors (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Lowe, 1991). Especially as the information of these actors on their blog delivers rich information that can be used to provide alternative explanations, the mostly rigid methodology used in deductive research could be limiting. However, it has to be noted that most qualitative research projects although inductive, incorporate deductive reasoning at later stages of the process (see Section 4.7). A summary of the research choices that have been made in this dissertation are presented in Table 4.1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Inquiry</th>
<th>Paradigm</th>
<th>Ontology</th>
<th>Epistemology</th>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>Interaction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Qualitative</td>
<td>Interpretive</td>
<td>Subjective</td>
<td>Interpretivist</td>
<td>Inductive</td>
<td>Independent</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.1 – The research approach used in this study
4.3 Research design

Within the context of the chosen research approach and paradigm, the design of the empirical inquiry needed to both address the specific study objectives and overcome the limitations in the existing research. It has been outlined that this research is exploratory in nature. This is partly due to the minority of studies that only provide a limited understanding of the phenomenon (McQuarrie et al., 2013; Vaast, Davidson and Mattson, 2013) and the continuous development and transformation of the emerging actors. It was more complex and difficult to identify themes beyond the areas of audience construction, content development and network formation. With a practice-based focus, an exploratory case study has been considered as a pilot study. The aim of the case was to overcome certain issues as presumptive knowledge about topics can be obtained over a longer duration. Due to prolonged engagement given themes may emerge empirically. The case study has been incorporated as the first stage of research, which should inform both the later stage of data collection as well as the sampling methods that are suitable for this study.

Both the existent literature and the qualitative nature of the study indicate a more complex sampling process due to limitations in terms of accessibility in contrast to publicly available information (such as content analysis of blogs). Moreover, the number of participants is limited making it critical to identify key individuals as the main object of this study. In existing qualitative studies (Nardi et al., 2004; Lenhart, 2006), sampling methods to find authors and their weblogs have been mainly undocumented or opportunistic. As the sampling of actors plays a critical role in order to understand and explain this emerging actor category, a purposive sampling strategy has been added.

The exploratory case and the sampling process are set out to inform the main stage of research. The case should provide an initial understanding of the nature and setting of the phenomenon whereas sampling process should provide a grasp of the amount of actors within the research setting. The examinations of actors will, consequently, be the main body of research. Though exploratory, the objective is to detect preliminary patterns and themes that have been developed from the case study. An
overview of the methods and processes of the main examination in relation to the prior stages will be illustrated in Figure 4.1 (justification and further discussions of methods can be found in Section 4.6).

![Figure 4.1 – Stages/methods within empirical data collection](image)

### 4.3.1 Research setting

The research setting can be seen as the physical, social and cultural site in which research is conducted. As qualitative research is conducted in a natural setting, boundaries and distinctions need to be made in order to focus on a specific community, in this context the emerging actor category. To examine actors using blogs and blog-associated technologies (Vaast, Davidson and Mattson, 2013), blogs need to be written by individuals that can be clearly identified. Blogs have been eliminated where authors could not be identified, thus separating them from potentially corporate or retail blogs (McQuarrie et al., 2013). An overview of the remaining factors is outlined below with further discussions of choices made (see Table 4.2).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Focus</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Blog type</td>
<td>Personal weblogs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Product category</td>
<td>Consumer electronics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geographical area</td>
<td>German speaking Europe</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.2 – Overview of research setting
**Product category**

Research on opinion leadership has identified that the form of leadership is product-category specific (Katz and Lazarsfeld, 1955; King and Summers, 1970). Similar blog studies (Herring et al., 2005) claim that blogs are grouped by specific topics they provide. The product area in this study aligns with the notion of “tech-bloggers”. To overcome issues and limitations around an overlap of leadership across consumer product categories (King and Summers, 1970), the chosen product category in this research has been narrowed down to consumer electronics such as smartphones and tablets. This product category in particular has been found to align with high influence WOM categories (see Section 2.2.1) due to their transformed use and based on: 1) the complexity of these devices; and 2) their factually-driven presentation (Turnbull and Meenaghan, 1980).

The increased functionality and choice of smartphones and tablets arguably lead to a more complex decision-making process. Different operating systems are in use and hardware specifications may become limited in terms of describing a device. Moreover, it is nearly impossible to know if a certain device suits specific needs without having tested them. Despite the recognised need for the documentation of software and lifestyles, traditional product news and reviews of these products still remain fact-driven, e.g. focussing on product specification (Blank, 2007). Thus, product advice, especially in this category, can be regarded as valuable to other consumers in order to reduce risks of uncertainty and opens avenues for actors to address those demands.

**Geographical focus**

The area where research is conducted is critical to justify the findings and to make empirical research representative in nature (Blaikie, 2010). In general, a study around these actors who form a community can be regarded as “a geographically delineated unit within a larger society” (Berg, 2001, p. 297). Online communication channels are known to be less geographically-bound and instead are centred on forms of consumption (Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001). As blogs are mainly divided by language, it is arguably more difficult to distinguish the U.K. from other markets (such as the
U.S., Canada, India, Australia, etc.). However, marketing activities such as promotions and communications are divided by country, making the process of geographical focus more complex. To distance from issues that may arise with English blogs and because of the ease of accessibility of the market (access to vendors based on prior involvement of the researcher), German-speaking Europe has been chosen. With a subpopulation of around 95 to 100 million it is seen as a significant market overall as being the largest consumer market within Europe.

4.4 Stage 1: Exploratory case study

As part of the overall study, a single exploratory case study has been applied in order to first gain in-depth insights into the area of interest in a natural setting. More specifically, the goal was to acquire a better understanding of the nature and complexity of processes taking place. From a theoretical point of view, the case study was necessary as “the boundaries between the phenomenon and context are not clearly evident” (Yin, 1987, p.13). Furthermore, a single case study has been advocated by Yin (1987) to study the content of unexplored subjects whereas multiple cases are more desirable with the intention of description, theory development and testing. Although single cases have been critiqued by scholars (Yin, 1987; Daymon and Holloway, 2011) due to their lack of generalizability, the intention is to understand the deeper structure of the overall phenomenon in terms of emerging actors in a prolonged engagement. The main use of this case study was to inform the subsequent stages of research.

Due to the desired prolonged engagement, access was more difficult than the sampling process suggested in terms of finding a suitable case. The case study had to conform to the overall setting and should therefore aim to investigate bloggers in German-speaking Europe and write about product news or advice in consumer electronics. Especially in this case study, access would need to be established on more than one occasion (Yin, 2011). Throughout the process, the threat of losing access always existed and the researcher therefore needed to manage access throughout the time in the field. As the progress of the investigated projects was not known, unpromising projects had to be eliminated. According to actors, blogs are
easily terminated in the first stages, thus a project was anticipated with a high percentage of completion to allow the researcher an in-depth insight into the full period of study.

In this context, a shared blog has been chosen as the main point of inquiry at this stage, namely a blog where eight individuals write about their technology interests. Although the project was initiated by Microsoft, this has been beneficial as they had the clear intention to run it for several years. Moreover, communication between marketers (Microsoft) and actors have been ongoing which has been critical to observe relationship development and influence. Observations could be made from the beginning on where prominent topics and issues could be obtained in group discussions. To ensure the independence of actors, it has been clarified that articles are independently written by the participating actors and they must not be Microsoft-related. The participants themselves are not being paid. However, Microsoft cooperates with them by providing additional access to information and software for specific purposes if necessary. The content presented reflects the opinions of the author. The individual posts are not subject to Microsoft approval or a similar process. Although the company clearly distanced themselves from the content developed by actors, this case provided rare insights in terms of communication with manufacturers as the actors in this project had a direct line to one manufacturer. It was interesting to see how this cooperation might affect the decisions and performances of the actors. The actors within the program are students or young professionals who operate within a shared blog and social media pages such as Facebook, Twitter and Google+ as well as their own channels.

4.4.1 Methods and purpose

The engagement within the case stretched over a year that included a variety of methods to gain further insights and serve the purpose of the case study, thereby informing the consequent stages of research. The main form of inquiry at this stage has been achieved through observation.

*Observation* has a tradition within case study designs as it provides important means of understanding the ways in which people act and interact communicatively.
Daymon and Holloway (2011) have noted that this also applies to computer-mediated actions and interactions that can be web-based social contact or actions regarding online tools. Thus, access has been granted to levels of action and interaction including:

1) Communication between blog authors, and between the marketer and blog authors;
2) Blogging platforms including front and back end.

Observations gave further insight into the daily activities of case study participants such as their publishing routines as well as where and how they communicate. As the case study chosen was a shared blog at an early stage, a learning curve in content development and network formation could be obtained. Furthermore, blog authors needed to construct an audience from scratch. Observations around the first stages of audience construction have been beneficial as it confirmed current issues in the literature as they had no prior experience and thus experimented as part of their blog development. Although this was sufficient with the computer-mediated environment, blogging practices needed to be developed. These became apparent in group conversations where the actors helped each other and shared experiences as well as communication with marketers which became more formalised over time.

Additional aspects of observations supported the sampling strategies as well as the choice of interview format. First, being involved in this setting also helped to identify key actors in the “blogosphere” which blog authors in this case study often referred to within communications and their blog content. Second, communication between blog authors as well as marketers primarily took place in an online environment. Despite face-to-face meetings between marketers and blog authors, these members have been found to be comfortable with online communication as the basis of their blog work. As a consequence, Skype group chats and conversations were a primary source of communication observation. In particular, the ease of use paired with the additional chat window made it easy for blog authors to refer to blog content and have a more intimate communication (due to video-conferencing) whilst being location independent. Blog authors have been found to be based in different cities.
and thus unable to meet regularly face-to-face. This setting has been later applied to the main stage of interviews (see Section 4.3.1).

Other forms of communication data included Facebook group chats and email conversations between marketers and blog authors. Access to a variety of communication data enabled the research to gain a fuller picture of the setting and a better understanding of where these communications take place. It raised the importance of online and offline communications and their distinctive use with different members. In particular the predominant use of social networking sites and associated technologies has been found to be useful as it contrasted with traditional forms of marketer communications which are considered to be heavily dependent on email with a more formal character (taken from the marketer interview).

As part of the rich access given, observations have been taken from the blog packaging software. As mentioned in blog studies (see Section 2.5.2), blogging software allows one to customise blog formation and display. Thus, the creation of a theme and the negotiation of blog format have been observed. A theme has been purchased that signalised the Microsoft focus topic orientation (metro theme) as the logo has been designed by one of the blog authors. Another critical aspect has been the application and use of analytics that became more important to audience construction in particular.

*Pilot interviews* – Observations have been complemented with pilot interviews, a common strategy found in the existing research (Yin, 1987; Daymon and Holloway, 2011). At this stage this has been found to be beneficial as the researcher was able to observe first and then question participants about controversies or other themes that were disclosed in the setting. Three interviews have been conducted with blog authors at different stages of observations and three preceding interviews with the marketer who was the main contact person for blog authors. These interviews allowed the researcher to connect observations made in response to the arguments given by participants that led to a case narrative (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2003). Thus, themes have been further narrowed down and validated from observations, which is particularly helpful as questions could be tested in advance prior to the main research stage.
4.5 Stage 2: Sampling of the main study

From a theoretical point of view, qualitative research within an interpretive approach mainly draws on samples which are likely to be chosen based on a specific purpose (Creswell, 2003; Belk, 2007; Yin, 2011). A convenience sample would have been less uncertain in terms of access. However, due to the relatively small number of participants in contrast to quantitative inquiries, it was found to be critical to choose informants that fit the purpose of the research inquiry.

Although consistent with the research setting, this inquiry did not intend to make representative statements about bloggers within German-speaking Europe in the area of consumer electronics. Rather, it was intended to provide an in-depth examination of practices, patterns and communications performed by a specific actor category from a variety of backgrounds. Therefore identifying actors that correspond to this emerging category as identified in the literature is essential to be able to present objective findings. The sampling has been chosen as purposive with a focus on a specific geographical area and topic category, thus avoiding many of the difficulties outlined elsewhere in producing a random sample of web pages or blogs (Li and Walejko, 2008; Kretz, 2010).

Within purposive sampling, a snowballing technique has been added to draw on participant information within the empirical process and to be more flexible within the empirical research process (Wilson, 2011). Snowballing has been found to be useful as identified actors could be further validated by individuals closer to the phenomenon than the researcher (Biernacki and Waldorf, 1981). Thus, the research follows those recommendations of existing interviewees that may lead to identifying other possible interviewees (Belk, 2007). Foremost, snowballing has been added to identify marketers and actors communicating and cooperating over a longer duration, which will be outlined further in Section 4.5.2. Aligning with Yin (2011), snowball sampling has been added for a purposive reason. Additional interviews will only be carried out if participants are thought to have additional information relevant to this study.
4.5.1 Sampling processes of actors

Drawing on existing research, scholars based their sampling strategies on specific blogging platforms (see Section 2.5.3). These consist of either a hosted platform such as “blogger” or “LiveJournal” (Herring et al., 2005) or external platforms that can be regarded as blogging databases. Hosted blogging platforms have been widely used in early blogging studies as the first blogs were hosted externally. To date, only a small fraction of blogs are hosted on these platforms anymore due to the evolution and ease of use of self-hosted blogs (see Section 4.3). Therefore, limiting actors to hosted platforms has not been found to be sufficient.

Blogging databases such as communities, aggregators and ranks and have received increasing attention in practice and have been incorporated in more recent studies (Kretz, 2010; Vaast, Davidson and Mattson, 2013; McQuarrie et al., 2013). Blog communities are mainly formed based on interest where blogs can add themselves manually to appear on the platform. This enables all bloggers in a certain category to be added, but it is limited to the blogger’s interest in taking part in this formation. In contrast, blog aggregators and ranks are platforms where blogs are added automatically based on a certain interest such as fashion, e.g. Hauteforte (Kretz, 2010) and an estimated audience, e.g. Bloglovin (McQuarrie et al., 2013). In particular, a distinction based on audience would be beneficial as a sizeable audience has been found to be one of the actors’ main characteristics. However, due to the automated collection of blogs within those platforms, blog interest, e.g. consumer electronics, has been found to be broader than in blog communities.

Based on the distinct characteristics of both blogging communities and aggregators, this research incorporates multiple platforms to provide a representative purposive sample. First, “German Blogcharts” have been chosen where the top 100 blogs within German-speaking Europe are represented based on audience size. Second, blog rank “High-Tech” has been incorporated as it ranks on audience but focuses on consumer electronics blogs. With regards to blog communities, “German Techcloud” has been incorporated as the largest community of German-speaking bloggers in the area of consumer electronics. In addition, the open Facebook group “German tech-
“bloggers” has been examined where it has been advantageous to obtain information from bloggers rather than blogs (Herring et al., 2005).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Type (Members)</th>
<th>Restrictions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>German Blogcharts</td>
<td>Ranking (100)</td>
<td>• Based on audience (top 100 blogs)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Website type – blogs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High-Tech blog rank</td>
<td>Ranking (100)</td>
<td>• Based on audience (top 100 blogs)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Interest – consumer electronics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>German Techcloud</td>
<td>Community (69)</td>
<td>• Website type – blogs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Interest – consumer electronics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>German tech-bloggers</td>
<td>Facebook group (31)</td>
<td>• Website type – blogs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Interest – consumer electronics</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.3 – Overview of blog communities/aggregators used

The purposive sampling drawn from the four platforms presented in the table above resulted in a main sample size of 234. Based on the characteristics of different platforms, the sample needed to be deducted to suit with the overall research setting. Table 4.4 displays eliminations made within the sample according to the overall research setting (see Section 4.3.1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Process</th>
<th>Sample size</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Purposive sampling</strong></td>
<td>234</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Deduct by blog interest (consumer electronics)</strong></td>
<td>146</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>As the ranking platform had no restrictions with regards to blog type, the sample has manually eliminated those that do not feature consumer electronics as their main subject</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Deduct by blog type (personal blogs)</strong></td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sampled blogs need to be clearly identifiable by one person. Articles written must clearly indicate one person</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Deduct by blog audience (sizeable audience)</strong></td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>As actors are identified to have more social contacts than others, blogs with no sizeable audience have been eliminated.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Eliminate double entries</strong></td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Snowballing technique within the empirical process</strong></td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technique used in both actors interviews and exploratory case study</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.4 – Summary of sampling process
Chosen platforms have already been focused on the intended geographical area. Similarly, blogs have been eliminated that align to blog interest and type. In contrast to personal bloggers (Nardi et al., 2004), this study examines an emerging actor category. A main distinction of this category has been made based on its audience size, namely that it has a mass media character (see Section 3.3). Thus, blogs have been eliminated that have not achieved a sizeable audience. Sizeable in this context has been chosen based on monthly visitors (>1000 per day – obtained from IVW, an independent media interface) as well in terms of a development of their social media channels (aligning with McQuarrie et al., 2013).

With regards to the elimination of double entries, it has been ascertained that 29 individuals in the sample occur in at least two different sources. Moreover, actors referred by interviewed actors as well as information from the exploratory case have been included based on their compliance with the overall research setting. Although no new actors have been found that fit the overall setting, 17 have been validated within the snowballing process. Hence, the sample has been double tested and its homogeneity could be obtained.

4.5.2 Establishing contact and final participants

An introductory communication was sent to sampled actors via email or a contact form was provided on their website. From observations within the case study, the main form of communication has been seen as informal. Hence, the style of writing has been adapted accordingly, e.g. the research outline has been more practically oriented in contrast to marketer interviews. The message included the objective reason, duration of the interview and a statement of participants’ intended contribution. The statement sought to make the message more personal to increase the actor’s willingness to participate. The responses of sampled actors were mixed, although 13 out of 41 agreed to participate. It settles with other studies (Nardi et al., 2004; Lenhart, 2006) that bloggers are very likely to talk about their experience based on their characteristics and interest in the area.

Final participants in this study are shown in Table 4.5 below. With regards to demographics, we found that the sample we identified in the product category
consumer electronics is strictly gender specific. All of chosen participants and the population from which we chose our sample were male. Regarding age we found no specific concentration at a certain age level. Although some of these actors may have started their blog before they were 18, our participants are between 18 and 42. There is, moreover, a trend that younger people are becoming more engaged and involved in this particular product category according to participants.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Actor</th>
<th>Blog name</th>
<th>Started⁴</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Blog visits/month⁵</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Christian</td>
<td>Inside-handly</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>Full-time</td>
<td>878.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Luca</td>
<td>2-blog</td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>40.000*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Carsten**</td>
<td>stadt-bremerhaven</td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>Full-time</td>
<td>1.300.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Alexander</td>
<td>Iphoneblog</td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>Full-time</td>
<td>376.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Fabien</td>
<td>Techstage</td>
<td>2008</td>
<td>Full-time</td>
<td>390.000*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Daniil</td>
<td>TBLT (tablet)</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>60.000*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Lars**</td>
<td>All about Samsung</td>
<td>2011</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>378.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Christof**</td>
<td>Tabtech</td>
<td>2011</td>
<td>Full-time</td>
<td>452.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Jan</td>
<td>Tablethype</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>Part-time</td>
<td>80.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Sascha**</td>
<td>Mobilegeeks</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>Full-time</td>
<td>870.000*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Lutz</td>
<td>Mobiwatch</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>Full-time</td>
<td>50.000*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Felix</td>
<td>Curved</td>
<td>2013</td>
<td>Full-time</td>
<td>800.000*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Philipp**</td>
<td>Technews</td>
<td>2014</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>46.000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.5 – Overview of interviewed actors

Due to the more flexible nature of this research approach, some interview participants have been interviewed twice (marked **) at a later stage to draw on information and themes that emerged during the data collection process. Particularly in relation to marketer interviews, a second round of interviews has been found

⁴ Start date taken from web archive “Wayback machine” (web.archive.org)
⁵ Blog visits are either taken from IVW Statistics (www.ivw.eu) or based on Google Analytics excerpt provided on their blog: * indicates approximate visits (in some cases based on information given by participants). Blog visits overall are changing continuously and should only display approximate measures of a sizeable audience.
useful to validate information. Resulting in 18 interviews, a certain degree of saturation has been reached. Saturation in this context is understood as a point at which interviews no longer improves categories or themes or no new themes have been found (Bryman, 1988; Kock, 2007). Bauer and Gaskell (2000, p.43) clarify that “the upper limit for a single researcher to be able to sensitively analyse is ranging from 15-25” which aligned with the number of interviews conducted.

Moreover, the snowballing/referral of actors within the sampling process did not lead to further participants or to the improvement of the validity of existing participants. Thus, contrasting with Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) critique that in many cases sample sizes are too small to have profound claims of redundancy or saturation, the issue of saturation has been addressed by applying various measures to the sampling process.

4.5.3 Identifying marketers

In contrast to actors, marketers have been purposively chosen based on their relations with actors. Aligned with the overall strategy, the sample has been drawn out of companies heavily engaged in this product category and therefore in continuous communication and cooperation with actors. The exploratory case study provided information regarding potential marketers. However, the snowballing technique as part of actors’ interviews has been the main sampling strategy applied to identify marketers in this study. Marketer interviews should provide further insight and a contrasting perspective in order to outline the actor’s practices.

Although 14 marketers could be identified from the exploratory case study and the snowball sampling process, access has been more difficult. Those 14 marketers have been contacted predominantly through email. The email format has been more formal to align with the practice in which the researcher agreed to share anonymised research findings to increase the chances of willingness to participate. It might be argued that due to the relatively new but competitive environment, marketers were less keen to share WOM marketing strategies. To increase the potential of marketers to provide information, their identities have been anonymised and names changed (see Section 4.7.3 for a discussion of ethical considerations). Marketers raised a
conflict of interest with company policies that resulted in their reduced interest in representing manufacturers.

The majority of respondents consist of consultants that clearly suited the purpose of this study. They are involved with manufacturers’ PR agencies or are consulting companies improving communication with the actors to further market their product. While valuable for this study, in some cases they represented more than one manufacturer and thus might provide more objective information.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Marketer 6</th>
<th>Clients mentioned</th>
<th>Field of Expertise</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Rolten (Blog relations manager)</td>
<td>Microsoft</td>
<td>Blogger relations, Influencer Recruiting, Digital Storytelling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Schmidt (Buzz Marketing Specialist)</td>
<td>HTC, Nokia</td>
<td>Tryvertising, Word of Mouth, Community Campaigning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Hall (Influencer relations manager)</td>
<td>Fujitsu</td>
<td>Influencer Relations (Blogger Relations, Analyst Relations)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Freisel (Online PR consultant)</td>
<td>IBM, Samsung</td>
<td>Influencer Marketing, Community Management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Mistel (Online influence expert)</td>
<td>Asus</td>
<td>Influencer Identification and Targeting</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.6 – Overview of the marketers interviewed

As displayed in Table 4.6 above, seven interviews have been conducted with five marketers. To refine information and themes within the research process, two follow up interviews (marked as *) have been conducted, mainly to validate the themes that emerged. A saturation of information overall has been sought while not exceeding Bauer and Gaskell’s (2000) range of interview analysis. Resulting in 25 interviews in total, they are on the upper range allowed to capture rich information from two different perspectives to validate findings and recognise perception gaps between actors and marketers. Further discussion of methods and informants in the main study will be outlined in the next section.

6 Names have been changed.
4.6 Stage 3: Main Study

The main study is informed by the exploratory stage where presumptive knowledge about topics and themes that emerged has been obtained. Through the main study, these themes will be refined and extended and systematically gathered in order to make profound explanations. Within the realm of qualitative research, interviews have been chosen as the main form of data collection. In contrast to the case study, the main purpose was to understand and explain. Despite exploratory features due to the nature of research, the main purpose at this stage of research is to address research questions. According to Blaikie (2010, p.69), “to understand is to establish reasons for particular social action, the occurrence of an event or the course of a social episode, these reasons being derived from the ones given by social actors.” Hence interviews have been conducted in order to gain a better understanding of actors’ patterns and behaviour. In alignment with the overall research approach, interviews are most common featured in interpretive and qualitative studies as a main approach to retrieving the interpretations of informants in the field (Walsham, 2006).

In existing studies, interviews and content analysis has been used prominently (see Section 3.1.2). The key disadvantage of content analysis is that only published information can be obtained. Limiting the research to the content on their channels would make assumptions less profound, whereas techniques such as interviews would be sufficient. However, blog analysis has been found to be valuable in terms of complementing interviews, particularly regarding content development and audience construction as underlying patterns and their outcomes can be obtained. With added marketer interviews to gain further insight in relation to the network formation, three methods have been applied that will be further discussed.

Figure 4.2 displays the main methods of analysis, which are actor interviews, blog analysis and marketer interviews. Further discussion of the triangulation of these data sources and their distinct uses to each research question will be explored in Section 4.6.4.
4.6.1 Actors interviews

After an extensive multistage sampling process (see Section 5.5), in-depth interviews have been conducted with 13 actors. In-depth interviews are used to cover specific topics where the topic order can vary depending on the flow of conversation (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2003). This means that interviews differ in wording and sequence, although distinct patterns emerge. In contrast to structured interviews the process was more flexible as questions did not need to be followed strictly and additional questions may be required to pursue issues or areas in detail (Bryman, 1988). However, this was more time and resource efficient as unstructured interviews generates “material that is of less relevance to your agenda” (Daymon and Holloway, 2011, p.225). In the context of flexibility it has been found that in some cases one interview is insufficient and issues and themes needed to be re-examined in the light of emerging ideas. Thus, follow up interviews have been conducted with five actors (see Section 4.5.3).

Interview format

Based on the nature of in-depth interviews, they primary occur on a face-to-face basis (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2003). However, it was impractical to conduct face-to-face interviews as a result of the distance to actors and the consequent costs and time involved. Bryman and Bell (2007) argue that interviews can also be conducted via telephone or the internet due to ease of access, speed and lower costs. With regards to telephone interviews significant issues have been found in terms of
reliability and their interpretation. Participants may be less willing to engage in exploratory discussions as personal contact is not as established as in face-to-face interviews, a dynamic which became particularly important as sensitive questions were employed. Moreover, there is less ability to control the flow of data as visual cues are not present. This may affect the interpretation of how far to pursue a particular area of interest (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2003). Internet-based interviews have been conducted in either an asynchronous (via email) or a synchronous (written) format using chat technologies.

In contrast to written internet-based techniques, there are now technologies available that allow synchronous video and audio interaction at distance, which are often referred to as “remote video techniques” (King and Horrocks, 2010) or “videoconferencing” (Wilson, 2011). These applications allow the researcher to communicate with participants whilst being location independent (Hanna, 2012). Technologies provide a synchronous form of communication as in the case of telephone interviews but the criticisms associated with losing visual and interpersonal aspects of interaction are overcome (King and Horrocks, 2010). Joinson (2007) has critiqued remote video interviews as they restrict the sample to participants due to issues of technology access. However, it has been discovered in the case study that actors use face-to-face remote conversations as one of their main forms of communication with companies or colleagues. They are familiar with the software and environment, and hold the required hardware (such as webcams and microphones) and bandwidth in order to make face-to-face interviews feasible. Although actors were given the option of telephone interviews to avoid alienating participants, all of them agreed to remote video techniques.

Hence, interviews have been conducted using Skype, a software application that enables its users to speak face-to-face using video and audio technology via a computer. Pretty and Pocknee (2008) argue that Skype is the most reliable and widely used application when it comes to remote video techniques. Furthermore: 1) It is free to download, calls are free of charge and its ease of use has been seen as advantageous; 2) Within Skype, users can be added to their content list and one can either video call or message them if they are online. The messaging function was especially useful for sharing data among participants or regarding the specific
features of their weblogs. Websites and blogs could be obtained during the interview where specific items from their blog could be discussed directly, which may not possible in offline face-to-face interviews; 3) As contacts are saved, it made it easier to obtain follow-up information via messages or even follow-up interviews; 4) Additional software allows one to record both audio and visual interaction in excellent quality which overcomes the limitations of dictaphones such as battery life and sound quality. The need to create a full record of the interview is one of the means to control bias and to generate reliable data for analysis (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2003). By audio recording interviews, the researcher is able to concentrate more fully on an actor’s responses and expression. However, to follow through on the areas of interest, notes have been made on the guidelines to provide touch points and draw on the responses given.

**Length and timing**

In-depth interviews are inclined to be longer than traditional questionnaire-based interviews, with most of the latter lasting between 60 and 90 minutes (Wilson, 2011). The duration of interviews was primarily dependent on the participant’s availability (Daymon and Holloway, 2011). In contrast to telephone interviews, it has been assumed that participants are more willing to provide more time. However, due to work pressures, the length was limited. Hence, the aimed duration was around one hour of core interview time. Although most actors showed a high interest in the topic leading to interviews of up to 140 minutes, others were time cautious resulting in 40 minute interviews. Thus, interviews averaged around 70 to 75 minutes. Shorter interviews were agreed in advance, so the interview guide could be adapted. Almost all of the relevant information could be obtained through interviews, but if any kind of key information was missing, participants have been approached via Skype messenger where additional questions were answered.

### 4.6.2 Marketer interviews

In order to incorporate other perspective regarding an actor’s information, marketers have been interviewed who are in on-going relation with these actors. In addition to their relationship with actors, they are regarded as experts due to their high level of
market knowledge. As Dexter (2006) argues, experts are members within a certain social system that are prominent and well informed. As evidenced by the literature (Kozinets et al., 2010; McQuarrie et al., 2013) as well as in the case study, most actors have an extensive communication with manufacturers or PR agencies regarding products and services. There is a lively information exchange where these experts work in a similar area (consumer electronics), but from a company’s perspective rather than an actor’s perspective. This view has been very beneficial to the relationship between marketers and actors and the influences marketers exert on actors. Moreover, it increased the validity of an actor’s given information as marketers may have a more objective and rich opinion given their extensive experience in the field.

Marketer interviews have been conducted in a similar setting as actor interviews. The main format of interviews has been via Skype due to the ease of use and the latter’s proven functionality. With regards to timing and length, marketers have been found to be more time constrained resulting in durations of 55 to 65 minutes on average. Interview duration has been mainly consistent throughout, with no interview less than 45 minutes thereby allowing the researcher to address the main themes. The shorter duration has been found to change the nature of the interview. The interview itself turned out to be more structured than with actors. A clear benefit was the more efficient use of time, whereas the narrative was different. Themes and questions have been clearly addressed and elaborated in detail. However, in contrast to actors’ interviews, new themes and controversies have been found to a lesser extent. This may be partly grounded as interviews with marketers have been conducted after the first round of actor interviews. Another aspect has been the higher level of formality; prominent themes and issues have been raised and explained in “corporate terms” which made comparisons between marketer interviews easier.

4.6.3 Blog analysis

Walsham (2006) argues that interpretive research interviews should be accompanied by other forms of field data that could include press, media or any other documents relevant to the context of being studied. In order to explain the outcome of actors’ practices, their blogs have been obtained. Blog analysis has been helpful to bridge
actor-provided information with evidence on their blog. A number of techniques are available which rely on the data collection from text-based sources to supplement interviews (Daymon and Holloway, 2011). Web-based data gathered from websites or online communication as a form of document has been beneficial for this study.

As outlined, existing studies in the area of blogging in relation to the emerging actor category have predominantly used a content analysis or discourse analysis as their main research method (see Section 2.5.3). With this approach, researchers try to examine artefacts of social communication. These are primarily written documents or – in this context – the articles published on a blog (Wilson, 2011). Discourse analysis focuses principally on the language that is used to construct different events and is concerned with processes through which meanings are generated and maintained (Daymon and Holloway, 2011). Content analysis has been found to be an unobtrusive form of data collection, where the researcher cannot influence the outcome. Bryman and Bell (2007) further argue that content analysis is considered as a relatively exact research method as it centres on facts as opposed to discourse analysis. A quantitative content analysis is mainly concerned with the interpretation of content by classifying large amounts of text that represents similar meanings. Analysis in this study goes beyond merely examining words to detect patterns (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005). Although McQuarrie et al. (2013) used content analysis to examine the verbal and visual texts of fashion blogs, their focus of analysis has been primarily on texts provided by those blogs. Moreover, Belk (2007) has critiqued content analysis, as excluding symbolic interaction and visual formats would restrict more profound insights.

One of the most remarkable characteristics of blogs is allowing greater flexibility in terms of format and visualisation of information (Scheidt and Wright, 2004). While it can be agreed that blogs are textual, they can be simultaneously seen as visual documents. Scheidt and Wright (2004, p.2) indicate that using content analysis, “while admirably productive, does not fully map the potential landscape of weblog research.” Hookway (2008) further argues that a visual focus on blog analysis may contribute as much as the particular text practices of individual authors. In particular, platforms such as blogs encourage actors to not only express themselves through their written product news or advice, but also to visually express themselves through
restructuring their blog, as well as incorporating various pictures and template designs (Hookway, 2008). Designs vary in design and colour scheme, title, logo and the use of different font types (see Fig. 4.3). Furthermore, it has been seen within the exploratory case study that customisation and adaption of plugins and themes is prominent and distinct from other websites and blogs. As Badger (2004, p.1) outlines, “if we think of weblogs as being homepages that we wear then it is the visual elements that tailor the garment to fit the individual”

![WordPress Demo Install](image1)

![WordPress Demo Install](image2)

**Figure 4.3 – An actor’s blog design/format vs. standard installation**

As a consequence, the blogs of actors interviewed have been systematically analysed in terms of visual and textual statements. The blog analysis has focussed on visual documents, however, texts have also been widely analysed. Since there was little to no research on this form of content analysis, a familiarity with widely used blogging platforms had to be premised (Hookway, 2008). Within the first stage of research, during the observational phase full access had been given to the blog backend in order to get a better understanding of actor practices and how these customisations work in practice. In addition, the theoretical underpinnings of content analysis have been used to provide justifications. Content analysis methodologies rely heavily on classifications through themes in a semiotic sense. Based on the themes developed,
blogs were analysed with a focus on website features rather than an exclusive content- or discourse-based observation as indicated in existing studies (McQuarrie, 2013; Davidson et al., 2014). Similar to traditional content analysis, these artefacts have been coded in comparable themes as the interviews allowed the researcher to develop an understanding of an actor’s activities and the practical outcome displayed on actors blogs. It further helped to understand how actors’ blogs endure over time and allowed one to gain historical insights (Daymon and Holloway, 2011).

4.6.4 Triangulation and focus

Interviews have been valuable in terms of revealing underlying motives and the processes behind blog activities. To put interviews into context, relevant blog content has been further analysed. Daymon and Holloway (2011) argue that it is advisable to use text-based sources to supplement interviews. Nevertheless, written and visual materials should be cross-checked and triangulated with other forms of data to ensure the validity of findings. As validity is often critiqued in qualitative research, triangulation was seen as a powerful technique to study the emerging actor category.

The triangulation applied in this study has moved across methods (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994). Although the overall research approach is qualitative and interpretive in nature, distinct methods have been used for cross validation. To overcome issues with the exploratory nature of the research and in order to gain valuable insights it was advisable to employ a qualitative method prior to the main study. With regards to the main study, rich data could be gathered from interviews but was more difficult to validate, as it was solely dependent on the informant to give accurate information. To validate actor interviews, marketer interviews have been found to be useful in this study. Although focused on the relation with actors, marketers were able to look at the phenomenon from a distance, thus having a more objective viewpoint. Often used in existing research, blog analysis is an efficient, but purely descriptive method. It describes what is there but may not reveal underlying motives and practices. Combining both blog analysis with interviews provides a more balanced portrayal of the emerging actor phenomenon.
These distinct methods have not only been applied to validate sources – they have been applied to accommodate the distinct direction and research focus outlined in each research sub-question. Thus, methods have been predominantly used to accommodate actor interviews in each research inquiry:

1) The focus of the first research sub-question is to understand the ways in which actors construct audiences and to what extent their audience shapes these practices. Thus, it incorporates a further blog analysis to examine readers’ comments and the ways in which actors interact with their audience. Moreover, blog analysis included the site analytics of an actor’s blog to include mechanisms in order to quantify their audience;

2) The second research sub-question aims to address an actor’s content as the main field of inquiry. To connect information given by actors, blog analysis proved valuable not only in terms of the content that has been examined but also the visual analysis that shapes their blog content. As it is the first study to date to combine the results (blog analysis) with underlying practices (interviews) a potential contribution of this chapter might be the combination both methods;

3) The last research sub-question sets out to give an overview of the whole ecosystem the actor communicates, with from other actors to marketers and their readership. The focus is on examining potential influences within those relationships in order to describe different levels of influences. Furthermore, it addresses perception gaps as data is gathered from two perspectives.

Although each research inquiry might have a distinct methodological focus, data processing and analysis aims to assemble them according to shared patterns under the realm of an overall qualitative research approach.

### 4.7 Data processing and analysis

Data processing and analysis in this study differs from quantitative approaches as there is no clear stage of data analysis after the data has been collected. Data has been analysed continuously throughout the study. The flexible nature of qualitative research allowed an on-going analysis to inform the subsequent data collection.
Interview guidelines have been refined depending on what has been found in previous interviews. Daymon and Holloway (2011) argue that this process, though inductive, shares some deductive characteristics. The empirical data collection was initiated through the exploratory case where the main areas identified in Chapter 3 have been validated and refined into sub-themes. These have been further explored, refined and extended during the examination of actors. At later stages of this examination, however, research has become more deductive as conjectures and ideas have been validated and patterns emerged. Moreover, literature has been incorporated that relates to findings or theoretical ideas. Hence, there is a constant interplay between analysis and data collection that validates qualitative research as “an iterative process” (Daymon and Holloway, 2011).

4.7.1 Organisation of data

After observations have been made within the exploratory case study, as well as pilot interviews being conducted and transcribed, they have been coded using NVivo software. Interviews transcripts have been organized within the notion of thematic analysis (Flick, 2006), where themes have been developed through a process of open and selective coding. Coding in this context is the first phase of analysis, moving away from statements to more abstract interpretations of data (Charmaz, 2006). In practice, segments labelled as “codes” have been employed in NVivo in order to organise the data generated. This approach allowed the researcher to develop a thematic structure that is based on collected data, but is also comparable across a number of interviews and data sources. At this stage, analytic induction was employed to reshape the research design and refine the initial research questions. Prior to the coding process of the exploratory case study, three broad themes have been identified: 1) audience construction; 2) content development; and 3) network formation. In the coding process and further analysis, the focus has been refined in terms of audience construction and moving towards monetisation as represented in Chapter 5. Content development has been refined based on the implications of audience construction as shown in Chapter 5. The network formation has moved towards forms of relationships, where relationships with key individuals in an actor’s ecosystem will be examined in detail (see Chapter 6).
The broad coding process after the case study helped to provide an overview of findings at this stage. Furthermore, with subsequent interviews and blog analysis at the main stage of research (examination of actors), it helped to organise and classify data. Interviews conducted at this stage have been transcribed and further coded using sub-codes. Sub-codes were then further developed to nodes, providing summarised arguments of a specific sub-code and a separate route for counter arguments. For example, as described in terms of actors’ content development, the way they evaluate their product advice can be either via a numeric ranking or an in-depth explanation or evaluation. While both arguments have been obtained in subsequent interviews, they need to be coded separately. In addition, within these codes, evidence on their blog that has been collected before it has been coded in this section in order to display the outcome of each approach. As Daymon and Holloway (2011) indicate, it is common to analyse visual texts within the overall analytical method of the qualitative analysis. Software packages such as NVivo are able to incorporate visual images within the coding process. Consequently, the same procedure as used in interviews (such as coding and categorizing) has been employed in relation to the analysis of actors’ blog sites and their accompanying arguments. However, to make the presentation of findings more feasible, blog pages have been translated into English using Google Translate. Blog captures could not be translated fully as parts of texts were saved as images, yet they improved the readability of findings. After translation, screenshots have been taken and incorporated within the selected sub-code. Actors’ information as provided during interviews has been critically interrogated by incorporating blog analysis in order to bridge the information given with the displayed outcome.

Furthermore, triangulation has been achieved through comparing the findings provided by actors with the distinct viewpoints of those marketers who work with them (see Section 3.6.3). Inconsistencies and contradictions have been examined after coding marketers’ arguments in the same classification to improve the validity of the findings. Marketers have been interviewed simultaneously with actors and their blog analysis to interrogate findings when they occur. This was seen as beneficial as fewer actors needed to be contacted to clarify points. It has to be noted that due to its interpretive nature in the conduct of this research, it was still the
researcher’s responsibility to interpret evidence that may lead to conclusions that the participants may disagree with.

4.7.2 Justifying the claims of qualitative research

Qualitative research is often critiqued regarding its unique and distinct approach to examining and understanding complex phenomena. The research is, therefore, often judged by its quality and integrity that is expressed in the degree to which it conforms to relevant criteria for evaluating quality (Yin, 2011). However, it has to be noted that there are different measures and disagreements about how to assess the validity of qualitative research. The criteria used in this study are drawn from Lincoln and Guba (1985) due to the latter’s use of an interpretive qualitative approach. According to this perspective, the integrity of the research is portrayed by: 1) trustworthiness; and 2) authenticity (Daymon and Holloway, 2011).

Within the conduct of this research, verification strategies have been acknowledged to ensure both the reliability and validity of data. This includes “ensuring methodological coherence, sampling sufficiency, developing a dynamic relationship between sampling, data collection and analysis, thinking theoretically, and theory development” (Morse et al., 2008, p.18). First, the aim of methodological coherence has been established to ensure the appropriateness of methods with regard to the research questions. As a result of the discussion of the research approach (Section 4.2), research questions demanded an investigation of practices, thus a qualitative approach has been chosen. Second, attention has been devoted to the sampling strategy, thus ensuring that the sampling strategy is appropriate. It consists of participants that represent and have knowledge about the research phenomenon (Morse et al., 2008). On the one hand, sampling adequacy has been found to be evident due to the saturation of themes (Morse, 1991), meaning that it allowed the researcher to collect sufficient data. On the other hand, the sampling strategy was developed thoughtfully using a variety of measures to ensure the validity of the participants. This has been confirmed by a snowballing technique that allowed validation of suitable participants and increased flexibility of further interview participants that may become apparent in the research (Morse et al., 2008). Data
collection and analysis is regarded as a “mutual interaction what is known and what one needs to know” (Morse et al., 2008, p.18). Due to the prolonged data collection in the main study as well as an extended engagement within the case study it allowed the researcher to incrementally analyse and develop themes. In particular, the duration of the case study helped with learning the culture and to test for misinformation (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

In the same vein, Lincoln and Guba (1985) argued that reliability is a concept not only limited to quantitative research. A common measure to ensure reliability in qualitative research is the use of triangulation opposed to quantitative measures e.g. inter-coder reliability (Daymon and Holloway, 2011). However, main themes have been reviewed by another researcher to agree on the coding of themes. Accompanied by triangulation due to the use of different sources such as blog analysis and marketer interviews, it allowed one to resist easy interpretations of the phenomenon (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

4.7.3 Ethical considerations

The research overall was guided by the requirements for ethical conduct provided by the University of Edinburgh. However, within the conduct of qualitative interpretive research, a number of ethical issues needed to be further addressed. Bryman and Bell (2007) identified main concerns such as lack of informed consent, harm to participants, invasion of privacy and deception. These will be further discussed in this section.

With regards to consent, all interviewed participants have been informed about the general purpose of the research at two different stages: an introduction to the topic area has been outlined as potential interview participants have been initially contacted (see Appendix A) and the research purpose has been further elaborated before the interview was conducted. Moreover, participants gave their consent by signing a consent form (see Appendix B) or verbally accompanied by an explanation of privacy and anonymity considerations during the interview. With regards to the case study, interview participants, the project lead and supporting company agreed to participate in this research.
Avoiding participant harm is closely related to issues concerning privacy and anonymity. Rights of privacy are neglected if the research findings made public represent confidential information that can be traced back to participants (Daymon and Holloway, 2011). Hence, the anonymity and privacy of all individuals and organisations needs to be ensured within this study. If explicitly declared, anonymity procedures have been applied to the disclosure of personal information. This included the use of pseudonyms not only within the report, but also regarding the information provided and transcription material. Blog analysis in this context has not been concealed or anonymised based on the availability of sources (Walther, 2002). A critical aspect in this study has been that blog content was publicly available and intended for a public audience. Although identifiable information is ethically allowed (Hookway, 2008), actors gave further consent (as outlined above). Moreover, it has been ensured that content that could be harmful to the participant has been eliminated.

4.8 Conclusion

Any research approach and design has its limitations and is consequently imperfect in practice. A qualitative approach is often critiqued in terms of its lack of validity and generalizability. In the context of this study, a qualitative approach has been more uncertain as the sample size was relatively low compared to quantitative studies. Therefore, access has been a potential issue, particularly as it was critical to choose suitable informants to gain further insights on practices within this emerging phenomenon. A high level of uncertainty paired with a relatively new and unexplored area that is in continuous development created a difficult impediment.

Nonetheless, the research choices made were intended to overcome these difficulties. Using a qualitative interpretive research approach to underlying practices and mechanisms, the phenomenon of an emerging area has been investigated from a variety of perspectives. An exploratory case study has been added prior to the main research, where a prolonged engagement should reduce uncertainty and allow further insight regarding the nature of the environment. A multi-stage sampling process including purposive sampling and additional snowballing has been discussed in
detail to ensure the validity of informants and to ascertain the overall sample size the researcher may draw on. A sufficient number of participants agreed to be interviewed in an in-depth setting that served as this study’s main method of inquiry. A further application of blog analysis and marketer interviews aimed to validate the information given by actors and supplementary data addressed each particular research question. Moreover, it provided a sufficient level of validity through triangulation.

The variety of data is further processed and analysed through the use of themes that are a result of open and selective coding. These findings will be presented in the next chapters (5, 6 and 7) where each empirical research question will be outlined and structured according to the themes encountered.
Chapter 5  Constructing Audiences

5.1  Introduction

The first conjecture regarding this emerging phenomenon is that actors managed to attract large audiences or readers to the novelty of these emerging actors, thereby they appear to have constructed audiences from scratch over a short period of time. This chapter outlines the mechanisms and processes involved in audience construction. As part of this utilisation, this chapter further discusses how audiences can be monetised and how this process influences actors’ behaviour and the controversies that arise in this context.

The importance of constructing audiences has been found to be essential to sustaining actors’ blog activities. In this context Thompson (1995) has argued that they are “dependent on recipients for their continued existence as performers” and that their audience “is the sine qua non of their own existence as producers.” Moreover, related literature on audiences (see Section 3.2) indicates that interaction might be divided in terms of mediated interaction and mediated quasi-interaction. In other words, interaction between actors and audiences can be either dialogical or monological. However, less is known what affect these interactions have on audience construction. Consequently, the ways in which producers picture their audience – what it wants to hear and how it receives what it has heard – have received surprisingly little academic attention. This is particularly the case regarding the large audience sizes that in some instances grow more a million per month that may result in even more complex modes of online interaction highlighting the need to further investigate in which ways actors develop their audiences and how they attract them.

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7 The terms ‘audience’ and ‘reader’ are used interchangeably in this thesis.
There will be an overall focus on the development process and its distinct stages, with specific attention devoted to the various stages of development and how actors utilise audiences as a feedback mechanism. Starting with the ways to monetise audiences, subsequent sections aim to capture monetary influences and their effect on practices and audience interaction. In particular, the monetisation process has not been examined to date in terms of consumption blogs.

5.2 Attracting readers

Actors try to engage with a wider audience and, consequently, readership acquisition has been found to be an essential part of their daily activities. In this context, actors frequently mentioned that visibility in the context of hedonic browsing (Moe and Fader, 2004) has a major impact in terms of website usage. If a potential reader is interested in a product or a brand, he usually searches for news through a search engine. The decision to use blogs as a communication channel is partly grounded in the idea that information on this platform is publicly available and can be indexed by search engines. In contrast, social networking sites or discussion forums are not indexed by search engines and therefore only visible to a smaller community (for further discussion on why actors start blogging, see Section 6.2).

5.2.1 Evaluation and exploration of product categories

In order to be found on search engines, actors have been found to channel their information towards a certain niche. A niche is seen as a specialisation within a product category. One way of conveying a specific topic focus is based on their domain name. The blog name of actors within this study has not been associated with their names. With some exceptions, blog names are chosen in relation to a brand, product category, or general interest (see Table 5.1). The choice of blog names can be contrasted with fashion blogging where, due to the very personal and informal style of their blog, the blog name is associated with the person, e.g. Karla’s closet (taken from McQuarrie et al., 2013).
### Table 5.1 – Overview of blog names

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus</th>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brand related</td>
<td>Samsung, iPhone</td>
<td>allaboutsamsung, iphoneblog</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Product category related</td>
<td>Tablets, Mobile</td>
<td>tablethype, mobilegeeks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General interest</td>
<td>Tech</td>
<td>techstage, technews, tabtech</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Although a more personal blog name would have been more flexible as Lars (allaboutsamsung) argues, there should be a clear focus on what a reader should expect when they visit your site. Using blog names associated with the product or brand is favourable according to actors, as it is much easier to convey the topic of interest. They claim that it is easier to locate and it conveys a more professional image to their readership, as Alexander (iphoneblog) has reported. The blog name is not only influenced by a product focus, but is similarly dependent on the availability and usability of their domain name. Shorter domain names are preferred as they are easy to type in and remember. Once a blog name has been decided, it is not easy to change at a later stage where very specific and narrowly-focused blog names may limit actors who wish to expand the scope of their activities. Whereas a clear focus of interest may potentially lead to an easier acquisition of readers with specific interests, it may be limiting in terms of expansion to other product categories as Alexander has claimed when he wanted to include other Apple products on his iPhone-focused blog:

“Over the years more and more problems appeared. When the iPad was released I was wondering how I should approach this issue and have argued that it is the same operating system and hence should be included in my area of interest. But there was quite an outcry from people who did not understand it at that time as they highly appreciated this special focus. In distinction I think that this really is one ecosystem and one industry.”

*Alexander, iphoneblog*

#### 5.2.2 Writing for an imagined audience

As discussed in Section 6.1, actors often have basic skills in terms of writing and knowledge in order to publish and fill their blog with content, as they are already involved in discussion forums or have written guest articles on other blogs. Moreover, they have already gained topical expertise due to their long-term interest
in consumer electronics. However, by developing their own blog, actors have remarked that they need to find a strategic fit with their expertise and the areas they want to focus on. This focus can be problematic: as Alexander (iphoneblog) argues, “at the beginning, no one reads you and therefore you have no idea who you are writing for.” Although writing for a phantom audience could prove to be difficult initially, the blog name already gives an indication of the topic focus. As blogs are conversational in nature, the first stage of blog development is difficult as Philipp (technews) claimed. This is ascribed to the high initial effort required to develop content structures and setting up an actor’s blog (see Section 6.2.1) paired with an absent audience acknowledgement. Actors have no social interaction and as a result no social obligation to their readership within the first months. The missing acknowledgment in terms of readership is in no relation to the amount of hours that they put in. “No one reads your blog at the beginning. After incorporating Google Analytics, I was happy to see that 10 people actually visited my site”, as Alexander (iphoneblog) reported. According to Philipp (technews), there is no particular ‘tipping’ point where readers increase, the readership builds over time:

“If I talked with others about their progress, many have said that there is a moment where more readers simply come without doing something entirely different. I suspect that it has a lot to do with the Google ranking. If Google ranks your articles particularly high in their news results, you can see an increase in traffic. But I wouldn’t say that there is a particular point, it is more like an evolving progress over the first months.”

Philipp, technews

As Philipp (technews) argues, the first months are critical to the success or failure of a blog. This has been confirmed as most actors will give up blogging or abandon their blog within the first two-three months according to Sascha (mobilegeeks). Giving up blogging in this context does not mean that they terminate their blog. In most cases they stop writing for a period of time as they are not motivated. Daniil (tblt) argued that if you go back to your blog after a certain time and you see that there is no traffic on your website, there is no encouragement to start again. When asked about important routines in the first months, the majority of actors claim that a publishing routine is a crucial success factor. It is argued in this study that continuous publication of articles increases audience size and the publishing cycle adds to the credibility of the blog. As Sascha (mobilegeeks) has noted, “You need to let your
readership know that they can count on you. If you are sloppy with publishing times, you will not progress in terms of getting readers.” Continuous writing is seen as essential to develop and maintain an audience, and actors can easily lose web traffic if they stop writing for a period of time. Daniil (tbt) has claimed that, “It's really difficult. I always take my MacBook with me to be able to blog on vacation. Or I used to pass it on to colleagues, who then wrote one or two articles”. He reports that even two weeks of not publishing anything on a blog leads to a significant loss of existing readers. To maintain these cycles, actors take no time off from their blog. However, findings show that publication cycles level off and consequently vary from blog to blog. Some are only publishing short articles, but others upload four or five a day (Alexander, iphoneblog), whereas still others are summarising rumours about a certain product in one article. However, similarities have been observed in that actors develop a certain publishing routine, as Alexander (iphoneblog) suggests. Although timing is important, continuity of output is more essential. The downside of a publishing routine has been found to put pressure on actors to find and write new content. As their readership mainly derives from search engines, their traffic is mostly measured per article. Thus, blog traffic is driven by the quantity and less by the quality of their writing at the first stage. If they write more, they will receive more traffic. If they would stop writing for a few days, their traffic will decrease dramatically.

Likewise, from a technical perspective actors need to maintain their publication routine in order to further increase their chances of being found on search engines. Most new readers are acquired through search engines like Google that act as a gatekeeper between interested readers and actors. Luca (2-blog) has explained that search engines act like people. Both readers and search engines appreciate: 1) when your site is referred to by others; 2) when your content is renewed continuously; and 3) when you write specifically in terms of keywords. Thus, if all three criteria are fulfilled, it is argued in this study that actors are not only perceived as more trustworthy and reliable to potential readers, they also rank higher on search engines. References to “Google Page Rank” and “Search Engine Optimisation” (or SEO) were prominent throughout the interviews. “Google Page Rank” has been mostly
used in relation to “back linking” whereby actors try to link to each other’s sites in order to be ranked higher in search engines:

“You can also achieve a lot by yourself with optimisation, but just for the start, it's not bad if other people link to your site as you rank much better on Google. Even if you should not be influenced by it, everything stands or falls with the ranking on Google. When I write an article and it appears on page 5, then simply nobody would visit it. If I'm on page 1, I can see that the traffic is significantly higher.”

*Jan, tablethype*

In particularly these links can be a big step to gaining access to a wider audience. It has been found in this research that traffic increases dramatically if written articles are featured on other blogs or even magazines. To be featured by other actors with a larger audience one either has to know the actors involved or to publish something that has not been published before. All actors agree that it is possible as an established actor to “push” newer blogs by constantly referring to their site. These referrals also increase visibility on search engines. However, it has to be noted that content itself has been seen as a prerequisite to being linked by others. For instance, Lars (allaboutsamsung) has published live content, e.g. updates and comments from the litigation between Samsung and Apple in a court near where he lived. As a law student, he had the great advantage to cover this case in more depth and hence was featured on other blogs and in mass media. Despite this, Sascha (mobilegeeks) cautioned that this increase in followers may be short term as relatively few people, in his experience, return to your blog after they have read this. To support this (see figure below), he provided site statistics for his recent English blog site where in June 2014 he was featured in a popular magazine. Whereas the peak audience could not be sustained, the overall readership still increased to a significant degree (vertical axis removed on actor’s request).

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*Excerpt of site traffic after peak article (from Google Analytics) provided by Sascha (mobilegeeks)*
5.3 Establishing an audience

Whereas at the beginning, actors try to get attention and acquire new readership through search engines or other blogs, at later stages they try to build closer relationships with their audience. Their reasoning is that they want to be less dependent on search engine rankings and alleviate the pressure to publish articles within a certain timeframe. Moreover, a closer relationship gives actors new meaning to publish articles as they are increasingly writing for a known audience rather than occasional readers (e.g. a phantom audience). Alexander (iphoneblog) reported that he aims to establish an audience as they appreciate him as a source of information and regular readers specifically want to read about his opinion on a subject matter, rather than relying on hedonic browsing. He specifically raised the importance of having a persona behind a medium. He states that the information is mediated by himself in his own language and writing style, including his mistakes:

“I do think that they read it because I stand behind it, because this information is mediated, mediated by myself, in my language with my approach and also of course with my mistakes. I think that's what is appreciated.”

Alexander, iphoneblog

“The first individuals who came, they just quickly looked for news. But for them it did not matter where they would read it. These are people who do not remain and come directly from Google usually. They don’t care if they read this on my blog or on another page. Those who get stuck, the regular readers, they think it is important where that information comes from. From these readers I now have a relatively large percentage. Only a few come to my site through Google searches, but that has been a lasting process.”

Alexander, iphoneblog

Furthermore, he distinguishes between different types of readers. Readers in the first stage want to get information, whereas among an established audience readers care where the information comes from. Similarly, Carsten (stadt-bremerhaven) has highlighted that the type of content is important and needs to be more appealing to regular readers.
5.3.1 The role of SNS in readership acquisition

Social Networking Sites such as Facebook, Twitter and Google+ have been found to play a major role in terms of establishing regular readers. On the one hand, they established their personal account where they communicated with colleagues and marketers (see Section 7.5). On the other hand, they specifically establish accounts for their blog. For example, Lars has established his blog’s SNS account in order to diffuse blog content to his readership, whereas his “private” account mirrors a broader field around his own interests:

“I have two Twitter accounts; one is for the blog and pumps articles into the net. My private account which I update as I want to and where I most of the time hold back to post Samsung articles. I tweet things I find thrilling, but generally tech-related, but not as specific as on my blog. People know that there is a second account and if they want to consume it, then they are welcome to do so.”

Lars, allaboutsamsung

With the decreasing popularity of RSS feeds, actors rely heavily on SNS to enable readers to follow them. Thus it can be assumed that the prime uses of these accounts are to diffuse information presented on their blog to an audience that can be referred as a societal news stream. This functionality is essential to actors to create a readership base. Most actors applied third party plug-ins allowing them to automatically diffuse their articles on SNS platforms once they are published on their blog (such as JetPack or Socialpublish). As Jan argues (tablethype), publishing to multiple channels is now one click away (in his case Facebook and Twitter). In addition, the characteristics of SNS platforms like Twitter (limited to 140 characters) enables actors to publish advice or information that is not restricted by a certain blog format.

As Lars (allaboutsamsung) has reported, if there is a rumour where there is nothing to add, he simply retweets the source instead of writing an article. Luca (2-blog) also prefers the use of social networking sites as readers can read short pieces of information directly and do not need to follow links to their blog all the time. He claims that using SNS to give additional information creates a richer experience for readers that should subsequently enhance engagement. Likewise, Fabien (techstage)
highlighted that heavily incorporating SNS was part of his blog success. However, in contrast to Luca (2-blog), he recognizes the potential of engagement with his readership on SNS platforms:

“Social networking sites offer great possibilities to me and where I think it's a factor that makes the difference between success and non-success in such online projects. People want to share, want to get closer to the author and want to contribute to discussion. We try to use these platforms in addition to our website which is a fundamental concept of Techstage.”

Fabien, techstage

This form of engagement has been previously discussed as being critical to audience transformation. If readers subscribe to one of the actors’ social network accounts, they will receive a notification for each interaction that has been made on their platforms. The number of interactions between actors and their readership has been found to be significantly higher than on their blog according to Jan (tablethype). Whereas comments on their blog rarely appear within the first months, SNS platforms is (in most cases) the first instance of direct communication between actors and their readers. With rapidly increasing numbers of interactions over a variety of SNS platforms, actors spend a significant amount of time – in addition to their writing – on communicating with their audience via these channels. As an example, Carsten (stadt-bremerhaven) has claimed that he receives up to 300 comments on all social networking sites combined per day.

To manage this amount of interaction actors incorporated third party tools and email alerts. Third party tools are mainly used to provide an overview of interaction via the most prominent channels (Facebook, Twitter and Google+). Mail summaries of interactions help to get an overview of the comments on a particular post. Using further tools helps them to “not lose the overview” as Christof (tabtech) has noted, and allows them to still concentrate on their main activity, namely the generation of new content around product news and advice. Interaction on SNS channels is then only limited to a specific period of time when a certain communication stream is being processed, e.g. for Carsten (stadt-bremerhaven), one hour in the morning and one hour in the evening. These automated processes allow actors to increase control over their channels, to engage with their audiences and to diffuse product news or
advice more effectively. An integral part of these established modes are based on the technological advances of platforms and third party applications.

5.3.2 The blog as a feedback mechanism

In the early stages, i.e. the first months after establishing an audience, engagement and communication with readers is limited to discussions regarding information around articles. A better understanding of their audience would lead to more suitable content as they would be able to identify tastes and interests. Apart from their SNS channels, actors rely heavily on analytic tools to identify the tastes and interests of their audience. Blog analytics (e.g. Google Analytics) and video analytics (YouTube Analytics) offer actors a toolset that is rich in data and easy to use.

One of the first indicators if readers are interested in a certain type of content, as Daniil (tblt) explains, is the traffic generated to the blog. Likewise, YouTube traffic indicates the demand for a certain topic. Lars (allaboutsamsung) has reported that usually product reviews are more popular than product news as there is continuous traffic over a longer period of time. Product news generates mostly traffic peaks for a day (for a distinction between product news and advice see Section 6.4.2). Philipp (technews) adds that after a certain period of time he is able to detect patterns and get a feeling for what type of content is of specific interest to his readers and when best to publish it e.g. weekdays, particularly Mondays. Although topic selection is in alignment with their overall focus, e.g. blog name etc., “sometimes it is not only the topic itself; it is also how relevant I make it for my target audience” as Luca (2-blog) argues. He analyses the statistics on each article to identify the type of articles his audience wants. If the blog post or review is popular, follow up posts are published later. Often, as Luca argues, product comparisons are more popular than an overall test. Therefore he adapts his writing style and format according to his analysis. In addition, specific platforms like YouTube allow actors to identify parts of an article that are less interesting to readers, for example Lutz (mobiwatch) analyses every video he produces to identify where he “lost” his audience in order to modify his presentation style and content for future videos. As he notes, “these tools were really expensive years ago and editorial offices had to hire their own experts. Now I can
analyse everything easily and for free”. Therefore, it may be assumed that the use of analytical tools and engagement through comments has an impact on the content choice and execution of videos. Due to their ability to recognise audiences’ behaviour patterns, actors are able to publish product news or advice that is appreciated and thus more likely to be shared by their audience. As a result of the continuous analysis of statistics, actors argue that they are able to define a typical reader of their blog. In other words, it allows them to partly envisage the phantom audience. For instance, Sascha (mobilegeeks) notes that his readers tend to have a basic knowledge of consumer electronics, therefore he doesn’t need to cover everything:

“I think my readers want to read “tech-blogging for adults”. That’s how I would term it, in the sense that I do not explain everything because they already have a certain level of knowledge. The readers are online; if they do not understand something, then they can google it. Or ask in the comments ‘What does that mean?’ Also if we look at statistics on YouTube, our biggest target group is between 35 and 45.”

Sascha, mobilegeeks

Sascha’s example is quite typical for actors. Similarly, Felix (curved) outlines that he found that his readership tends to be less technically-oriented and aren’t interested in highly technical details such as “what the processor tact rate is, etc.” Although actors highlighted that the taste of their readership established itself over time it may be argued that they actively shaped it by the content and writing styles they initially conveyed to ideal audiences.

5.4 From audience to community

Although analytics might help to envisage their audience to make content more suitable to them, further mechanisms are needed to transform readers into a community. It has been argued that actors attract large audiences that can be compared to mass media such as television audiences (see Section 3.3.2). Thus it might be argued that actors are mainly in mediated quasi-interaction with their audience, e.g. monological interaction. However, findings suggest that actors expressed a desire to engage with their audience. Applying social media channels to
communicate with readers is seen as the first step to breaking down the boundaries of broadcasting (Thompson, 1995). Alexander (iphoneblog) compares his readership to any other friendship he cultivates. Trust is built up and you appreciate each other:

“I can only speak from my own experience. A relationship with a reader is like a friendship. If you are honest with each other, then you would want to visit or see the person again. But if there are any dirty tricks or lying involved the person might fall for it once, but not twice. If I’m not honest to my readers there will never be a community or a relationship.”

Alexander, iphoneblog

Jan (tablethype) in this context argues that a “vital community around their blog,” e.g. a blog that incorporates discussions is an indicator of credibility. New readers may look for other readers’ opinions, and discuss these in the comment section of the review. Jan further argues that some readers visit the blog more regularly and are more likely to engage actively on the platform, commenting on blog posts, giving feedback and sharing articles on their own network. This active engagement helps to diffuse information to others and acts as a feedback mechanism for actors who can monitor what is being shared. Thus, actors claim that besides being responsive to their readerships tastes, actors actively engage with their readership to foster relationships with their readers. By building relations with reader actors want to tie them closer to their blog and to encourage regular readers to become active members of their community. Actors in this study claim that they see their blog as a conversational medium rather than as simply broadcasting information. This also includes their content. Actors are trying to actively encourage discussions by incorporating open questions at the end of the blog post that may refer to the opinion of the reader such as “Where do you use your tablet most often? At home, at work, on the train or somewhere else?” or “Would you buy this device now or wait until the price drops?” In some cases discussions are triggered by controversial topics or comments on their blogs:

“Sometimes we have 10 comments minutes after we published an article. Of course this is dependent on whether a topic is controversial. It may also be that the article is quite normal, while only the first comments trigger a complete discussion. We found that around 1% of visitors are commenting. It is time costly, but we will always respond directly, or at least try.”

Jan, tablethype
Jan (tablethype) emphasises that encouraging discussions is useless if he is not responsive to readers’ comments. He argues that commenting and engaging with his readership is very time intensive, but he tries to comment on every article and to answer every question. Actors further raised the need to recognise the importance of discussions and exchanges with their readership where actors try not to act as an authority, but rather as a member of their community, which is reflected in the levels of transparency evidenced in discussions. As actors have complete control over their blog, they can delete comments or posts by their readership, but none of these actors claimed to do so. They prefer to participate in discussions rather than lead them and appreciate every form of comment, except when it becomes abusive. Transparency and open exchanges are one of the prerequisites for discussion as Lars (allaboutsamsung) has argued. Furthermore, readers are actively co-shaping content where actors are responsive to comments and try to provide follow-up content information based on the comments of previous articles. An example of a follow-up article is shown below (Section 5.1) where actors specifically answer questions from readers.

**Questions from the first impression**

Some questions had asked a few of our readers from the post of first impression. This here I will answer again separately if they are not already mentioned previously.

**If supported by the USB mini port on the host mode?**

Yes, this works fine, but requires the appropriate cable.

**How long does it take to charge when the battery is (almost) empty?**

Due to the large battery it worked for me with the standard power supply lasted about 5 hours until it was fully charged at the outlet.

**Can you connect to a projector that part somehow?**

No HDMI output, so at most indirectly.

**How it looks because at Lenovo with updates to newer Android versions from?**

A really clear upgrade strategy, Lenovo has not to my knowledge. Previous tablets were usually at least one update, compared to Nexus devices which support should, however, not naturally be so good.

**Conclusion**

Blog capture 5.1 – Snapshot of follow-up information as part of review

(Carsten, stadt-bremerhaven)
Actors such as Carsten (stadt-bremerhaven) are proud of the way their discussions on their platforms have developed. There is a lively information exchange that means that readers sometimes answer other readers’ requests. This increases an actor’s time resources as they do not need to respond to every comment in discussions. Therefore, it can be argued that an engagement with readers helps actors to form a community, but also aids them to reduce their workload. Thereby readers suggest blog topics by asking questions within comment section or sending tips. Actors are able to gather direct feedback apart from analytical tools. Readers can ask queries and become more involved in the active co-shaping of the blog. To encourage readers to engage in discussions, actors need to recognise the emerging voice of their readership and be responsive to it, including negotiating blog content and development. Another aspect has been found in that actors need to employ functionalities to enable their readership to engage with them.

5.4.1 Engagement through blog functionality

Actors claim that adding a comment section after each article is the primary way to offer their readership a channel to communicate and for the former to engage with readers. Integrated in most blog systems, the comment section facilitates discussions between the actor and his readers, or between readers. To allow readers to engage in various ways, actors extend their blog functionality by integrating tools such as ratings or discussion forums. Some actors have established discussion forums around specific products in order to increase community building. Online discussion forums within a blog allow actors to foster relationships with their readers and provide an opportunity to exchange information with them that is not topic specific. Readers get the opportunity to actively take part in the wider shaping of the blog, as Sascha (mobilegeeks) argues. He added a discussion forum to his blog with additional sections such as a “Geek Lounge” where readers can provide feedback, critiques and ask questions around the blog. When it came to a redesign of Sascha’s blog, he asked for suggestions: “New colours, new icons and maybe a new division of individual forums, what would you do differently? We try to implement your suggestions in the future, so please help us.”
This request received more than forty suggestions thus far. Despite giving new ideas, readers might feel more valued and incorporated in the decision making process as he argues.

Similarly, Christof (tabtech) included tools on his website to give readers the opportunity to rate articles or products. He incorporated a rating function where readers could choose from a list of devices and compare them with each other. He argues that these tools are essential to engage his readers and encourage them to stay longer on the site and to access other content. Other actors included different user-based ratings in order to validate their opinion, for example, Christof (tabtech) has a feedback tool (Blog capture 5.2) to rate his articles that asks readers to rate the article product on a five point scale and Christian (inside-hand) incorporated a user-based rating of products based on five key attributes (Blog capture 5.3) that can be compared to his own rating. These rating tools allow their readers to engage with the actor and other readers and allow actors to see how their opinions align with the reader’s opinion.

This type of feedback allows readers a greater voice to express their opinions and equally provides additional value to an actor’s analysis of taste identification. In contrast to analysing traffic, actors are able to obtain specific information on their product review and to ascertain if an article is popular amongst their readership. User-ratings are widely incorporated to give readers an opportunity to express their opinion and this is quantifiable. Christian (inside-hand) has reported that these ratings measures offer an easy overview of how articles are perceived without looking at comments or feedback, which is valuable but difficult to quantify. As a
consequence, they can further adapt their content to their readership’s needs, which should lead to more active discussions and a thriving community.

5.4.2 Negotiating content and blog development

Due to the transition to constituting a community, actors are actively incorporating their readers’ opinion in future strategic decisions such as blog orientation. Readers are actively involved in shaping the blog and actors need to negotiate further development. Due to the large number of readers, actors are claiming that they are unable to please every single reader, therefore controversies are inevitable. Carsten (stadt-bremerhaven) argues that in order to stay competitive or to further expand their blogs, certain actions have to be taken that can be unpleasant for their readership, for instance the extension or reorientation of topic focus. Hence, to reduce the risk of losing readers, actors need to learn how to deal with such disputes and find ways to achieve their objectives while keeping their readership satisfied. In some cases, they are able to negotiate terms, whereas in others they need try to deescalate the situation. Topic choice or a reorientation of topic interest emerges when actors have to react on changes in the market (the introduction of new forms of consumer electronics) or want to expand their blog through the incorporation of other topic areas. In both scenarios, actors need to carefully extend or incorporate new topic areas. Topic extensions as found in actors’ blog development are seen to be closely related, however issues still emerge. Most readers appreciate a clear focus on the blog’s content choice. For instance, Alexander with his iPhone blog experienced difficulties when he started incorporating iPad news and product advice on his blog, which was primarily focused on the iPhone and established before the latter’s introduction, and he tries to provide further justifications for his actions:

"Over the years there are more and more problems. So when the iPad came out I was wondering how I should approach the subject and I decided to do it, because it had the same operating system, etc., and there was quite an outcry from people who did not understand as they appreciated this special iPhone focus. But I tried to argue that all this really is one ecosystem and one industry. So I think it's not bad if you look at the bigger picture. But everything within its borders. I would never for example report on MacBooks."

Alexander, iphoneblog
Another way to prevent tensions around topic choice is to rephrase reviews in order to make it suitable for their audience. Lars (allaboutsamsung), for example, wanted to review devices from other brands, but as he has a clear focus on Samsung products it has been difficult. To overcome this issue, he created a new page section called “Beyond the horizon”, where he was able to review devices from other brands. In order to satisfy his readership he compares these devices with Samsung devices rather than to review them on their own terms, which enabled him to incorporate a wider topic area whilst still keeping his main focus (see Blog capture 5.4). Although topic expansion or reorientation is needed, “close attention should be paid at the transition process in order not to lose your core audience” as Lars (allaboutsamsung) explains. He concludes that other segments can be included in addition, but should never undermine the main corpus of the blog content.

Blog capture 5.4 – Excerpt of product comparison (Lars, allaboutsamsung)

Apart from topic area, there are similar disagreements within blog content that have been turned out to be a short term dispute, e.g. blog content is published by actors where their readership simply disagrees with them. In some reviews, readers think that the evaluation of a product is less justified or they believe that actors have a tendency to write favourably in relation to a certain brand. However, these disagreements can be resolved by responding in the comment section of the blogpost.
as Luca (blog2) has clarified. By providing further justifications, the actor is able to resolve the dispute. Moreover, it has been found that their readership engages in discussions actively to back the actor in controversial situations. If the actor is accused wrongly, other readers offer justifications and regulate discussions. Hence, as Christof (tabtech) argues, there is no need to interfere in most cases. Although, their readership regulates and deescalates, he underlines that it is important to keep discussions transparent and to not censor anything:

“Only because of their opinion, we would never delete a post. Even if it becomes personal, it stays on our blog. Most often five other readers comment on the critical comment and defend us. Luckily, our community regulates it very well, so we don’t need to interfere most of the time.”

Christof, tabtech

If a further justification is not sufficient to placate disgruntled readers, actors such as Christof (tabtech) have noted that they publish follow-up articles where they concentrate on the one specific issue. These follow up articles may offer additional information, e.g. a missing test in a review, or further clarification of an argument. Sascha (mobilegeeks) argues that, however, if a mistake has happened, the best way is to be clear about it and apologize to your readership. An attempt to conceal information is arguably more harmful. Whereas blog content has been unintentionally linked to disputes, the change of topic orientation has been found to be a strategic choice as part of their blog development.

Examples like these illustrate that if a community is formed, their relationship needs to be maintained and actors need to be responsive to readers’ actions. In addition, the community might change and develop as they expand and grow. In order to make strategic decisions around their blog development, an actor needs to know their audience well enough to make transitions without any consequences for their readership size. Overall it has to be noted that transparency and openness for negotiations is key in such transitions. The community consequently influences the future blog development such as topic or blog expansion including new writers or other forms of cooperation. On the other hand, actors need to make changes to their blog to stay competitive; hence they need to find a balance in agreement with their readers.
5.5 Monetising audiences

Although engaging in discussions with their community allows actors to attract and maintain a larger audience, it is more resource intense. Furthermore, it has been ascertained that the generation of new and unique content is becoming more time consuming (see Section 6.4). These transformations lead to an increased involvement in blog-related activities, lasting for five hours a day at least. As Lars (allaboutsamsung) argues, “the fact that it is getting much more time-consuming, I think that it is time that something comes back.” Actors are not writing for a phantom audience anymore (as in the initial stages) meaning they receive acknowledgment for their work through comments and ratings. It has been found that they are rewarded for their contribution through comments and ratings. With comments such as “Thanks Carsten, it has become a tradition to read your blog every morning after coffee, keep up with the good work,” or “Carsten, you're doing a great job with your blog and I want to say a big thank you! I have read your blog for many years, even if I criticize you here and there” (blog comment excerpt, Carsten, stadt-bremervorhaben). Thereby actors feel more appreciated. In this context, self-enhancement and the desire to help others (Dichter, 1966; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004) have been observed as motivations to continue their blog. However, actors tend to increase the quality of their blog content to make it more appealing to their audience where further investments have to be made.

For instance, to provide appealing videos and images within their blog content, actors need to acquire further camera equipment and that can become very cost intensive. As Daniil (tbitl) reports, the equipment itself is an element required to be able to produce pictures. He explained that when he first started, a normal camera did the trick. However, later a normal camera was not sufficient enough for him and therefore he purchased a professional camera. Further equipment such as additional microphones, tripods and studio lights easily add up to around 1,000 euro of equipment costs as he stated. Philipp (technews) highlights that well-made videos enable actors to further improve their blog. He argues that besides the written content that he provides, the appearance of reviews has an impact on new readership acquisition:
“Especially with videos, such as a hands-on or a full review, you can improve a lot. However, you need good equipment to provide these types of reviews. Similarly, with pictures it’s not always about whether the tested device is correctly represented in pictures but how they look in general. If you have two reviews side by side, for example a preview at Google, readers often chose the review with a better thumbnail because it looks more professional.”

Philipp, technews

Hence to keep their readership satisfied and potentially acquire further readers, their blog needs to be developed further. Carsten (stadt-bremerhaven) argues that these investments are growing continually, whereas actors are dependent on further financial resources to enhance their blog and offer their readership a better experience. Similarly, Sascha (mobilegeeks) reports that investments rise during the later stages of blog development. Whilst around 1,000 Euros would enable them to buy their first semi-professional equipment, 10-20,000 Euros can be easily spent on equipment in order to expand further:

“Yes, most investments are put into web development. But this is also reflected in gear. We recently bought 3-4 large studio cameras and a set up for a whole studio. 10,000-20,000 Euro goes pretty quickly then. “

Sascha, mobilegeeks

Consequently, it has been found that actors at this stage are actively looking for ways to transform their audience and monetise their blog, thus resulting in a shift of motivations at this moment. In the initial stages actors claimed that they were driven by self-enhancement or the desire to help others to engage with their blog. However, now, due to more time-consuming tasks and further investment, monetary incentives become much more prominent.

5.5.1 Variations of advertising placement

Monetising a blog means that actors incorporate advertising into their platform to receive further income. Advertising itself is split between banner advertising or videos and affiliate links. Most actors have included all of these in order to monetise their blog. As Philipp (technews) has noted, “The more the better. I have Google AdSense advertising on my blog and YouTube, I have a marketer and affiliate links to Amazon, etc.” Banner advertising is referred to as advertising space around an
actor’s blog or YouTube channel. The latter is incorporated within an actor’s videos in various formats, usually in the form of a banner that is placed around the blog itself. Blog capture 5.5 displays the banner placement opportunities from Sascha’s blog (mobilegeeks). He incorporated three banners that vary in size and visibility. Whereas Banner 1 and Banner 2 are fixed, Banner 3 slides alongside the content and is visible throughout the whole visit.

![Banner Placement Diagram](image)

Blog capture 5.5 – YouTube advertising formats

Based on the size of the placement and the visibility, companies are willing to pay a certain amount, usually per 1,000 page impressions. Google AdSense as an automated banner advertising tool is often used in this context. Due to its ease of incorporation and automated payment, this enables actors to generate income with a relatively small amount of effort. Advertisement can also be placed on their blog or through other platforms. In particular YouTube allows actors to easily embed advertisements around their videos. As Daniil (tbt) highlights, he appreciated the

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8 A certain code is embedded in the blog which then choses from a variety of companies willing to place advertisements. By contrast, on YouTube commercials are shown in video format prior to the actual video. Although the presentation of advertisements differs between YouTube advertisement and blog banner placement, returns and payment are similar processes.
ease of generating income through his YouTube channel. Income is automatically calculated and transferred to his bank account at the end of the month. However, Alexander (iphoneblog) reports that due to the low amount earned per 1,000 page impressions (between 1 and 10 Euros per 1,000 views depending on topic area and niche), actors with a very concentrated audience need to look for other ways to increase their income:

“With GoogleAds, I have already seen at the beginning that it makes no sense for my blog, as I have the wrong audience for it. I do not focus on leaks that lure masses to my site every day, who create millions of clicks. Hence I work with advertising partners. And with those I am able to specify what I want, for example: I take nothing below a certain price. And if you set the price higher, the quality of advertisement is on average better.”

Alexander, iphoneblog

In contrast to Google Ads, he prefers the option to incorporate banner advertising through an advertising partner. An advertising partner is hereby referred to as an intermediary that brings actors together with vendors who want to advertise campaigns on their website. This enables vendors to advertise in a relevant market (e.g. consumer electronics) and actors gain a higher return per page impression as they attach a higher value to a more concentrated audience. Another benefit is that the advertising is also more relevant for their readership. It has to be noted that these collaborations are mainly campaign-based and therefore limited to a certain period of time. If the advertising partner is not able to find a vendor that is willing to pay a certain amount, the blog space would be empty. This is particularly the case if actors do not have a certain reach. Hence, actors place Google Ads if there is no banner advertising available from advertising partners. Both Google Ads and advertising partners pay per page impressions. In contrast affiliate links pay a certain dividend based on the conversion of a certain link clicked. Therefore affiliate programs are most often found linked to device-specific news and advice. Most actors will employ affiliate links at the end of a review.
If a device is bought through one of these links, the actors will gain a commission. The commission has been ascertained to be different from marketer to marketer. Amazon, the biggest affiliate partner, offers 4% of the complete purchase, at a maximum of 10 Euro per purchase. Based on the prices of devices, each purchase brings in around 10 Euro for an actor. However, not all of purchases are devices, it also includes accessories. However, Philipp (technews) argues that per article a certain percentage will buy a product through his links. As a consequence, affiliate links also benefit substantially from more page impressions. He reported that other actors with a larger readership base as a result earn accordingly:

“On average, a little less than one per cent of people that read a review will actually buy it through my affiliate links. In my case the last review has been read by 1,000 people. I don’t want to know what you will earn if a review is read between 300,000 and 500,000 times like at stadt-bremerhaven or Mobilegeeks. If you can add these numbers together, then it is very good money.”

Philipp, technews

These affiliate links have a critical impact as some actors receive up to a third of their income through these links. The incorporation of these links might lead to a more product-specific choice of articles. This shows the influence of income on blog orientation, as they would earn more money if more people read their articles with incorporated affiliate links or watch their videos with advertisement:

“Around Christmas we have perhaps 800 pieces sold per month, but not limited to tablets. On average we have 500, or sometimes even 1,000 devices sold through these links per month. That’s interesting, because it’s different from blog to blog. On some blogs affiliate links play no role at all. Of course, it also depends on how you use it. For me personally, the affiliate program is still an important component, it makes between 30 and 50% of my monthly income. The rest is banner advertising.”

Christof, tabtech
For instance, Christof (tabtech) combines different advertisements and affiliate opportunities. However, he ascertained that actors have varying success when implementing advertisements on their blog particularly as based on their blog orientation. Thus, questions arise in terms of how their success relating to ad placement affects their blog orientation. Based on the uniqueness of an actor’s niche and audience some forms (banner/affiliate) are more suitable for them compared to others. As actors seek to maximise return, it is argued that the monetisation of their blog influences their future topic orientation and format. In the case of Daniil, he now focuses on his YouTube channel and builds blog articles around his videos.

Similarly, Philipp (technews) found that affiliate links are very effective on his blog. Hence he incorporates blog content where he draws attention to Amazon sales and deals (see Fig. 1.8 left). On the other hand he is incorporating affiliate links after his content (see Fig. 1.8 right). According to him it provides additional value to his readers and in addition he is able to get a higher monetary return. However, he relativizes the impact on advertising as he reports that he optimises his blog content in this direction, but would never actively advise readers to buy something:

*Philipp, technews: “I try to optimise my blog to earn a bit more. I tried to implement a larger banner, but that was not very effective. I have an additional box of Amazon products that are self-programmed where a related product is located.”*
He highlights that he optimises banner positions or affiliate links to make them more visible. However, the extent of maximising advertisements abruptly stops when it comes to encouraging readers to buy things only because he would earn more. Hence, influencing readers towards buying products through affiliate links is seen as ethically unjustifiable (see Section 5.5.2). Carsten (stadt-bremerhaven) argues that this form of encouragement is seen as lying to your readership. He doesn’t want to risk his reputation solely to earn more:

“I do not lie to my readers. Advertising is marked as advertising. I do not sell links. I have a marketer who worries about my advertising which runs in the sidebar and that’s about it. I do not need a bit of cash to lie to people about how great the product XYZ is. This is not only ethically intolerable; I also put the placement of my blog at risk.”

Carsten, stadt-bremerhaven

Thereby, there is a risk involved if the ethical boundaries around advertisements are overstretched. Started initially to cover investments and reduce losses within their blog, actors develop a sense of business and optimise their income through advertising. Consequently, actions are taken beyond just covering their costs. Thus, the findings indicate a transition towards establishing their blog as a business that is able to generate a monthly income. This change of motivations affects their blog development and their personal attitude and skills, and requires more formal communication between vendors and the marketer. To avoid a conflict of interest or loss of credibility, actors need to find a balance between maximising revenue and keeping their readership satisfied. Hence, the amount of banner advertising and affiliate links should be thought of carefully. If advertising is too prominent on their site, it could influence their readership size in a negative way. In order to be seen as credible, very prominent advertising could question the autonomy of their blog.

5.5.2 Transparency and interaction as mediators

With the increasing dependency on external funding and the opinionated form of content (see Section 6.4) disputes may arise. However, as these actors just recently
emerged, there is no clear code of conduct regarding what is ethically acceptable and what is not. Hence particular actions need to be negotiated with actor’s readers as one of the main reasons the latter consume their blog is because of their independent and honest opinions. However, with a close connection with marketers it has become very difficult for them to still be perceived as autonomous actors. A prominent issue between actors and readers has been whether the increasing dependency on advertising could influence their orientation towards content that generates more revenue. As these actors are behaving as an intermediate between consumers and companies, it is essential that their opinion reflects their own perspective and is not influenced by third parties. Some actors are already closely aligned with companies based on the name and content orientation of their website, e.g. iphoneblog (Alexander) or allaboutsamsung (Lars). It could be argued that those specific actors could be referred as “Fanboy” or “Brand Evangelist” as Lars (allaboutsamsung) has iterated.

Furthermore, actors are approached by companies via email on a continuous basis. Alexander (iphoneblog) explains that he gets up to ten emails per day from companies willing to pay high rates if they could place the content they created themselves on an actor’s blog without any identification. This is commonly referred as “sponsored posts” which are prewritten by a company with the aim to be published like other articles on an actor’s blog. Despite the monetary attraction, actors are refusing offers from companies that are not willing to make this cooperation public. Nevertheless, some actors have agreed to such arrangements in the past when they weren’t aware of the consequences:

“Soon after I started blogging I included a sponsored post once. I had been offered 150 euro for this one post. It was this one time only. Sure, it was quick business with good money. But I do not want to risk my credibility and be thrown out of the Google page ranking. There is no relationship between risk and reward. The bigger the blog the fewer will do it, because there is so much more at stake.”

Daniil, tblt

As Daniil (tblt) reported, he once included a sponsored post without claiming it as such. However he realised quickly that the risk of losing your reputation has no relation to the reward. He also argues that by incorporating external content he could
be banned from Google PageRank and would no longer be visible to new readers. Likewise Alexander (iphoneblog) emphasises that it is “a process that takes years, where you build your reputation in contrast to all the negative claims”. Thus, actors take care that all advertisements on their website are clearly identified as such in specific page areas so that there is no confusion. Carsten (stadt-bremerhaven) applied a banner temporarily to raise more awareness to the ways he is financing his blog (see Blog capture 5.9).

On a separate page he explains that he is reporting this independently. His blog is financed only through the advertising of partners (which are also listed) and Amazon-affiliate links. Otherwise there is no money going into his pocket and he promises that this “will always be the case here” (blog excerpt, Carsten, stadt-bremerhaven). Similarly, actors such as Fabien (techstage) or Sascha (mobilegeeks) have incorporated a separate page on their blog to inform their readers about their means of funding and further explaining its purpose. Furthermore, if an actor agrees to cooperate with manufacturers in order to receive products or information, they disclose this information to their readership (see Section 7.2.3).

Overall, the findings illustrate that all actors pay close attention and carefully evaluate all economic options. Sascha (mobilegeeks) added to Alexander’s comment that only a few actors survive for that long because they are honest as reputation is built up over years and can be lost in a few seconds. In this context, their reputation is not only based on their behaviour but also on their style of writing. The number of articles published over a certain period of time makes them more dependable. As Daniil (tblt) argues, “if you tested over 500 devices as some other bloggers did, that says a lot about your experience”. As the actors stated, they have an obligation to their readership and want to distinguish themselves from company-sponsored
information, so their main target is to stay autonomous: “By autonomous I mean that no cooperation or advertising influences my content or advice in any fashion” (Sascha, mobilegeeks). As Alexander emphasises, “The only responsibility I have is to the readership. The readership keeps me alive, so it’s the most important thing. We do the best possible to offer a well-informed, entertaining and trustworthy opinion.” Another mechanism to distance themselves from third parties is to write and engage with products more critically. As they developed their expertise through their experience, they can allow themselves to express their opinion in a more critical way compared to others. These opinions are grounded on a factual basis (dealing with certain tech features compared to other products) rather than just relaying their subjective opinion. Some actors see their critical viewpoint as an essential characteristic that distinguishes them from others. Giving out negative opinions is mainly to warn readers but is also considered as part of their duty (Blank, 2007). A drastic example is cited by Philipp (technews) and is displayed below:

**Conclusion: No**

Do not get me wrong, I am well aware that there has to be low budget tablets, but if you invest your money in this tablet, you can also burn it. And even if you should now be thinking, "Oh, a tablet for €114, for watching videos in bed at night, it will be enough." I say: please, do not - NO! Alternatively, you could buy you a Kindle Paperwhite or just buy a good book.

Blog capture 5.9 – Excerpt of product test - Tablet Acer Icona B1 (Philipp, technews)

In this instance, Philipp (technews) is clearly warning his readership about a certain tablet that he got from Acer to review. As he figured that his readers would mainly buy it based on the low price, he further argues that for this price a book or a Kindle might be sufficient and better value. In contrast with less opinionated media, actors’ publicly state their opinion which can lead to a dispute with their readership. One mediator that has already been raised has been transparency. Actors disclose information and do not conceal any form of conversation on their blog. The second mediator here has been found in terms of interaction. As actors try to build a community that shapes their blog orientation, advertising placement can be negotiated with their audience. Further content disputes are solved as they actively communicate and justify themselves. As a consequence, transparency and interaction
in terms of the disclosure of information around monetising their blog has been found to be key in order to facilitate the further expansion of the blog. On the one hand, with investments, they can offer their readership a better experience. On the other hand, their readership is worried that the monetisation of the blog is increasing and consequently influencing the actors’ blog content.

5.6 Further expansion

As the blog develops, actors devote more time to maintaining interest among the readers, in some cases spending around seven hours on the platform (Jan, tablethype), despite their using their time more effectively. While a number of actors in the early stages of setting up and establishing their blog are studying full time or have flexible working hours, the increasing demands on their time becomes an issue. On the one hand, there is a desire to further develop and work on their blog. On the other hand, their main occupation and private life means limited time resources. Something has to give.

5.6.1 Blogging as a full time occupation

Actors need to make a strategic decision about their blog’s development. They could potentially continue as they have been doing and keep their time resources consistent, engaging with their blog on a part-time basis. However, advertising on their blog is becoming a respectable part of their overall income. Based on their income, actors tend to make a drastic change. If the income generated from their blog allows them to give up their main occupation, they could focus on their blog and its further development full time. In contrast, if their blog is not generating any money at this stage, actors could step back from their blog completely. Consequently, they base their decision mainly on the monetary return they are receiving thus far. The revenue of their blog is becoming a prerequisite to allow them to work on their blog as an occupation. As Alexander (iPhoneblog) elaborates, the point where he thought that, based on his monthly revenue, he could live from his blog triggered his decision:
“It was not planned; it has developed in this direction. I have just finished my studies and worked afterwards and the blog was a very big part of my income and I have developed other activities on the side. And at some point of time I wanted to try blogging as a main occupation, but in combination with other activities. For two years now I'm completely on iphoneblog.”

Alexander, iphoneblog

He further argues that additional employments are sought in the transition phase towards becoming a self-employed actor. As income generated through the blog is less stable, actors need to reduce the risk of not securing a sufficient income. In the case of Alexander (iphoneblog), it was mainly corporate blogging around conferences or events. Similarly other actors mentioned guest writing for other magazines or blogs. Usually these contracts are flexible and actors are paid per article. Carsten (stadt-bremerhaven) hereby argued that guest writing is more profitable and the return is instant. If not enough income is being generated, actors could comparatively easily get additional income from guest blogging. However, it has been found that actors need to adapt their writing style and are limited in their content choice (see Section 7.4.1).

Therefore, they try to expand their blog to be less dependent on other forms of income. Utilising their blog as a main form of income has been found to have an impact on the actor’s behaviour. As Freisel (marketer) claims, there is a difference between occupational and non-occupational actors. Both of them may behave in a professional manner. However if there is a focus on revenue generation it influences working patterns. For instance, communicating with business partners such as advertising partners and marketers requires the actor to become more organised and structured. Jan (tablethype) highlights that although content is provided in a similar way; the working patterns behind his blog are more systemised and more focused towards income generation. Consequently all relationships that are affecting actors’ incomes are seen as important. The self-interest behind maintaining and further developing the amount of readers are seen as vital. Christof (tabtech) outlines that his main income is derived from advertising based on his audience; he needs to maintain his audience and to keep them entertained.
5.6.2 Maximising income

Overall, it has been found that to generate more revenue through their blog, some actors in this study strategically planned to:

1) maximise their existing income opportunities and
2) further expand their blog content to attract more readers.

In the context of further income opportunities it has been found that a few actors successfully incorporated direct sales channels in contrast to affiliate programs. For instance, Christian (inside-handly) elaborates that incorporating an online store where readers could directly buy devices has been proven to be successful in terms of generating revenue. However, he claims that he had to be really careful about the incorporation to not influence their independent blog content. Hence, he created a new domain name for this shop to make visible that the online store is more distant. In a different setting, Fabien (techstage) has incorporated an app market into his platform to increase revenue.

This shift to operations development is consequently leading to fewer resources for content generation. Thereby, actors are outsourcing complex tasks such as web development. In most cases this is done in terms of sales channels, blog customisation and increased functionality. Even without integrating sales channels, web development is outsourced as the platform is getting more and more customised and complex. As Fabien (techstage) argues, one of the first things he handed off to his business partner was web development before even launching their app store:

“At the beginning I did everything alone. In 2009 I handed over all technical development to my friend and now business partner. Later we employed a few others who worked on the content. In 2010 we made the whole platform available in English and already six months later we launched our app store.”

Fabien, techstage

Web development as a form of subcontracting is reducing the overall amount of work for actors. According to the latter, this form of outsourcing is less complicated as it does not affect their daily activities. They highlighted that tasks like these allow them to focus on strategic development and blog content. Expanding their content
repertoire has been found to be a form of further expansion. In contrast to discussion forums tying existing readers ever closer, new readers need to be acquired to generate more income. A wider audience is consequently attractive for actors to increase revenue through the advertisements placed on the blog. As niches become saturated at some stage as Christof (tabtech) argues, expanding towards new topic areas could prove beneficial. He elaborates that his readership is still increasing to some extent, but additional niches would attract a much greater and diverse readership. With regards to shifting trends, diverse niches could overcome these issues. Hence, trend screening is very important for actors as an operational task. Philipp (technews) argues that he is developing his activities towards strategic and operational tasks:

“I see myself less on an operational level in the future, in terms of standing in front. I would like to move back a little and then rather organise, think strategically ahead, identify trends and look how the blog can be further developed.”

Philipp, technews

As Philipp (technews) suggests, this can be a broadening of topic focus that is necessary to grow your audience. A specific example is offered by Sascha (mobilegeeks) where he started his blog with a clear focus on netbooks. As the netbook market was not growing significantly, he broadened his interest to tablets and smartphones enabling him to reach a wider audience. On the other hand, Alexander (iphoneblog) reports that he is concerned about losing the characteristics of his blog and consequently his readership. Hence, strategic decisions like these need to be carefully planned and executed. In the case of Sascha, it was a process that evolved over a period of time, where he continuously broadened his interest. Another way of increasing their audience is through expanding into new markets. Most common is that actors try to expand their blog by offering their content in different languages. As these actors are based in Germany, a number are trying to get into new markets, for example, Sascha (mobilegeeks) argues that to be important in the overall market, you have to offer English content. Similarly Christof (tabtech) aims to expand towards other markets. In contrast to Sascha, he thinks that other markets could be much more valuable. Hence he is in discussion to make his blog content available in Spanish:
“I’ve basically got a global mind set. I don’t only want to focus on the German market. Even after delivering content in different languages, German, of course, still remains in the foreground. The quality of content should not be compromised. This also applies to general web and video development to find new tools which I can then apply to all three sides [note: German, English and Spanish].”

Christof, tabtech

One of the concerns about expanding into new markets is the lack of specific market knowledge and foremost the lack of language skills. As blog content is read based on the lively narrations of actors, the latter have problems conveying their style in a foreign language. As a consequence, Christof (tabtech) argues that hiring a writer specifically for a certain market is inevitable based on his lack of language skills. In the case of Sascha (mobilegeeks), he suggests that language isn’t his main issue as he worked and lived in the U.S. for several years but would struggle in other languages. Furthermore, he reported that his personal resources simply do not allow him to offer separate language blogs. He tried to write in German and English, but his audience numbers did not increase. Moreover, simply translating German content to English would be insufficient, as the content needs to be adapted to the new audience.

5.6.3 A blogger’s dilemma

Out of this arises a dilemma for the actors; they want to develop their blogs but do not have the time or resources. The blogger’s dilemma is about the balance between the growing demands of developing the blog while still keeping the same blog identity and characteristics. According to actors, they are not able to accomplish all activities in a satisfying way due to their limited time resources. But if too many activities are outsourced, it can harm the credibility of the actor and consequently the blog. One radical but necessary step is to employ writers to generate content such as product news in order to acquire new readers. This has led to some actors employing aspiring actors who are interested in the product to assist and then write independent product news. These individuals usually want to gain experience reviewing in a more professional setting before starting their own blog and are studying or working part time, which gives them certain flexibility. According to Philipp (technews), they are paid on a monthly retainer or per article. As most readers appreciate the writing style and opinions formed by these specific actors, outsourcing content is rather complex.
as blogs are instead characterised on a person’s identity rather than just the content they provide. Their readers have a clear idea about their blog and the specific actor shaping it. A logical step would be if the writers adapted to the writing style and practices or to recruit actors who hold similar opinions or have similar writing styles. Whilst it is seen as necessary that new contracted writers need to follow certain guidelines, it is important that they develop their own persona within the blog, as Carsten explains:

“My writers had problems being accepted at the beginning. A lot of readers wrote in the comment sections that they only want to read my articles. But then they would have to visit another blog. I chose the people around me very specifically, and they should not be a copy of me, but they also need to have their own opinion and stand behind it. I knew that if I like how my colleagues write, my readers would enjoy them.”

Carsten, stadt-bremerhaven

Carsten (stadt-bremerhaven) found that shortly after including new writers, they are often exposed to very critical comments on their blog posts, not due to the quality of the articles, but because readers are critical of change. Changes such as employing new writers need to be carefully executed. In the case of Carsten (stadt-bremerhaven), he ensured that new writers introduce themselves and write articles about them (see Section 6.6.1) so readers get to know new writers. Consequently, actors aim to fully integrate new writers to form a specific actor’s team in form of a long term employment. The change in representation from an actor towards a team is also mirrored in their blog content. They comment on each other’s articles and engage in activities together. These strategic developments have led to another prominent transition in their blog. Although content is presented in a similar way, actors try to transfer their reputation to their blog, in other words a transformation from an actor’s blog to an actor team has been achieved. Actors use their reputation to create a brand based on their blog name to allow them to employ more writers. If guidelines are given and the quality of the blog content is controlled, readers tend to accept it as it provides them with a better experience. The more people write and spend time around a topic, the better the reporting will be, as Philipp (technews) has elaborated. Hence their focus is on promoting their blog name rather than themselves. The development of the blog reaches a critical point where it has to build
on the actor’s reputation but in order to grow it needs to take on a life of its own around the values and style of the originator.

Actors are found to distance themselves from the operative part of their blog to emphasise its strategic development to a greater extent. They are still seen as the face of a blog; however, they have more resources to investigate further cooperation and strategies for their blog. This transition goes beyond an occupational actor and is seen as a move towards the organisational structure of an online magazine. Whereas the content provided by writers and actors should remain unchanged to a certain extent for the sake of their readership, the business behind their blog is now distinct from earlier development stages. Similar to occupational actors, they are forcing further income generation through expansion and advertisement maximisation. A distinction is seen as experts are now utilised to increase the quality of their videos and blog functionality. Furthermore, writers are employed to reduce the overall workload. Actors still write for their blog but now focus on main topics such as major device introductions or device reviews. Behind their blog, they are assisting writers, delegating topics, requesting devices and handling all communications with advertising partners and marketers. This step back is necessary, as actors need to keep an overall perspective on their blogs. As Sascha (mobilegeeks) argues, he is now responsible for his staff as well; hence he is the person responsible for securing revenue expectations and keeping their blog alive, whereas further development should decrease the risk of generating less income, while employing writers and experts is cost intensive:

“The outcome is blog content as before. There are no protected terms here. Tech blogging for me means in the first place that someone reports device-related information in an honest way that means something to him and generates fun and maybe communicates it in a more loose and unconventional way. What happens behind my blog is now very different. I’ve employees for whom I am responsible. So I have to see that I get certain revenues, so you have to look further behind the business.”

*Sascha, mobilegeeks*
5.7 Summary

This empirical chapter explored the ways in which actors construct their audiences. The process of audience construction unveiled three different types of audiences: the first time reader (stage one); the regular reader (stage two); and the loyal readership (stage three), thus corresponding to different stages in the blog’s development. A schematic diagram of findings is provided below:

![Figure 5.1 – Main findings of audience construction](image)

The first time reader usually derives from Google, is only interested in a particular article and may not come back. This type of reader is less concerned with the actors as sources of information. The regular reader visits the blog on a regular basis and is the foundation for constructing an audience. Nevertheless, the regular reader does not play an active part and interacts rarely. However, this type appreciates the style of writing and the author as a source of information. The loyal readers, or the core readers, read the blog regularly, actively engage in the blog, by commenting and
helping other readers. As a result, they shape blog content and are taken into consideration regarding the blog’s future orientation. By being responsive to feedback from readers, actors try to tie readers closer to their blog, transforming regular readers into loyal readers. Moreover, there was an emphasis on additional feedback channels devoting a critical role to the audience. Actors are responsive to comments from readers, resulting in a co-shaping of content. The empowered voice of the audience is similarly represented in the transformation from an audience to a community.

Community development is seen as a success factor. Reasoning might be ascribed to the monetisation of audiences where regular and loyal readers are necessary to maintain the audience size, thereby ensuring that the blog remains viable. However, actors need to carefully negotiate and decide to what extent they want to maximise their economic capital while remaining autonomous. Interaction and transparency with the reader is key and a prerequisite to developing the blog. The transition for the actor from a part time occupation to a full time activity requires a regular income which in turn allows actors to outsource tasks such as web development and content. However, if blog content is outsourced, actors need to find ways to manage this transition to ensure that the blog continues to deliver for their readers.

As particular blog content has been found as a distinguishing factor, it raises further questions regarding how content is developed and under what circumstances it is presented. The next chapter will address this gap by examining how blog content is developed and presented by emerging actors.
Chapter 6  Content Development

6.1  Introduction

During the examination of how audiences are constructed, content creation has been found to be critical in attracting and maintaining an audience. In equal measure the type and quality of content is influenced by economic resources.

This chapter outlines how content is created by actors. Related literature on content development has been outlined in Section 3.1. Two main forms of content have been found to be product news and tests respectively. Product news may be explained with reference to opinion leadership or blogging activities, however the two research strands are rather contradictory. In particular the role of an actor as an information filter and what sources are used are of especial interest. Furthermore, the writing process and its presentation is neglected in the existing literature. Reviews can be either “connoisseurial” or “procedural” in nature, which has critical implications regarding the evaluation process (Blank, 2007). How do actors gather, evaluate devices and what do they provide for readers to easily distinguish between different product features and performance? Closely linked to this is the influence of technology, e.g. the blog as a channel. The increasing incorporation of multimedia such as videos, pictures or audio recording in addition to written content has been neglected in existing studies. Hence, how the incorporation of further technical development and multimedia affects an actor’s activities requires further investigation.

This chapter will also focus on the development process and its distinctive stages. As there is no explicit career path for actors, this chapter tries to capture content development in the making – in other words, which activities dominate in the content
production process and what skills are needed to fulfil these tasks. This study uses the related literature to organise main themes.

6.2 Initial position

Actors draw their motivation to start blogging from their diverse backgrounds. Although the majority of actors in this study had no prior background in journalism, all actors expressed: 1) a prior and on-going involvement and interest in the area of consumer electronics; and 2) previous experience in online communication, which has been found as a prerequisite to start blogging. Carsten (stadt-bremerhaven) and Christof (tabtech) had prior work experience in this context as they both worked in sales for a large consumer electronics retailer for several years. Sascha (mobilegeeks) modified mini PCs prior to beginning his blog in consumer electronics, which is similar to Philipp (technews) who modified mobile phone software and was actively engaged in discussion forums prior to starting a blog. Thus, as with product interest, familiarity with online communication was closely related to starting a blog. Active engagement in discussion forums is seen as the first experience in exchanging information and building product knowledge around like-minded people. Furthermore, it is argued that this constitutes the first chance for actors to establish themselves and show their expertise. As Daniil (tibt) reported, engaging in online forums encouraged him to start his own blog. Similarly, Lars (allaboutsamsung) argues that writing on other platforms was beneficial for him in terms of starting to acquire an audience:

“I originally started at Androidpit because I had a HTC Hero and the unit was very bad, it had very bad software. At this time I wrote about my device and the modifications that are possible on a discussion forum. My posts were quite frequently clicked, with up to 300,000 users reading my posts in the forum. At this stage there was a point where I wanted to write blog posts on my own blog instead of on a forum system.”

Lars, allaboutsamsung

Although they engaged in technological discussions online earlier, other circumstances triggered their decision to set up their own blogs. Lars (allaboutsamsung) and Alexander (iphoneblog), for instance, report that someday the
comment line became too small and they aspired to start a project on their own. As a result, the actors distanced themselves from forums and discussion boards as they wanted to be independent. As most actors were active on other blogs or discussion forums before, it can be assumed that they didn’t want to be dependent on somebody any longer. Further intentions to start their own blog have been found to be either of self-interest, e.g. “Are people actually interested in the things I am writing” (Philipp, technews) or the desire to help others, e.g. “Can I help others to avoid buying mistakes I saw every day in retail” (Carsten, stadt-bremerhaven). Sascha (mobilegeeks) argues that when he started he was simply frustrated about the lack of information available on a certain topic area:

“For me, the tech-landscape in mobile was empty at that time; there was nothing that interested me. I found it all super boring, magazines published extremely late if they have even published anything. In addition, there was simply no subjective comment; it was not polarizing at all. I think an argument can be very stimulating for many parties, especially for readers. They really appreciate that on my blog.”

Sascha, mobilegeeks

In addition, actors claim that the opportunity to write about an emerging niche such as tablets (tablethype, tabtech) or smartphones, e.g. the iPhone (iphoneblog), encouraged them to start their blogs. As this opportunity was seen be temporary, the actors have argued that they needed to take their chance. As Christof (tabtech) reports, an emerging niche such as tablets was not only exciting to him, but also provided a space where he could see a blog develop:

“Tablets simply came about as I wanted to start blogging. There was only a Galaxy Tab and iPads on the market. For me, personally, it was a topic that was kind of interesting and trending. Although there was not a lot of content on it when I started, I thought that these devices could become interesting in the near future.”

Christof, tabtech

Thus, actors decide to set up their own blog based on inner circumstances (self-interest, desire to help others) and outer circumstances (market opportunities). Further, actor’s engagement in online media reached beyond writing and engaged in forums or other blogs. It has been ascertained that actors in their studies or employment such as web design, information technology or media design, developed
technical skills to set up a blog. Therefore, most actors to some extent also had technical expertise to be able to set up their blog.

6.2.1 Setting up their blog

In order to create and publish content, a technical basis has to be developed. As a technical basis, actors distinguish between the backend and frontend of their web-platform. The frontend is mostly based on a template that directs the appearance of a blog and appears to transform constantly to react to new trends or readers’ feedback. Similar to their domain name (see Section 4.2), the backend remains unchanged. Philipp (technews) argues in this context that the setup of their own blog is the first instance where they are confronted with thinking about building a framework, e.g. a backend solution that is able to meet current requirements and future developments on their blog:

“Basically it was online immediately. Then I started to tinker with the first theme, which was then built up relatively easy and does not really correspond to the design as it exists now. But it was a useful framework at the start, to fill it with content, whereas I could then work on a proper theme. The backend was ready within a few days, working day and night. After the main setup it is mostly a running process. You will find some design snippets or functions at other blogs that you like and then gradually incorporate them into your theme.”

Philipp, technews

The choice of universal and customisable blog script packages such as WordPress has been found to be evidence that actors’ desired to customise their blogs from the very beginning. According to actors, they were willing to take more effort in setting up their server space to allow a greater control over appearance and data. Alexander (iphoneblog) has raised the importance of independence and customisability similar to the findings obtained from other actors. He argues that he specifically chose his setup after considering all platforms and already established sites:

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9 In this context, the backend is often referred as a Content Management System (CMS) where the majority of actors applied WordPress as their system of choice. CMS such as WordPress have been found to benefit actors in terms of installation and setup, as they don’t require extended technical skills. Moreover, WordPress offers plugins and templates to easily modify and customise the blog at a later stage. As a consequence, actors carefully evaluated different systems for potential future expansion. Thus CMS could be installed on a WordPress hosted server, or they could rent their own server space; the latter was preferred by actors.
“I then set it up all by myself. Using WordPress was relatively comfortable. I rented my own server where WordPress has been installed. I found this form of system especially thrilling as there are certain methods to adapt the website according to your own wishes. I did not want to be dependent on another party and therefore decided against other platforms.”

Alexander, iphoneblog

As Alexander (iphoneblog) has outlined, he specifically chose a platform that gives him the opportunity to customise and alter almost everything. However, this means that, in contrast to other blogs or discussion forums, there are no set guidelines or orientations where actors are first confronted with the type and format they want to use to publish their content. As a consequence, it has been found that they initially used a similar format and writing style they had encountered in their prior experience and adapted this later on. Daniil (tblt) or Jan (tablethype), for instance, claim that they already gained experience to some extent in discussion forums or guest writing on other blogs. According to Christof (tabtech) and Carsten (stadt-bremerhaven), they gained some expertise due to their long-term interest in consumer electronics. Hence, it can be assumed that actors have basic skills in terms of writing and knowledge in order to publish and fill their blog with content.

In this context, Carsten (stadt-bremerhaven) argues that approaching and communicating with established actors is beneficial in the first stages. Engagement and discourse with established actors enables less experienced actors to further assess their development and, on the other hand, to be able to avoid mistakes (see Section 7.2.1 for discussion). The findings illustrate that although they respect the advice given by more established actors, they are still trying to shape their practices which fit with the desired shape of their blog. This can be expressed in terms of their difference in publishing format and given writing style. Philipp (technews) argues that a writing style is critical to distinguish one blog from another. He therefore focussed on a more informal writing style, thereby becoming more approachable to his readers. In contrast Alexander (iphoneblog) has noted that he wrote very formally at the beginning so as to appear more credible. Thus, it is argued that actors are in constant transition in the first months, where they test different writing styles and formats before finding their own.
6.2.2 Developing content structures

Philipp (technews) emphasises that apart from the form of writing, his content structure is a crucial contrasting factor. Whereas in other blogs or discussion forums, the focus and orientation was given, on their own blog actors need to define their own focus. It has been found that some actors already have a tendency towards a certain product segment such as mobile (mobilegeeks, insidehandy) or tablets (tabtech, tablt, tablethype) based on their blog name. These blog names are specifically chosen to attract a certain audience and set of interests (see Section 5.2.1). However, further distinctions need to be made regarding what type of content they want to publish in a certain product category according to the actors. These are made based on different operating systems, type of device or a brand. Although this separation might be beneficial for actors, findings show that the latter want to keep their blog structure as simple as possible. As a more modified distinction, Sascha (mobilegeeks) and Lars (allaboutsamsung) have separated their content based on type of device (navigation bar four and three). Examples of content structures expressed as navigation bars are illustrated in the figure down below.

Blog capture 6.1 – Navigation bar (tabtech, techstage, allaboutsamsung, mobilegeeks)

Within those modified sections such as tablets or smartphones, actors publish product news around devices in that category. What has been prominent throughout the findings was a clear distinction between product news such as (tablet, smartphone, notebook, etc.) and product tests (also termed as reviews). The findings correlate with work from Richins and Root-Shaffer (1988) who state that the main dimensions of WOM are either product news or advice where each requires different procedures. Product news includes advances of technologies in the consumer
electronics sector, differences between device models and information about the development of new devices. Advice-giving eWOM includes comments and information about a tested device related to an actor’s personal experiences. In contrast, product news is based less on personal experience and more on general knowledge about consumer electronics as a product class. Information sharing differs from commenting in that it offers factual and practical information as opposed to expressing opinions. Thus, it can be assumed that the first dimension is more dependent on processes regarding information search, sources and filtering, whereas the second dimension relies more on the decision making and the formation of an opinion.

6.3 **Product news**

Prior to blogging, actors claimed that they already read online magazines or other blogs to get a grasp of what is happening in their respective product categories. What has changed is that they now need to channel their information to their constructed content structure. Hence, they need to further refine and narrow down their sources by focussing on what fits in their content structure rather than basing themselves solely on their own interests. There is a clear focus on the development of information searches and filtering. In other words, due to their limited perception at the beginning, actors focus on product news in order to attract audiences and to build their knowledge through systematic information searches.

6.3.1 **Information search and sources**

Actors claimed that they prefer information sources with a clear niche or topic of interest. A clear topic of interest helps actors as well as other readers to gain specific information about a certain product category. Alexander (iphoneblog), for instance, emphasises the importance of having a clear focus in order to be read. He argues that other actors eliminate themselves by having a good opinion but writing about everything. If these sources would also publish information on unrelated topics, readers would have no interest in following them anymore:
“I think it’s good if you have very specific area where you focus on. The worst thing is when people actually have a very good opinion, but they write on so many different things that you cannot follow them. This is definitely a problem.”

Alexander, iphoneblog

Thus, a distinction between self-interest vs. others’-interest has emerged. In other words, what are actors reading to stay informed and to also keep their own readers informed? According to Bloch, Sherrell and Ridgway (1986), continuing information searches can be divided by the information collected for others and the search for information for their own use. In practice these different processes happen simultaneously as they are mainly interested about what they write. However, in some ways the selection of topics to publish needs to align with the blog’s niche:

“I really like specific tech news items and still enjoy reading them, but I need to break it down to a certain level for my readers. For example I recently read about different Kernel specifications in Linux, but that is not a niche I want to serve on my blog. If some people are mainly interested in that type of news, they need to find a blog where they talk about these things specifically.”

Carsten, stadt-bremerhaven

Carsten (stadt-bremerhaven) argues that this clear niche was initially established by him. As iterated in terms of audience construction, actors write for a phantom audience when they start building their blog, e.g. they may not know their audience in contrast to traditional WOM. It can be argued that they are imagining an audience they are writing for, which could also mirror their own interest and persona (see Section 5.3.2).

**Information sources** – Information about products and services would usually be gathered by accessing mass media sources such as TV or newspapers. However, an actor’s consumption of mass media has been found to be significantly lower in this research compared to other studies (King and Summers, 1970; Bloch, Sherrell and Ridgway, 1986). Actors claimed that almost all of their information sources are very specific online elements gathered in various communication channels. Within the first months of a blog’s development, actors focus on systematically obtaining information from online media. As these sources are publicly available, theoretically everybody would be able to obtain this information. Thus, actors have no
information advantage at this stage. However, their systematic processes allow them to obtain large amounts of news that is focussed towards a certain channel. Therefore, information sources should be relevant to their niche and, more critically, are rather short, as Jan (tablethype) has found. As some of those actors screen around a hundred different sources every day, long articles are less time efficient. In the context of channels, Carsten (stadt-bremerhaven) reports that he gathers information from “everywhere, signed up in all possible news channels and also active. Sounds difficult, but it is true.” However, he noted that he prioritizes channels and is not able to check them synchronously. In this context Fabien (techstage) emphasises that multiple channels are used to validate news to make sure that they are correct. Likewise, Christian (inside-handy) thinks that although all channels are used, based on their varying functionality, only one of them is used as their main channel of information. He further argues that they base their information on one channel whereas other channels are used to solidify content and search for specifics.

Building an information repository – Overall, it has been found that actors set up their information repository\(^\text{10}\) at the initial stage, and only then do they refine the latter by adding sources or deleting others. According to actors, these consist of categories that have developed over the years, e.g. rumours, hardware-news, product-launches, Samsung and Apple. These categories may be further refined by manufacturer, product category or specific categories of interest. These repositories have been found to be channel specific. Christian (inside-handy), for instance, uses other blogs as his main source. If he wants to search for specific topics further, he uses microblogging platforms and rarely bothers with social networking sites. Most actors have been found to install “Feedreader” software whereby other blogs can be subscribed to through RSS feeds and sorted into different interest categories. In contrast, Lars (allaboutsamsung) and Christof (tabtech) acquire information mainly through microblogging platforms, specifically Twitter. Most actors favoured Twitter based on its message characteristics (140 characters maximum). Twitter messages are short and contain “hashtags” which makes a search for specific topics easier. With third party applications like “Tweetdeck” they create their own categories and

\(^{10}\) These repositories are built using software such as Tweetdeck or Feedly that enables actors to add information sources and to structure them by interest.
create alerts if there is new information about a certain topic with the aim to have a more organised and structured news stream. Lars (allaboutsamsung) prefers microblogging platforms such as Twitter over other blogs (RSS feeds) as the screening process for the latter is too long. Based on the limitation to 140 characters per tweet, he is able to screen around 400 news articles on Twitter in a short period of time:

“I know a lot of other bloggers who still work with RSS feeds, but I no longer do, because RSS feeds are quite disorganised if you want to have all news aggregators that you need. I actually work only with Twitter as a news aggregator, or as a content source, because I now think that I follow the right people and get exactly the content I need. So I wake up in the morning, look at Twitter, have around 400 news items and look what happens in the U.S., what is worth reading in Russia, what in Korea, screen it once and filter out what and what not to pay attention to within five minutes and then I already have a feel for what news items are interesting and what topics I can publish throughout the day. During the day there are one or two additional topics if they are breaking news, but I manage to make it work I think.”

Lars, allaboutsamsung

In contrast, Lutz (mobiwatch) argues that he needs a reliable network of information, however based on the length of tweets he is not able to guarantee this on Twitter. Similarly Christian (inside-handly), thinks that Twitter is more suitable to search for or to validate information. Thus, actors try to find a balance between long screening processes, e.g. RSS feeds, and not missing any information, which is often achieved via Twitter.

Carsten (stadt-bremerhaven) primarily uses news aggregator platforms like “Reddit”. They provide an overview of the most important news on a certain topic of interest. Topics are collected, sorted and summarised in terms of a community. Users within this community can “up-vote” and “down-vote” certain information and the platform will sort topics according to those with the most “up-votes”. Although the community may be more subjective and cannot replace the main information sources, it enables actors like Carsten to get a feel for what sort of news items are of interest. Likewise, Luca (2-blog) emphasises that it is not possible to obtain all new information around a topic, but with news aggregators he makes sure not to miss the most important news of the day. Based on indications of how interesting certain information is to an audience, it can be assumed that news aggregators offer a
significant advantage compared to other blogs or microblogging sites. However, some actors raised the issue that when news aggregators make certain information visible, it is already too late for an audience.

Drawing on this issue, timing has been found to be a prominent factor. It might be argued that actors like Lars (allaboutsamsung) prefer Twitter, as information on this platform is spread in a timelier manner compared to blogs or news aggregators. The focus on timing might also be reasoned to be the dominant focus on different markets such as the U.S. and Asia (see Lars’ quote above). Actors “follow” other blogs or people that are known to be close to manufacturers’ sites. These people tend to operate in either the U.S. or the Asian market, which should allow the actor a time advantage in comparison to other actors in his market. Being a first mover has been found to be a step towards delivering additional value to their blog. Similarly, Christof (inside-handy) focussed on information sources from different markets as he argues that they are timelier and thus more relevant. Actors are not only filtering information, they are looking beyond their main market to find information that is relevant to their audience. This is further signalled by the increasing use of personal contacts. In alignment with timing is the utilisation of personal sources to gain a time advantage and consequently a competitive advantage.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Online media channels</th>
<th>Personal contacts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Other blogs (through RSS feeds)</td>
<td>Contacts to manufacturers/marketers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Microblogging platforms (Twitter)</td>
<td>Information from other actors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>News aggregators (Reddit)</td>
<td>Exclusive information from contacts/readers</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 6.1 – Main information sources

**Personal contacts as information source** – Actors further divide information sources by online media and personal contacts where they utilise their network to gather further information (see Table 6.1). According to actors, company contacts (in most cases marketers) are sought out to ask further questions regarding a rumour. If an actor screens a certain rumour, contacting the manufacturer or marketer to confirm the rumour would reduce the risk of publishing false information which could harm their credibility according to Fabien (techstage). Although actors spend a
lot of time validating information to avoid uncertainty, Christian (inside-handy) outlined that contacting marketers is advantageous when verifying information.

Other sources of information are emails from contacts, e.g. experts or readers that have been found to be a potential advantage as these individuals pre-filter news that could be of interest to actors. For instance, Jan (tablethype) argues that product news are often shared with other actors before they are published. This should give other actors (receivers of information) a time advantage, but also helps the actor (the sender of information) as he is mentioned as the main source:

“I also have contact with a lot of colleagues and others on Facebook and people send each other articles if someone has something exclusive. Sometimes they message me even before they publish it saying that there is a rumour. Then I can prepare for it beforehand. It's been a lovely collaboration so far.”

Jan, tablethype

Jan (tablethype) is using information given by other actors to gain a time advantage. Thus, building and maintaining networks with other actors, marketers and their readership have been found to be critical to acquire access to exclusive information or to receive information earlier (see Section 7.3).

6.3.2 Expressing expertise as a first mover

Although exclusive information from colleagues or other informants is seen as a very important source of information, actors need to be “online 24/7” to be able to publish information in a timely manner, as Christof (tabtech) argues. Actors need to publish news when it appears and thus they are required to regularly screen and check sources. Consequently, some of those actors are spending day and night reading and publishing content in some extreme situations, as Carsten (stadt-bremerhaven) details. He used conferences such as the Consumer Electronics Show (CES) as an example where he needs to cover a huge amount of different news from new product introductions, rumours, etc. which are available at the show for the first time. As Christof (tabtech) has claimed, at peak times “it is very time consuming as I sit up sometimes until to 4 or 5 o’clock in the morning on the computer and cut videos and at 7 o’clock I am back to further process reviews and write texts.” But how are they
justifying this high level of involvement? Empirical evidence has been found that covering a broad range of news articles is crucial to attract new readers. Furthermore, as readers seemingly become less and less patient as Christof (tabtech) notes, it can be seen as an advantage for actors that they are able to publish news faster than traditional print media. Being a “first mover” enables them to attract new readers as they appear first on search engines and are cited by traditional media. However, Fabien (techstage) notes that traditional media are criticising actors by accusing the latter of “delivering less profound information” than traditional journalists. He emphasized that he is not only validating the quality of the actual reference, he also validates the numbers of mentions of the same rumour in various channels which should help to distinguish fake product news from real information. On the contrary, Christof (tabtech) admits that if you want to be the first to publish information, there is less evidence available to be able to validate a rumour. Thus, he finds “it hard to find a balance between time efficiency and quality, where everyone has to decide on their own.”

Based on an increased invisibility based on timing, their writing process is focussed on “getting news out in a timely manner”, as Alexander (iphoneblog) states. Despite the format, the majority of actors link to the main quote and place their opinion below in contrast to summarising sources. According to actors, mentioning the original source helps to keep the information acquisition more transparent and leaves more space for discussion. Moreover, it spared them writing an extensive summary, which is one of the ways actors developed to improve their speed of action. At conferences they included interviews and videos to compensate for a more time-consuming writing process. In contrast to existing studies (Pollach, 2006) where article length has a positive impact on credibility, actors see the ability to diffuse product news that is short but covers the main points as a quality measure. Nevertheless, their main outcome of product news is in written format where their routine helps them to formulate arguments in a shorter amount of time:

“It is hard to estimate. If you have a message from the U.S., I am able to publish the article with comments from my experience in around 10-15 minutes. If you do not have it, it maybe takes an hour at least.”

Lars, allaboutsamsung
As Lars (allaboutsamsung) argues, with his experience he is able to publish information quicker that is crucial to new rumours and news. Therefore, it may be assumed that product news is a way to inform their readership in a quick and unformatted manner.

### 6.4 Need of unique content

Drawing on Lars’ comment, actors increasingly link their experience to rumours, product developments, or other innovations. In this context, Christof (tabtech) claims that he wants to give his readers not only short news, but an overall impression of what this happening or that rumour means. Hence, he attaches links from original sources to the article but the information from those links is not replicated. This has been found to be the case where the actor’s main activities seem to shift away from simply information-gathering and filtering. They try to identify and organise information sources and diffuse this information to their readership. As a result, within the first months of blog development, an actor’s main purpose is to establish a working routine and to develop a publication cycle (see Section 5.2.2). Figure 6.2 below gives an indication of how product news is replicated in earlier stages.

![Blog capture 6.2 – Replication of news (Philipp, technews)](image-url)
An example of information filtering is provided by Philipp (technews). As displayed below, the original source is from the news source Gizmodo, where Philipp (technews) adopted the original picture and paraphrased the news in his own writing style and format. Although he transferred the information into his own language, the meaning remains more or less unchanged. In contrast, Alexander (iphoneblog) reports that he tries to give his readership an understanding of the bigger picture instead of merely replicating news. Moreover, he aims to give readers additional information in case they want to develop deeper insights regarding the topic. In this article, a quote is followed with the actual news item as provided by an industry expert, which can be seen as an optimisation of information sources. In the following excerpt Alexander tries to break down this information and highlights the influence on the overall market:

It has also been found that actors try to cover information that is beyond simple device-related news. By integrating their experience to a greater extent, product news should be simultaneously more relevant to their audience and distant from other forms of information as Alexander (iphoneblog) argues. Thus, product news should give additional value to potential readers, and not only provide filtered information.
as Christof (tabtech) has explained. This is not only limited to written news, it can also include background information concerning companies or images. Referring to Figure 5.2, Felix (curved) notes that another way to distance a blog from others is to create your own preview pictures instead of using press pictures. The inclusion of images has been found as a first indicator of multimedia importance which is found to be steadily increasing over time. In this context, McQuarrie et al. (2013) argues that the use of own pictures is an aspect of professionalization in blogging.

### 6.4.1 The growing importance of authorship

Prominent in content development (e.g. product news) is the personalised presentation of content. Moreover, it has been found that this information is now actively underpinned by the actor’s opinion as illustrated in Alexander’s example. Opinionated presentation has been found to be of benefit to readers as blogs are foremost read because consumers are more and more interested in independent honest and opinions as Freisel (marketer) has noted. Carsten (stadt-bremerhaven) underlines that “if you and your content is replaceable, people will not care where they get the information from. Your task is to give them something they are not able to get elsewhere.” Concerns relating to being replaceable have seen actors focus on generating opinionated content. Actors also claim that it is their persona and the way the information is presented that makes them unique. Therefore, it is assumed that readers want a tangible person who is approachable when engaging in consumer electronics discourse. Carsten (stadt-bremerhaven) argues that readers want a person with an opinion that stands behind their content. In the case of online, it seems that readers have a desire for a tangible person who they can engage with:

“It is either because they like me or because they hate me. I do not know. But the fact is that I'm vulnerable and as a person I stand behind it. I think that alone makes a difference. We have seen that even with colleagues who have sold their blogs and since then the blog has died. So as a blogger you are not easily replaceable. Readers want people who have their opinions.”

Carsten, stadt-bremerhaven

Moreover critical opinions have been found to be an indicator of credibility. For instance, Lars (allaboutsamsung) claims that based on their critique on products and services from manufacturers they display a certain distance and independence. Felix
(curved) finds himself responsible by drawing attention to product errors or faults. According to him, he uses his expertise to warn his readers as on most occasions they would not have noticed these flaws in store. The use of opinionated content is seen as a first indicator of the growing importance of authorship on an actor’s blog. As actors avoid replicating information, the usefulness and accuracy of content is dependent on the author of information (Xia and Bechwati, 2008). Thus, actors noted that they are disclosing information about themselves in contrast to traditional media. According to actors, they are publicly connecting their blog to their persona. This is emphasised by Alexander (iphoneblog) as he argues that at the beginning he saw himself as an editor of his blog, although he was the only person writing for it, whereas in the later stages “the blog became Alexander”. Similarly Lars (allaboutsamsung) has found that the blog name and his name are mentioned interchangeably when readers mentioning his platform.

6.4.2 Providing new content

Content transition, e.g. the production of new content, is partly initiated by an actor’s concern regarding “being replaceable” as Carsten (stadt-bremerhaven) argues. Actors emphasized that although readers might visit the site repeatedly, they need to generate new content in order to maintain their readership. In this context, Philipp (technews) argues that he needs to “strategically develop content orientation.” He explains that reacting to existing news becomes very time intense whereas he tries to find and write about topics that are relevant to the market but haven’t been discussed yet. Thus, it may be argued that actors don’t react to market information but rather try to create market information, particularly if topics are determined by an actor’s experience and specific keywords are searched for by readers. Luca (2-blog) noted that he can analyse which keywords readers searched for on his blog or which keywords have led to his blog. He uses the example of a “Samsung 4 active underwater test” which has been frequently searched for on his blog where he aims to include more information or even to provide this type of test. This has been found to be a way to distance actors from mass media as an information source and being responsive to their audience (see Section 5.4.2).
However, Sascha (mobilegeeks) iterated that a conflict of information breadth vs. depth exists at some stage, as “you think you need to write mass compliant and occupy the most trending topics to gain more traffic. But it is also important to occupy different niches, to be an expert on something. It is hard to be an expert on everything.” He further claims that by broadening his topics and by only reacting to trending news he could lose his expert status. Thus actors need to carefully think about what topics to incorporate. With regards to strategic planning, actors distinguished between long-term and short-term traffic. According to Felix (curved), short-term traffic is relatively high at the beginning but does not sustain very long. An example is product news where a lot of attention is garnered when initially published but after a certain period of time this falls off. On the other hand, long-term traffic is relatively low but sustains for a longer period. For instance, if products are tested, “they are still read after a year” (Lars, allaboutsamsung). Jan (tablethype) argues that although he primarily focuses on product news, long-tail traffic becomes more interesting for him as it sustains for longer:

“The main traffic comes from product news, especially as referred from Google and Google News. But we now tend to focus more on product tests and reports as this content is heavily commented on and shared via social channels over weeks. Usually, news items are shared on Facebook and Twitter on the first day, whereas an opinion article or a test report gets 20-30 times more shares and visits over time.”

Jan, tablethype

According to Jan (tablethype), product reviews generate more traffic in the long run. Furthermore, he noted that most product news items are only relevant for a few days. This is questioned by Lars (allaboutsamsung), who noted that an issue with product news is “that they are already out-dated when I publish them.” Actors claim that focusing on long-tail traffic enables them to reach more stable traffic throughout, instead of traffic peaks when content is published. He claims that providing further insights into the market rather than being product specific by interviewing experts or employers from manufacturers directly could help to overcome this issue. Interviews or other information could be valuable to deliver unique information, whereas actors tried to utilise contacts in order to verify product news. Meanwhile, actors are using their market expertise to gain “inside information” as Daniil (tblt) claims. According to actors this happens mostly at conferences which are not only interesting in terms
of getting new product information but also to build connections with vendors or marketers to provide better content to their audience. In this context, Felix (curved) argues that attending conferences such as the CES (Consumer Electronics Show) or the Apple Keynote pushed him “to another level” in terms of content. He further argues that these events are good opportunities to provide better content, but they are foremost important to make themselves known in this sector. Thereby, actors are first confronted with the representatives of manufacturers mostly in the form of marketers (Kozinets et al., 2010). Freisel (marketer) argues that these connections can be fruitful for both parties – the actor is able to gain better information or even to test equipment, and the marketer is able to exploit new audiences (see Section 7.3):

“Bloggers who want to do it professionally know when they get input from the manufacturer that they may also report better – to get the press release or test equipment for reviews. Tech-bloggers want to get devices to perform a variety of tests that are different from the ones in print media, since it’s also about just having exclusive content to be ahead of the others, or to have what no one else has.”

Freisel, marketer

Freisel (marketer) emphasises that the increasing demand for unique information may have several implications. Although online information sources are still critical to build knowledge, social interactions become increasingly important. By building relationships with other actors, marketers or experts, it enables actors to get access in order to provide better information and unique content. On the contrary, an actor’s reputation may become more critical in the process. As content is unique, they cannot refer to other sources anymore. As in product news, by validating sources actors make sure that information is accurate. Unique content is not only based on topic expertise, but also on reputation building within the first stages. In particular content is seen as a more opinionated type of content in contrast to product news. Thus, actors need social and strategic competencies in addition to expertise about a topic area. It is especially the case that strategic decisions need to be made, as actors now have to cope with multiple activities in order to create new content.
6.5 Product advice

With the increasing dependence on unique content, the incorporation of product reviews has been seen as a consequential step. As they developed further topic expertise through the diffusion of product news, actors are improving product evaluations and seemingly gaining confidence in doing so:

"In contrast to daily activities like product news, product advice is more time intense, more informal and opinion based. My particular opinion is I think this makes the difference in terms of readers going to my blog instead of others."

Jan, tablethype

As Jan (tablethype) outlines, to give advice about a product, a person needs to review it thoroughly and make a judgement about their specifications. He further highlights the importance of authorship in the evaluation process. According to Jan, his judgement is important to his readers as they see him as a more credible and independent source of information than the mass media. Therefore actors need to test a device intensively as otherwise they could lose their credibility (Rogers, 2003). The publishing process thereby consists of the various actions involved which these actors have to deal on a day to day basis: 1) they have to select products that are interesting for them, but moreover are also interesting for their audience; 2) They need to gain access to these products to be able to test them. Then; 3) the actual test of the product begins, which has been found to have become more systemised, thus optimising time and resources. The writing process is complemented with a ranking incorporation to make reviews comparable. Although broad activities involved in giving product advice is well known (e.g. testing products) evolving practices need to be examined further as there might be various ways to accomplish the review process (Blank, 2007).

6.5.1 Product selection and gathering

Product selection is closely aligned to overall blog orientation. Similar to product news, products are selected which fit the overall orientation (as set out in the blog’s initial position). As actors are characterised by attracting a large audience they favour devices that are of general interest to their main market as it aligns with the interest
from readers as Christian (inside-hand) suggests. The interest of actors in the product has been found to be less important, which may result in a product review that an actor personally isn’t interested in. Actors are responsive to readership suggestions, showing a significantly higher level of engagement with their audience in contrast to journalists. Lars (allaboutamsung) argues that “readers want a full picture of the devices available in order to make a purchase decision. My job is to give them exactly that”. In order to do so, the gathering of products is critical. Arguments provided by actors such as Christof (tabtech), emphasize the commitment of these actors, as they are willing to suffer monetary losses in order to give advice to others:

“If everybody is talking about the new iPhone and I know that Apple is not very keen on handing one out, I have to queue like everyone else to buy one. But there are so many readers out there who want to know how the phone is, so I need to be the first one to test it.”

Alexander, iphoneblog

Alexander (iphoneblog) in this context claims that in the past he queued for hours to be one of the first to get his hands on the newest iPhone when it was released. Similar to the findings in product news, being a first mover is seen as a main driver behind attracting new readers. It can be assumed that they see the purchase of a device as an investment in their platform. However, actors note that they cannot afford to buy every new product that has been released. To minimise their monetary loss they could sell the product after they tested it, but it would be still constitute a significant loss and would not be manageable for all tested products as Christof (tabtech) notes. These priorities may shift based on the accessibility of devices. To cover a range of products, actors need the support of marketers to review devices. Therefore actors are dependent on the manufacturer’s cooperation to stay competitive. However, marketers’ amount of test devices are limited and they apparently rank requests based on readership size as Philipp (technews) has claimed. In particular, with actors who have fewer readers, they need to wait for devices until they are sent back by other actors. This results in a dilemma for most actors. As they want to compete, timing is crucial. This correlates with the concept of opinion leadership regarding the importance of being an early adopter. Blank (2007) mentioned that a potential conflict of interest occurs if there is a dependence on
resources: “If a large phone manufacturer is withholding devices from an actor, he would not be able to survive for long”, as Hall (marketer) states (see Section 7.3.3).

### 6.5.2 The product evaluation process

The product evaluation process has been found to be more systemised to account for time allocation and pressure. To publish reviews in a timelier manner, actors included hands-on reviews which will mainly show the unboxing of the device with technical specifications and the first impression in terms of look and feel. As actors are already informed about the product and may already have heard about issues around specific product features, they can answer these questions, possibly straight away. The main advantage of a hands-on test is to get the first information out as soon as possible which should release the time pressure on actors. Furthermore, it allows them to engage with the product more intensively in the main test. The main test covers different aspects that are dependent on actors and therefore can be more responsive to feedback from readers. For instance, Christof (tabtech) asks questions within a hands-on review in order to get feedback from his audience that he can then cover in the main test:

> “I developed a road map that I follow during tests. This helps me to cover the main parts. If a device has a special feature, for example if a device has a keyboard or a digitizer, or just something that is needed or desired in the comments, or has caused controversy, then I will go into more detail on this.”

Christof, tabtech

> “A few readers asked me if this specific tablet is appropriate for students when I published the release date in the product news. So I tried to incorporate this into my review and I took the tablet to my lectures for a couple of days.”

Philipp, technews

Similarly, Philipp claims that he is responsive to audience feedback. If questions still remain unanswered, he will test the device again (a follow-up test). High interest, controversy or mistakes made during the main test have been mentioned to be the main reason behind deciding for a retest. Whereas hands-on reviews and main reviews have proved dominant on actors’ blogs (see Fig. 6.1), follow-up tests are less common.
As the device usually needs to be returned to the manufacturer within a certain time frame or the device needs to be sold to reduce the loss of the initial purchase, this provides the reasoning that the actual duration of the test is a vital point. Time and resources are limited. Hence, actors such as Christian (inside-handly) report being engaged with a device for a full three days to complete the testing process. This is criticised as “less than a week is not enough to test a device to ensure that everything tested is authentic and similar to the experiences a reader might have afterwards” as Carsten (stadt-bremerhaven.de) explains. He suggests using the tested device as their personal device for a couple of weeks. In contrast, Christian (inside-handly) is aware of this issue, but he claims that “that the optimal solution would be to test devices for longer, but we need to stay competitive and I can’t test five devices at one time.” This controversy displays the issues around quality, quantity and resources. The more products and the broader range an actor wants to cover, the more resources in terms of time and capital he has to use to maintain the quality of the actual test.

With the main product test, actors need to get a good sense of product specifications, look and feel, issues around the product and overall opinion in order to give advice. Actors in this study give advice based on tested devices on a regular basis where they are “evaluating up to three devices a week” (Christian, inside-handly). The evaluation is a fundamental aspect as time and financial resources are limited. In order to be efficient, most of these actors developed: 1) guidelines of tests; and 2) norms in their written review:

“I have a large test database with 150 to 200 criteria that I'm going through the same way in each test and I also do the same things and standardize the procedure and the written test. Besides, it helps to not forget anything. After around 700 tests you will also have a certain routine, but you still have to align those criteria in order to ensure comparability.”

Lutz, mobiwatch

Others may not have such a concise list as Lutz (mobiwatch), nevertheless findings show that all actors in this study defined main categories in order to split up their written advice such as “processing/touch and feel, display quality, technical
6.5.3 Types of reviews

These segments are used in order to guarantee a level of consistency within the main structure of their reviews, i.e. subheadings which should make it easier to bring their views into a written, blog format. Reviews have been found to be underpinned by the actor’s opinion similar to other blog content with the aim to give the reader clear advice, i.e. whether “they should buy a certain device or not by unveiling a product’s strengths and weaknesses” (Philipp, technews). Opinion-driven reviews differ substantially from a journalistic piece as actors give their own opinion based on the experiences they encountered during the test:

“This [the conclusion] is the main reason I think why they are reading my tests – because people want to know if I would buy this device or not and whether I like it or not.”

Lutz, mobiwatch

By formulating a subjective opinion, it contrasts with traditional reviews. Based on the systemised process some actors have incorporated even in the main evaluation, it could be assumed that these actors become more aligned with procedural reviews as in PC Magazine (see Blank, 2007). Procedural reviews are based on laboratory tests which are quantified using a fixed ranking system in order to generate objective and comparable findings. Reviews in this study obtained a close alignment with connoisseurial reviews by evaluating devices based on an actor’s experience of use (touch and feel, durability) rather than its specifications (display size, CPU benchmark, etc.). Carsten (stadt-bremerhaven) argues that his opinion and expertise is the main separator from other reviews. Actors, therefore, subjectively evaluate products in real scenarios and wrap their views in an overall judgement:

“Every idiot can copy product specifications. But one must also give people a feel for the hardware that they can empathise with. I'm trying to describe the hardware from my everyday life experiences. I try not to be a blogger, but try to describe it as a regular consumer who has a cell phone.”

Carsten, stadt-bremerhaven
Typical examples of product advice in the form of a review summary are provided below. Carsten (stadtbremerhaven) summarises his view in a simple paragraph where he clarified that the last sub-paragraph needs to clearly outline if a device “is worth buying or not”. Using similar arguments – but in a more structured fashion – Christof (tabtech) outlines the main advantages and disadvantages in a list format with an evaluation synthesized in one simple sentence:

Blog capture 6.3 – Review Summary (Carsten, stadt-bremerhaven)

In particular, Christof’s advice format has been found to be increasingly popular among actors. Although an actor’s product advice is subjective in nature, they try to quantify their evaluation to provide the reader an easy way to compare devices including strengths and weaknesses. To further clarify his overall “test score” (which was 80%), Christof (tabtech) provides a more detailed section where he aims to translate the performance of each category into a “ranking system” (see Blog capture 6.5). As displayed, Christof incorporated a rating from 1 to 10 in each category that should give the reader a better overview of the category-specific performance of the product.
Others have incorporated a user-based rating in addition to including the readership’s voice by enabling them to rate devices. Christian, for instance added a “user-rating” based on the main categories (see Blog capture 6.6). Readers can compare his rating to the ratings awarded by other readers. This approach leads to a more transparent judgment. Consequently, this may be seen as a way to increase both the credibility of their evaluation and engagement on the actor’s blog (see Section 5.4.1). Beside the main categories, the main blog post incorporates answers from the questions posed in a previous hands-on article and, lastly, the conclusion or overall evaluation of the device. The evaluation and the message in general are not only shaped by the actor himself, they are also shaped by the channels in which they operate. As they mainly publish through their blog, this may offer various possibilities as well as limitations in terms of presenting findings.

6.6 Further content development

With the increasing incorporation of unique content, actors claimed that authorship is critical. Similar to the desire to envisage their audience (see Section 5.4.2), actors argued that readers want to get to know actors to evaluate if they are credible or not. In contrast to offline forms of communication, online communication is critiqued by its anonymity and absence of gestural and visual cues (Schmidt, 2007). Particularly given the limited cues available on the web, developing content that provides further insight into the actor’s identity and blogging practices may increase perceived credibility. Mainly achieved through self-disclosing content and the incorporation of multimedia, this type of content could be understood as a form of “identity management” as Schmidt (2007) suggests.
6.6.1 Content as self-disclosure

“News and tests are both equally important to gain short and long tail traffic. But to be successful in blogging requires more, something that gives the platform a face. Personal items from us that show how we work on a daily basis, what brings us closer to our readers, for instance, that’s what still matters on a blog.”

Felix, curved

Drawing on Felix’ statement, additional blog content must not be related to product news or tests; it can be about the actor themself. According to actors, an integral part of blogging is self-disclosure as a different form of engagement aims to tie readers closer to their blog. Brown and Reingen (1987) have argued that there is a positive relation between credibility and the information available about a person. One example of self-disclosure is given by Carsten (stadt-bremerhaven). He wrote a post about his 10,000th article on products and devices. This post not only signals his experience in blogging, he also primarily tries to thank his readers and give them an insight into what his workspace looks like. Carsten elaborates on his daily activities as a tech-blogger and responds to personal questions from previous articles that were asked in the comment section and then summarised in this post. He talks about his daily life, his favourite football team and shares insights about his family.

These articles are not the focus of his blog; however they allow him, as he states, “to be more engaging with my readers which make the whole experience more personal.
I don’t want to become too big and impersonal. Then a person becomes interchangeable and I think my readers like my approach so far, therefore I intend to maintain it as well.” It might be argued that actors want to share personal information to appear closer to their audience. This is partly grounded by the actor’s desire to “let their audience be part of their life” to develop relationships with readers as Alexander (iphoneblog) argues. He believes that if he shares more personal information, readers would do the same by commenting on an actor’s blog, thus resulting in a more personal blog interaction.

6.6.2 Uses and effects of multimedia

When looking at actors in this study, it became apparent that some started to use their blog to give advice or share news when social networking sites such as YouTube had not yet been introduced and Web 2.0 in general was still at an embryonic stage. As online technologies develop, human-computer interaction also transforms (Turner, 2010). In this context, an actor’s way of giving product advice or news has emerged from a plain written format similar to print media reviews, to multimedia reviews including audio, video, info graphics and other animations.

Content generation through different types of multimedia is seen as an emerging trend in tech-blogging according to actors. In this context, reviews and demonstrating product characteristics have developed in new ways. Belk and Llamas (2013) have argued that new forms of information make the consumption of digital media more appealing to a mass audience. In the context of this study, it enables these actors to reach a wider audience which confirms that their website traffic has not only developed by their increased expertise, it is also influenced by the increased use of additional communication channels. One of the reasons to appeal to mass audiences has been due to the rise of social networking sites. In particular platforms such as YouTube (video) or SoundCloud (audio) allow the uploading of multimedia content and sharing it with new audiences. Due to the ease of creating and embedding these types of content in a written blog post, it becomes increasingly fundamental to product news and reviews, as Felix (curved) has argued.
1) Sound recordings – Christof (tabtech) has claimed that he uses audio files mainly to record interviews with experts or the spokespersons of manufacturers. This reduces the workload of actors as they do not need to transcribe the interview into a written format and, further, gives them a critical time advantage to publish information more quickly. In addition, Carsten (stadt-bremerhaven) found that these interviews appear to be more authentic to their readership as interviews are not heavily edited and the information is presented in a near raw format. Given the limited time available at conferences, according to Felix (curved) videos or audio recordings help to cover a wider range of products in a short amount of time. At conferences, additional content in video and audio formats has been found to be beneficial.

2) Videos – He further cited hands-on videos as a popular example of video use. The main features of the device can be displayed in a time effective and appealing manner. As new or developing devices are first shown at conferences, actors have only a limited time with the actual product. According to Fabien (techstage), filming videos has been a good way of making a weakness an opportunity, as he reviews the product while being filmed, i.e. a review in the making. This should make the first experience livelier and the actor can effectively use their time on conferences. Despite hands-on videos, product videos are created in addition to the main reviews, lasting for over 15 minutes for some reviews (Christof, tabtech). The duration and type of reviews has been found to vary widely between actors. According to actors, videos have near limitless possibilities to review devices. Thus, the focus on video-based reviews could be reasoned as a means for actors to distinguish themselves from others.

3) Images – Apart from including video and sound bits, images are still the most fundamental type of multimedia used in blogging (McQuarrie et al., 2013). Similarly, Philipp (technews) notes that, “if you want to publish high quality content, pictures are an integral part of it and needs to be as professional as the text.” Thus, images compliment an actor’s written content. Felix (curved) argues that actors are now distancing themselves from press pictures in order to be unique. Whilst improving the quality of a blog, it also gives their readership additional value by displaying the
device distinct from press-related pictures (Felix, curved). Below is an example of pictures that are embedded in product tests to give additional information – how it feels in the hand, the size in relation to other devices, or what the user interface or battery looks like.

Blog capture 6.7 – Example of product test related pictures (Felix, curved)

Philipp (technews) emphasizes the use of multimedia to provide additional information. He argues that images, videos or sound should be used to give additional value but not to repeat the same information. In addition to the actual writing process of the review, videos need to be produced, edited and images taken. Felix (technews) argues that this leads to a more complex task that needs to be deliberately planned and executed, particularly given the importance of being a first mover (see Section 5.3.3):

“When do we take pictures? Should we do photos first and then the video? What is important in this device? All these questions need to be figured out before I start an article. This means that apart from getting the device we will need to make sure that a video is being produced, edited and uploaded in time, the article is written and close up pictures are taken. If any of these tasks are not finished in time, it delays the publishing time for the whole article.”

Felix, curved

Felix gives some example questions (see above) that needed to be answered prior to a product review or news article being written. This includes a number of tasks that need to be finished at the same time, increasing the overall workload for the actor. As Felix (curved) argues, he is now a “writer, photographer, picture editor, media designer and video cutter all in one person.” According to Philipp (technews), skills are acquired through “learned by doing”. He reported that at the beginning he had no idea how to cut videos, “but you have to teach yourself to become better. It is a continuous learning curve.” Lutz (mobiwatch) goes even further by claiming that in
terms of blog development, to master and incorporate all these activities is a major success factor and selling point. The incorporation of multimedia could consequently influence the publishing cycle of an actor and possibly their content structures. As outlined in the product evaluation process (see Section 4.1.1), the actual product review may be split up due to the increased workload involved in incorporating multimedia.

Moreover, the inclusion of multimedia is transforming their behaviour as they adapt to becoming: 1) less information- and more entertainment-driven; and 2) in front of the camera actively presenting a product or service. In particular, in videos “the basis is to support the written information in the product test, but what is increasingly important is the entertainment factor” (Philipp, technews). Thus, the information transmitted is still fundamental, but videos give actors a variety of ways to present information. According to actors, videos are a distinguishing factor where they aim to make their video tests more entertaining to watch. In this context, Sascha (mobilegeeks) refers to himself as “techtainer”, an entertainer about tech. Felix (curved) adds that he presents the device and goes through its functionality, which is mostly unscripted and improvised and should make it a more authentic and interesting experience. The focus of the person presenting a device contrasts with most views on online communication (see Section 3.1.2.) as actors change from “hiding” behind their computer” (Lyon and Henderson, 2005) to actively participating in front of the camera.

A “narrative product review” is displayed above. Christof (tabtech) presents the device by explaining his experience with its use. The personal focus of these videos has been found to be closely related to the disclosure of an actor’s identity.

Blog capture 6.8 – Example of a hands-on video sequence (Christof, tabtech)
According to actors, their appearance in videos makes the review more authentic and personal. In the context of product tests, this enables the audience to see the product evaluation in the making. Previously, the actual evaluation of a review was altered and channelled in a written format, whereas with videos actors can now review a product by deploying a multiplicity of visual cues. However, the limitations of this have involved a wide critique of the credibility of an actor’s information. By including videos and images, actors can use hand gestures, they can emphasize different words similar to WOM communication. According to Lutz (mobiwatch), “it may be unfamiliar at the beginning, to see you in front of the camera”. Similarly, the majority of actors noted that they would not have imagined themselves in front of the camera when they first started their blog that is seen to influence their behaviour and blog appearance equally.

6.7 Blog appearance and functionality

Multimedia ought to be incorporated in order to offer additional information. A different aspect of multimedia usage is to make the design of a blog more appealing. Appealing pictures or videos on actors’ blogs is argued to increase blog quality. Similar to multimedia, increasing appearances on a blog has been found to be due to three main reasons: 1) to appear more professional and thus more credible; 2) to provide additional value to written blog content; and 3) to distance themselves and stand out in contrast to other actors or traditional actors such as journalists. Sascha (mobilegeeks) finds that “when you have enough experience with reviewing products, then obviously you are looking for other possibilities to increase the quality of your blog. For me personally, the design of a blog is a critical differentiator.” When looking at actors’ blogs, they have been found to differ widely from standard blog scripting packages. Although the background system may be similar, the design varies.
WordPress standard install

Shown above is a standard install template provided by WordPress. The majority of actors are using this script-packaged system, but with other templates that are developed by themselves or purchased they are able to change the appearance. In particular the main page has been the object of customisation. Articles are still organised in reverse order, a blog characteristic (Blood, 2002), but other parts of the blog format are dramatically different. Two examples are displayed – Fabien’s blog and Christof’s blog. Both blogs heavily incorporate images to make their blogs livelier. Therefore it may be argued that blog design is heavily influenced by actors’ willingness to incorporate multimedia, especially pictures.

Blog capture 6.9 – Examples of blog layout (Fabien, techstage and Christof, tabtech)
With regards to the blog format, both blogs provide an overview of the trending topics at the moment and: (1) display other articles in reversed time order (illustrated below); (2) An excerpt of these articles can be shown in a list as well as in a grid (see example left and right); (3) In addition on the side panel of the website, trending topics or hot key words have been incorporated. When comparing blog format and appearance over time, it has been found that platforms have been customised.

However, the blog format itself remains the same in that it confirms strategic decisions regarding content structures (see Section 6.2.2). Although the blog content may differ, the blog format sustains. According to Christof (tabtech), a complete redesign is mostly not viable; only modifications can be made after the main decisions in terms of article length and format have been made. Furthermore, an adaption of their website requires a lot of resources in terms of time and money, whereas actors need to systematically plan the development of their website. This affects the choice of the title, which consequently raises questions as they limit themselves in a certain way by standardising the format of their articles.

Thus, it could be argued, the blog format shapes the content format. In particular, with the incorporation of preview pictures, Fabien (techstage) claims that changing to a different blog format is difficult at later stages. He argues that “a standard is set with every design rollout; therefore each topic contains an image with a predefined solution and height-width ratio.” If the height or width ratio changes all existing articles need to be changed with an appropriate preview picture. It can be argued that a blog format shapes how a blog article is produced and how pictures are taken. This has been confirmed by actors who have had to determine a set of guidelines that takes into account the blog design. As shown with the development of Lars’ blog (allaboutsamsung), the blog format remains identical. His two main columns have the same width as before and the preview pictures above are, although larger, have the same height-width ratio. The difference is: 1) the increasing amount of pictures and; 2) the incorporation of blog logos due to technological advances.
Particularly, in Carsten’s (stadt-bremerhaven) example (Blog capture 6.13) it is evident that images are taking up half of the content section. Furthermore, he incorporates a self-designed logo with social networking sites links on the right. According to actors their logos have a “recognition value” (Fabien, techstage) or “act as a symbol of quality” (Christof, tabtech). An overview of differences in logos is displayed. It has to be noted that the name is a dominant factor within these logos and they align with the domain’s name (see Section 5.2.1). These logos are not only incorporated in their blog, they also appear in their videos, usually as an intro and outro (Blog capture 6.14) or as a watermark on the product images taken.
Apart from blog appearance, blog functionality is seen as a potential way to outrun competitors by constantly improving the website’s functions and widgets. According to Christof (tabtech), “a lot of effort is now put into the background system when trying to establish something new, to generate ideas and also discard some because the market is very competitive”. On the one hand, an implementation of further tools referred to as “plug-ins” increases functionality. According to actors, these tools improve the reading experience and as part of this allow users to give feedback and to engage further.

Christof (tabtech) argues that developing content structures is only one part of sorting content. He makes all his articles searchable and has implemented a variety of sorting functions. Hence, blogs are not only available in reverse chronological order as in most other blogs, they can be based on “most commented,” e.g. the articles with the most comments (see Fig. 6.14), or “trending,” e.g. articles with the most visits within a particular timeframe.

Felix (curved) also allows users to rate articles after they have read them. They display the feedback in correlation with a preview picture that ranges from “embarrassing!” to “awesome”. Although these ratings could have negative outcomes on the views of this article, Felix deliberately decided to not censor a bad rating, which aligns with findings from audience engagement (see Section 5.5.2)
In contrast to other platforms, actors have endless possibilities to enhance and customise the blog functionality and as a consequence the reading experience for readers. As a differentiating factor from other actors, blog functionality as well as appearance is used heavily. However, it not only needs to be strategically planned, it also requires additional skills and resources to make these alterations possible, as Christof (tabtech) has noted. He further argues that although content is still the predominant factor, the blog itself is constantly transforming. From a content development perspective, the blog as a channel has a fundamental influence on both content format and the information that is transmitted. Further alterations such as the incorporations of logos or further functionality have been found to appear at later stages once a certain quality of content is guaranteed, as Christof (tabtech) argues. This might be due to the relatively high costs involved when conducting further alterations.

6.8 Summary

On the basis of the two main types of WOM that have been identified – product news and product advice – this chapter has outlined the processes and activities involved in their development and content. In addition, acquired skills within these processes have also been reviewed. A schematic diagram of findings is provided below:
Overall, expertise has been found as a critical separator between development stages. Therefore, product news has been chosen as the first type of content as it involves strategic processes regarding information search. With increasing product knowledge, actors then include their opinion within product news to a greater extent. As a further example of expertise, product advice that incorporates further activities and skills that need to be developed in relation to blog development is provided to readers. In this context, three main types of activities have been identified:

**Personal development** – Activities that are based on authorship have been found in the transformation of product news. Actors thereby incorporate their opinion and only cite other sources when needed. It illustrates a more substantial focus on actors as a source of information rather than relying on other sources. This is further evidenced in the transformation of actors itself, pushing themselves to the foreground.
of their blog, a trait that is also visible in the construction of product reviews. At later stages additional blog content is added, revealing additional information about the actor that lowers the barriers to readers. On the other hand, by including multimedia actors are more vulnerable as they are in less control of what should be revealed and what should not.

**Technical activities** – Technical knowledge has been found to be critical from the start. Without acquiring technical skills in terms of setting up their blog, actors would not be able to start developing content. Furthermore, contemplating content with the production of their own images, incorporating multimedia as part of their technical activities has been found to be essential. In particular videos have had a major impact on content development as well as on actor behaviour. With regards to the limited social cues that have been a part of the critique of eWOM communication, videos and also blog appearances enable actors to appear more credible and closer to their audience.

**Social activities** – In contrast to Lyon and Henderson’s (2005) work, it has been shown here that actors’ further content development is influenced by social integration, firstly in terms of improved information sources in product news and more prominently in later stages, such as other forms of content. Interviews with experts and relationships with marketers are critical to sustaining their blog and to distinguish actors’ platforms from other blogs. In this vein, access to products and specialised events illustrate actors’ dependence on marketers. Based on the need for a further examination of social activities, particularly in relation to marketers, the next chapter explores the variety of interactions and the nature of relationships that are formed with actors.
Chapter 7  Network formation

7.1  Introduction

Research in either blogging or opinion leadership has been devoted to content development or social interaction. In relation to the latter, actors have been found to not only interact with their audience, but also with other actors or marketers as identified in Section 3.5.1. McQuarrie et al. (2013) have argued that once actors gain a sizeable audience, they gain access to the “inner system” consisting of vendor representatives (e.g. marketers, journalists and others).

This chapter aims to outline processes that occur when actors enter this inner system and explores how the emergence of actors influences this system. Building on Kozinets et al.’s (2010) network co-production model, the focus of this chapter is on the development of shared practices and relationships with identified members in the system such as marketers and journalists. A prominent role in Kozinets et al.’s (2010) model has been given to marketers as they directly influence actors. However, most studies identified (see Section 3.5.3) have been based on seeding campaigns and are limited to an empirical investigation of only one campaign over a short period of time. Hence, there is a need to explore how these relationships are formed and how sustainable they are. Furthermore, there is no study to date that illustrates how marketers choose actors for collaboration. In terms of networks between actors, it has been found in blog studies that a homogenous group is formed, often referred to as the blogosphere. Neglected to date is the way in which these relationships are shaped and how these practices are established. By providing further insight into the places to network, it will be illustrated how and who forms these groups.
The related literature (see Section 3.5) is used to organise the main themes, starting with this chapter’s Section 2, which reviews the initial contact with other actors in order to gain advantage. Section 3 focuses on the type of networks involving marketers from both perspectives. As actors enter and adjust to traditional members in the ecosystem, the relationship between actors and journalists online will be compared in Section 4. Last, places to network will be explored further to provide insight into the formation of groups between actors, and between actors and marketers.

### 7.2 Networks with other actors

Relationships with other actors are a fundamental part of an actor’s social interaction. At the initial stages of blog development it became apparent that actors are trying to connect with more established actors (see Section 6.2). An initial touch point has been discovered by observing more established blogs. By observing what others do, actors are able to get an overview of the possibilities of a blog in terms of functionality and content. Thus, Sascha (mobilegeeks) argues that imitation of other blogs has been a potential route to acquire skills and learn. Actors in the first months of blog development try to imitate other blogs and their practices. He further elaborated on the importance of approaching other actors in addition to observations:

> “Ask yourself: What do they do? What can I do? What can I learn from this? Talk with them. One can also contact them and ask, ‘Look at my blog. What do you think?’ I personally think this is a great opportunity and you should make use of this.”

Sascha, mobilegeeks

Sascha (mobilegeeks) actively encourages less experienced actors to approach him or other actors to get advice. As he has been through the same stages and painful experiences, e.g. “when nobody reads your blog”, he is keen to connect with them.

#### 7.2.1 Advantages of connecting with actors

Similarly Carsten (stadt-bremerhaven) has argued that connecting with established actors is beneficial at the initial stages. Engagement and information exchange with
established actors enables less-experienced actors to ask about further development and to receive advice where needed. The advice proffered covers writing style to feedback about the blog format. Often advice is needed when it comes to the backend of their blog as Jan (tablethype) has noted. Another question often raised is the publication cycle required to attract an audience (Section 5.2.2), and moreover what type of content (Section 6.2.2) to focus on is heavily influenced by advice from more established actors.

**Sharing experiences to allow comparisons** – Although blogs and their development might differ, actors can draw on experiences from other actors when it comes to decisions at specific stages of blog development such as the choice to blog full-time (see Section 5.6.1). Philipp (technews) has argued that blog success measurement is often beneficial to compare with other actors. He found it increasingly difficult to know in terms of audience construction if he is doing well given the amount of time his blog has been online. Thus, he shares site statistics with other actors who have developed their blog over longer periods of time:

“I asked Jan [tablethype] as his blog is six months older than mine and compared his traffic to mine. That was great timing as now he has a lot of contact with marketers. So, if I have similar page views in a few months it is also time for me to engage more with them.”

*Philipp, technews*

He further stated that in contacting marketers, sharing experiences is very useful. Fabien (techstage) highlights that the problem at the beginning is that you don’t even know who to talk to and who is responsible. Therefore, establishing connections with actors are seen as essential to developing links with marketers. Furthermore, Daniel (tblt) has claimed that without other actors, he would not be able to get invites for first events. He has found that actors’ relationships are established far sooner which can help actors to connect with marketers before they achieve a sizeable audience:

“*With HTC, I knew another blogger who had good contacts with HTC and then it worked well as he introduced me to the relevant person and gave a recommendation. So either you get to know someone who knows someone at a vendor or you establish contact on events or expos.*”

*Daniil, tblt*

These introductions or recommendations have been found to be particularly helpful when actors have not attracted a large following and consequently are less interesting.
for marketers. Although actors are able to contact a marketer directly through email and ask for devices or conference invites, chances are low if you don’t know anyone or haven’t attracted a sizeable audience yet, as Philipp (technews) notes. He argues that in most cases when you approach them they reply with the same answer, e.g. “We currently don’t have any devices, but we will contact you as soon as devices become available.”

**They help to construct audiences** – As a vital form of support, experienced actors are not only able to recommend actors to marketers. They can also recommend actors to their readers, thus making a wider audience aware of them. To support new and upcoming actors, established actors link to other actors’ blogs or devote a separate blog post as an introduction. In addition to the recognition and prestige that may be a part of being mentioned, it has also been found to be a key driver in attracting new readers at the early stages, as Jan (tablethype) argues:

"Due to my guest blogger activity I already knew a few of them: Sascha from Mobilegeeks, who has supported me from the beginning. Carsten from Stadt-bremerhaven linked to me very often. The best thing was that I got my own article on Mobilegeeks, where they advertised for my site, and if Sascha recommends my blog it honours me a lot and of course it means that on this day there was extremely high traffic."

Jan, tablethype

It is arguable that less established actors are able to access a potential readership to attract them to their blog. Moreover, if established actors recommend other actors, they may be perceived as more trustworthy. Another means of recommending or appreciating other actors’ work is by quoting their articles as a source in their post. Some actors think that quoting others – or “back-linking” as they refer to it – is a form of legitimisation that can be very beneficial when it comes to further readership acquisition. Back-linking improves visibility and the credibility of actors as Jan (tablethype) has explained. This is also appreciated by search engines as the number of backlinks to a blog increases the latter’s visibility. Therefore, if a blog is linked by other sites, they rank higher in search results. Jan (tablethype) argues that “getting back linked from established actors can push my article from page five of Google search results to page one which multiplies my traffic” (see Section 5.2.2).
7.2.2 Type of relationship

According to actors, the desire to connect with other actors is predominantly driven by the desire to get advice in the first months. To learn from the experience of established actors has been found to be beneficial, as Philipp (technews) has noted. However, actors also establish relationships based on their shared interests such as developing their blog or consumer electronics. A critical role has been given to the type of interaction that is both mediated online and offline (see Section 7.5). As Jan (tablethype) explains, “on a first instance you add them to your social networking channels and may ask questions or exchange information, but most friendships that I have now evolved through conferences.” Similarly, Christof (tabtech) claims that offline communication changes the form of the relationship:

“There were a few people who have had the same topic: Me, Tabletblog.de and Tabletcommunity, with whom I have always maintained contact and written back and forth. But the first time where we got to know each other better was at the first conference. That was the CES in Las Vegas. From then on we had more contact.”

Christof, tabtech

Consequently, it may be argued that a group is formed based on shared interests. Philipp (technews), similar to other actors, has noted that their interest can be summarised as, “We all have the same passion, to bring consumer electronics to the consumer.” These relationships are important to them as they are instances where they can talk about this passion. Daniil (tblt) highlights that even though they only see each other infrequently at conferences or other events, they always have something to talk about. Similarly, Lars (allaboutsamsung) argues that on Twitter for example, there is a group of actors that follow each other. He further notes that it evolved into a “relatively large, reasonably homogeneous group.” Not all of them are bloggers; some refer to themselves as running platforms or online magazines. In particular as there are specialisations within consumer electronics (e.g. type or brand specific) and writing styles differ widely, it is hard to distinguish between them. This might be a potential reasoning for a non-existent hierarchy according to the actors. There are arguably more experienced actors: “more established” and “less established actors” are frequently mentioned. However, they claim that within this group, there are no clear leaders. This is partly reasoned by the fact that due to
different niches and writing styles, they are not directly competing with each other, as Jan (tablethype) has outlined.

Cooperation or competition? – This study’s findings illustrate that although they respect advice given by more established actors, actors are still trying to distinguish themselves. For instance, Philipp (technews) argues that an informal writing style makes him different to others, while “it does not help if I get advice to build another blog X, I want to be different than other blogs.” This mainly includes the niche they want to write about and their writing style (see Section 6.2.2). In particular, the importance of distinctness as Philipp (technews) outlined, may indicate a progression from imitating more established blogs and exploring and developing their own practices. Further evidence of this is cited by established actors, namely that sometimes they are bombarded with requests. As Carsten (stadt-bremerhaven) has noted, “Some people bombard me with questions and want to do everything meticulously. But as with most things in life there is no right or wrong.” He found that he is not able to guide another actor through his blog development as there is no career path for being an actor. According to him, he focuses on two things when giving advice. First, to find a niche they are familiar with and more importantly is not to be over-competitive: “If you are the 1,001st iPhone blogger then it will become very difficult to be successful.” The second piece of advice is to “find your writing style and just start to write” (Carsten, stadt-bremerhaven). Thus, the form of support may be limited to experiences from established actors from where comparisons can be drawn.

Thus, it is argued that actors can sustain close relationships with each other as the benefits dominate. Felix (curved) confirms that every actor has a different target audience, thus they do not take readers away from each other. He further claims that, based on his niche, he is competing with a traditional online magazine. According to Jan (tablethype), he also finds that the market is big enough and readers tend usually to read more than one blog:

“There are plenty of readers, there is enough space for everyone. And it's not like a reader will read just me or read Sascha’s blog. They usually read both as someone might want to look for several opinions if he wants to buy a device.”

Jan, tablethype
The type of relationship has been found to be very close, although some actors distance themselves from the actor group. Findings illustrate that this is based on a desire to keep a professional distance. Christian (inside-handy) outlines that although relationships with other actors are fruitful and necessary, he doesn’t like to be too close. Thus, some actors keep their relationships formal. Actors try to establish and clarify their own practices on their blog to distance themselves from others.

7.2.3 Shared practices

However, it has been found that to some extent shared practices are formed by the actor group. Carsten (stadt-bremerhaven) provides an explanation of how practices are established. He argues that modes of working have become established that are not formalised as such, but constitute a space where some actions are accepted and others not. If actors are not behaving according to these practices, they risk other actors distancing themselves from them. It has been found that two main modes have been found where actors are expected to act accordingly:

**Transparency in terms of funding** – The importance of transparency has been mentioned mostly in relation to marketer relations. As explained previously, a relationship between actors and marketers can be beneficial for both parties. Readers fear that the increasing engagement with marketers will influence actors’ evaluation of product news and their reviews (see Section 5.5.2). Similarly, actors do not want to lose their reputation as a group and thus want to maintain their autonomy. Actors such as Alexander (iphoneblog) emphasize that marketer relations do not affect their blog content where being transparent is a key mechanism. If cooperation is not mentioned or labelled as such, it becomes more problematic. For this reason Sascha (mobilegeeks) as well as Fabien (techstage) published a separate page on their blog where they list all forms of the support they receive from companies. Sascha (mobilegeeks) claims on this site that “Mobilegeeks is not only a professional but also a commercial tech-blog achieved through advertising and affiliations. In addition, we are invited by partners to various events which we openly communicate to readers.”
Blog Capture 7.1 is an excerpt of the funding displayed on Sascha’s (mobilegeeks) blog which is intended to provide a higher level of transparency according to him. He further found that other legitimate reporting modes like this have been negotiated with marketers. These may include: lending devices; getting paid for travel expenses; and receiving goods for raffles.

| This site is geared towards transparency and gives an overview to all donations of our sponsors: |
| November 2014 |
| - Flight and accommodation AMG GT and # mbtr14 Event Sascha Pallenberg for |
| - Canon PowerShot G1 X Mark II Canon permanent loan by Germany |
| October 2014 |
| - Flights and accommodation for Sascha Pallenberg Qualcomm 4K |
| - Flight and accommodation Mercedes B-Class Event for Sascha Pallenberg |
| - Flights and accommodation for Sascha Pallenberg OPPO Event |
| September 2014 |
| - Flight and accommodation by Intel IDF 2014 available |
| - Accommodation by Qualcomm Uplinq Sascha Pallenberg and 2014 |
| - Flight by Mazda for Markus Sekulla at IFA Berlin |
| June 2014 |
| - Flight and accommodation by Audi Le Mans 24 |
| - Accommodation and Flight by Audi 24 Sascha Pallenberg Nuerburgring |
| - Flight and accommodation by Samsung Samsung SSD for |

Blog capture 7.1 – Excerpt of sponsor/funding page (Sascha, mobilegeeks)

Although it seems that common practices have begun to be established, in particular less established actors are often approached by marketers to place articles on their blog, in other words functioning as unlabelled advertising. As Alexander (iphoneblog) elaborates:

“I can of course understand if you invest so much time in good research, you want to be rewarded for it, be it monetary or other forms. But the mistake is to just jump on the first offers, because the first offers are usually the worst you will get. Like ‘We send you an article, publish it but do not write that it’s sponsored.’ Those are really the black sheep.”

Alexander, iphoneblog

As Alexander (iphoneblog) explains, not labelling any kind of cooperation in terms of content as such resulting in sponsored posts or product placement are not accepted by the actor group. It may be assumed that a reputation among readers that has been
built over years and is perceived as credible can be easily damaged. He explains the case of an actor that incorporated product placement within his videos. After readers found out, there was an outcry about the autonomy of actors. However, Sascha (mobilegeeks) noted that readers would not read a particular blog anymore, but other actors or marketers are more critical:

*Sascha, mobilegeeks: “Of course there are a few who cheat. Check out the product placement scandal of [actor x]. The guys are so down now. Not only because of their readers. Most readers may have forgotten about it in a few months. But all fellow bloggers, marketers and media outlets will never corporate with them again. They dug their own grave.”

*Researcher: “Is it the whole actor group that then suffers?”

*Sascha, mobilegeeks: “That is the issue! We have to fight really hard to be perceived as credible. Everyone that is misbehaving like this, it’s like a stab in the back. A kin liability should not take place. I would never do what they did. For me this is fraud and my view of reporting has nothing to do with it.”

He argues that if other actors are dishonest, it would directly affect him, other actors and marketers. Sascha then emphasises that the misbehaviour of actors directly influences the whole group. Marketers would limit their willingness to cooperate with certain actors in general and readers might think that actors overall are not credible any longer and thus stop reading their blogs. As there are fewer regulations as in traditional occupations such as journalism, actors have been found to strictly align to standards of transparency in order to sustain their blog. As Hall (marketer) clarifies, in contrast to journalists, actors observe each other carefully. If an incident happens, they do not tolerate it in their group.

**Transparency in terms of information sources** – To further strengthen these practices within the group, transparency in terms of information sources, i.e. the failure to acknowledge work from other actors, has been found to be equally important. Similar to journalistic practices, actors raise the importance of citing others if information is retrieved from them or their blog. On the one hand, it helps to professionalise the group and to converge with journalistic standards. On the other hand, it appreciates that the information exchange takes place within the group. As Sascha (mobilegeeks) highlights, a large element of being in this community involves actively engaging with other actors, commenting on their blogs and encouraging open information exchange. However, if actors restrain from citing
other people, it would be seen as “stealing from others” as Alexander (iphoneblog) has argued. Philipp (technews) adds that they do not want to become an envious group. He claims that, “even if the area is very competitive it doesn’t mean you can’t grow if you align with the rules. Of course I want to become bigger than Carsten, but that doesn’t mean I am not citing his articles if I am using them.” If actors fail to acknowledge the work of other actors by not citing them, they are not considered as being part of the formed group any longer:

“It goes one in one with someone's personality, if you follow certain rules, which is a matter of attitude. The people who do not stick to it, which are thankfully not so many, at least in our industry, one personally has not so much to do with them and they are not welcome by others. The word gets around very quickly between us. If you do not acknowledge our work and behave yourself, it reflects that you don’t want to be a part of this group.”

Christof, tabtech

In summary, it has been found that actors choose who is a member of their group. This group hereby is regulated by their members and influences each actor. As being part of this community comes with key benefits, actors need to align with group practices in order to be accepted. On the other hand, these practices are useful for less established actors to guide them and in order to find out what is accepted and what isn’t. As Sascha (mobilegeeks) emphasises, this group is responsible for developing certain guidelines and setting boundaries that enables easier communication with their readership and marketers as it establishes working patterns and formalises cooperation.

7.2.4 Reinforcement of practices

The findings outlined here emphasise the importance of transparency, such as quoting one another. If actors fail to quote others, non-cited actors will refrain from reading or referencing non-quoting individuals in future. Thus, it can be reasoned that there an active reinforcement of practices where confirmative behaviour helps to distinguish credible blogs from others. If actors are not conforming to these practices, they will have no information exchange with other actors, thereby readers may develop doubts about their trustworthiness. Shared practices also apply to their readership as group conformity has been found to be a positive indicator for
credibility, which results in a closeness between actors and their readership. The findings illustrate that self-regulation appears to be observed to some extent.

**Support for confirmative behaviour** – Christof (tabtech) emphasises that particularly bigger, more established actors need to act as a ‘role model’. If an actor is standing up for group ethics, it is has been shown that others actors will also show support. One example cited by Sascha (mobilegeeks) relates to an actor who openly critiqued Apple’s device strategy and was not invited to any further event. He and others stood up for him and wrote an article about the incident as a sign of their appreciation. Furthermore, Sascha (mobilegeeks) publicly noted that “Good that [blog] positioned himself here. That might have been his last invitation to an Apple event, but who cares? I have so far survived without any iPhone event but can critique them openly and honestly when needed.” Sascha (mobilegeeks) found that this form of public positioning is required to become established among other actors. As he notes, “If they want us to become more respected, then we need to act according to a certain set of rules”. In a similar way Carsten (stadt-bremerhaven) is requesting other actors to take a similar stance.

**Public critique by non-confirmative actors** – Another attempt to reinforce transparency between actors has been found where actors publicly critique another blog for being too dependent on a certain manufacturer. Christof (tabtech) argues that some blogs willingly give up their independence to cooperate with manufacturers to gain better access to certain companies. In particular he noted that when marketers recognise the value of marketing through blogs, they start offering funding from the early stages of a blog. Sascha (mobilegeeks) explains that with further funding it is easier to grow faster. He assumes that with increased access or funding some development stages could be tackled much quicker:

“But what I think is that it is still tougher than the fact that iPhone 6 reviews are becoming much poorer in terms of the mass media, is that fewer blogs are invited to test them. Coincidentally, the hidden corporate blog [name] was invited to travel to Cupertino to test the new iPhones. What was that again about dependencies?”

*Sascha, mobilegeeks (taken from blog post)*
It is therefore argued that a minority of actors might use a close relationship to get further access, while also claiming that they are still an independent source of information (see Section 7.3.4). However, further access enables them to produce higher quality content according to them, which is appreciated by marketers.

**A grey area of transformative practices** – Controversies like these exemplify that practices are a current debate and are constantly evolving and transforming. Actors have developed their own ethics codes and if practices are not followed the consequences are not fully known. Thus, it can be argued that these shared practices might not sustain or are in current transformation. In particular with the increasing influence and power of marketers to support blogs, their independence is open to question. Felix (curved) also argues that the topic area, e.g. consumer electronics, is becoming more and more competitive. He outlines that even traditional actors try to adapt to the writing style and practices of other actors to reach a different audience. As a consequence, Felix (curved) notes that established actors feel threatened and critique others, not only to protect their practices and ethics. He found that some actors are using their power within the actor group to exclude other actors who could be a potential threat to them. Actors with a rapidly growing readership are a particular focus. If they would benefit from external funding, they would need to critique him, as otherwise they would out-compete other actors. Thus, most actors in this study appraise others’ closeness with marketers.

### 7.3 Networks with marketers

The relationship between actors and marketers becomes more essential during the development of an actor’s blog, as marketers are a vital source of information and resources. Actors are not interacting with the whole firm – in some cases just persons from a manufacturer’s public relations or marketing department. However, more and more common are specialist occupations that communicate with actors, as Freisel (marketer) has argued:
"I have had my first contact points with online and social media more or less in the area of marketing. The whole thing was still quite small, about 2008. We started to build relations with big online media at the beginning. The Americans were at that time very much further advanced. And since IBM is international, we then adjusted and specialized in online communications and as part of it in influencer strategy development."

Freisel (marketer)

Freisel (marketer), for instance, is responsible for influencer strategy development in a variety of areas with a focus on consumer electronics. The firm she is working with represents and consults with manufacturers such as IBM, Apple and Samsung. As she argues, it has been found that due to the emergence of actors, internal marketing departments adjust to the increased demand by creating new professions themselves. They refer to themselves as ‘influencers’ or ‘blogger relations managers’. Thus, in this study we refer to marketers as either spokespersons of manufacturers or specialists (influencer relations) who interact with actors. Another distinction is also made between marketers and vendors who compensate for banner or affiliate advertising (see Section 5.5.1).

7.3.1 Why actors cooperate with marketers

The first instance where actors seek an engagement with marketers is to add further value to their blog. Actors argue that marketers can provide information and resources, which enables them to publish new content and consequently attract new readers. As actors’ personal capabilities in terms of information sources and funding are limited, they expect to gain competitive advantage over other blogs. Thus it has been ascertained that actors try to utilise marketers for further content creation purposes.

Marketers can loan devices and accessories – An essential part of an actor’s activities is to evaluate devices, which is a way to create unique content. Actors have found different ways to test devices, whereas the acquisitions of devices becomes more costly and less resource efficient. Each device that needs to be bought specifically for a test and then sold later on, makes a loss of at least 50 Euros per device according to Philipp (technews). Hence, marketers are able to provide devices such as smartphones or tablets. If not agreed otherwise, devices are lent by marketers.
to actors for a period of two weeks. In addition, accessories around devices such as headphones, sound systems, etc. are lent by retailers. Despite being more cost efficient, marketers are able to lend devices before they appear on sale. Hence it is argued that cooperating with marketers could provide a competitive advantage as actors could publish reviews in a timelier manner (see Section 6.5.1). Lutz (mobiwatch) raises the importance of timing in order to appear more prominent on search engines and to be more attractive for one’s readership:

“I realize that through my own channels that timing is key. You can say that it represents a factor of 10 if I am able to publish a review in a timely manner. It makes the difference between 1,000 or 10,000 clicks. And the faster I get the device, the faster I am able to review it.”

Lutz, mobiwatch

As loaned devices are limited, there is a high congestion in terms of who should get devices first. Actors indicate in their relationship that if their relations are closer with marketers, the chances to receive devices earlier can be higher. Otherwise actors need to wait until the first batch of devices has been returned after two weeks. The timing of returns has been found to be very structured as loan agreements are handed out with the device. Usually devices need to be returned within an agreed period of time. In some rare cases, however, devices can be kept. A possible reason is based on the price of the product, as Hall (marketer) argues. With regards to accessories such as headphones, actors can keep them as postage costs raises the price of the product. Another motive is when marketers provide devices for raffles. Raffles in this context are competitions where actors’ readers are able to win a certain device. Beneficial both for actors and marketers, it provides high visibility and a major push in terms of temporary page traffic. For instance, a retailer supported Christof (tabtech) with his raffle to celebrate his blog’s third anniversary (see Blog capture 7.2). A clear benefit for the company is the increased visibility of their products and product information. In the example of Christof (tabtech), to ensure the marketer’s visibility, he agreed to mention their social media channels.
Marketeters can provide further information – Despite supporting actors with devices, marketers are able to provide further information about devices. Marketers can utilise internal resources and try to answer them as Rolten (marketer) has noted. Establishing a relationship with marketers is vital to confirm rumours or to receive product information earlier. These can be sent to actors via email. In most cases questions concern new products that are scheduled to roll out and their market information, but also relates to the overall strategy of the particular company as Lars (allaboutsamsung) argues. As part of this information, marketers could arrange interviews with employers in a specific department that might provide further insights. Another way to get additional information about main products is by attending events such as product introductions organised by marketers or conferences such as the Consumer Electronics Show (CES) held annually in Las Vegas. These are essential to actors for several reasons: Products are usually introduced prior to the roll out where actors can have a first hands-on experience. The device itself is elaborated in detail and actors are able to ask direct questions of marketers. In addition, events are one of the rare opportunities to talk to marketers in person and foster relationships.

As raised by actors, the opportunity to engage with marketers face-to-face is important in order to develop relationships. It has been underlined that the relationship with marketers may start through online communication, but is difficult
Network formation to be as personal compared to face-to-face interaction. In this context, Lars claims that he was in steady email contact with people from Samsung, but after seeing them and having a drink with them, this eased the form of communication and altered the relationship. Likewise, Jan explained that after seeing them in person, it was easier to exchange personal contacts and there was less hesitation to contact them. Moreover, it gives actors the opportunity to see a face and the person behind an international company. As Schmidt (marketer) argues, actors are often intimidated by the size of the manufacturer or retailer. Hence a direct connection with one person helps to overcome this fear and allows the relationship to proceed at a more informal level. Thus, there is an indication of the importance of both offline and online communication (see Section 7.5)

Marketers can provide further funding – Factors such as access to information underlines the importance for actors to be part of such events. Nevertheless, travel and accommodation are very costly. In some cases it has been found that marketers fund actors to participate in events. They reimburse actors for travel and accommodation. In particular, for overseas events such as the CES in Las Vegas further funding is needed, as Christof (tabtech) has noted. He has also raised the importance of marketers’ support, as otherwise he wouldn’t be able to attend. However, Jan (tablethype) has found that marketers are very selective in terms of funding. This could be reasoned because, in comparison to access or lending devices, the costs are higher. Moreover, the cooperation has been found to be less structured and formalised. From another perspective, the return on investment from a marketer’s perspective is less transparent.

7.3.2 Why marketers cooperate with actors

Actors publish product news or advice on a day to day basis on their blogs. These posts are read and shared by their readers and featured in other blogs. These characteristics are critical factors in order to rank highly on search engines as they value the number of page updates and backlinks, e.g. shares and referrals as Luca (2blog) has outlined. In comparison, traditional company websites have difficulties achieving the same visibility on Google according to Rolten (marketer). As corporate
content is rather static and less shared, they appear less often, especially in news or image searches. As part of keyword placement, marketers can utilise the visibility of actors’ blogs to further promote their products and make them visible to a wider audience through search engines such as Google and an actor’s readership base. A particularly noteworthy distinction is illustrated in the Appendix:

“Our aim is to place a certain subject, increase the overall reach, and to exploit a new target audience for a certain product. We now rarely engage in blogger relations that are isolated from other projects. It is a part of an online strategy where we look for opportunities to communicate with multipliers apart from traditional media.”

Freisel, marketer

Actors enable access to a new audience – As Freisel (marketer) argues, a general interest of marketers is to exploit new audiences that would be difficult to do on their own. As actors have built up a certain audience over the years, thereby establishing their blog, their reviews and opinions are regularly read by a large number of people. In order to have an impact on a certain audience, the blogs targeted are required to have a certain audience size as Hall (marketer) elaborates. Marketers thus distinguish between blog reach and social reach. Blog reach in this context refers to visits and page views per month, whereas social reach incorporates followers from all social networking channels (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, etc.). The latter can be obtained easily from their channels; however, blog traffic is more complex as it is not publicly visible. Marketers in our study thereby obtained information from the “Information Community for the Assessment of the Circulation of Media” (IVW). IVW certifies website traffic and makes them public for marketers (see excerpt below). If not available, site analytics tools such as Alexa are utilised to estimate blog traffic.

Actors enable access to a relevant audience – When looking at the website traffic below as provided by the IVW it can be seen that Carsten has not only a major audience size (1,873,954 page impressions in May 2014), his audience is also very concentrated (1,059,922 specifically about consumer electronics). In contrast to traditional media where readers are quite diverse, actors have narrowed their readership based on their clear focus on consumer electronics. Not all actors in this study have an audience size as large as Carsten (stadt-bremerhaven). However, all have been found to be similarly relevant (in percentage terms).
Hall (marketer) argues that blogs offer a unique opportunity. She further clarifies that her interest not only concerns reach, relevance is an equally important factor. Opposing the hypothesis that more readers equal more conversions, it is argued that a very homogenous and dense readership is more favourable. Sascha (mobilegeeks) uses the term ‘conversion’ as a metric of relevance which he sees as more important than traffic:

“It always depends on the industry. But you have to get away from the idea of reach. People still simply believe that a lot of readers helps a lot. However, conversion is much more important, e.g. how many people are actually interested in the product that is reviewed. I can write a blog with 200,000 visitors a day, which corresponds to a great range, but if it does not convert, it does nothing. Think of a blog with 200 visitors a day that focuses precisely on a certain niche like a luxury car blogger. If only one of these 200 buys a car, then you have converted.”

Sascha, mobilegeeks
This has found that the number of people talking about technology is quite high whereas the reach of blogs differs wildly. Therefore the relevance of this specific sector has been the subject of much debate. Rolten (marketer) adds that as products are developed for a mass market there is a need to attract a mass market but the niche also plays an important role in the consumer electronics sector.

**Blog attractiveness through distinct types of format** – As part of these marketing strategies, Rolten (marketer) argues that their relevance is also mirrored in terms of the audience they (marketers) want to target. A critical part of his strategy is to reach a target audience for the product, an audience which should be interested in consumer electronics, in his case students. Rolten (marketer) elaborates that, apart from the audience size, the usage and evaluation varies dramatically between actors. Therefore, he is interested in a blog that is less technical but that outlines the functions, particularly within a certain age range:

> “Our specific goal with this online strategy was to make our products more appealing for students. Of course the focus on students for me did not work, because it is fluid. They use the device privately as well. Hence, we were looking at a certain age range that we wanted to target. This must not be an IT expert in any way. We wanted to aim at the average student that has an interest in consumer electronics to use for his studies and leisure time.”

*Rolten, marketer*

It may be argued that blog attractiveness in this context is assessed in a very qualitative way. Companies form their objectives and analyse blogs based on these criteria. Styles of writing or the overall appearance of blogs may be indicators of the age range and interest of their readership. Moreover, the actor himself is being assessed, as it is assumed that actor and audience demographics are homogenous, e.g. if an actor is still a student, he may be more appealing to other students. Alongside this, the qualitative measures of relevance and quantitative measures of reach raises questions regarding how marketers evaluate and assess these metrics. Freisel (marketer) explains that the potential synergy between both qualitative and quantitative measures is useful to assess how beneficial a potential actor would be for cooperation:
“We have put a lot of effort into how to determine the value or relevance of a blog and we have found different metrics that worked for us, namely the classic blog metrics such as PageRank and site traffic. Then we also incorporated indicators of how well networked someone is in social media, where we look at how many subscribers they have on YouTube, etc.

Freisel, marketer

Quantitative measures consist of blog and social reach respectively, as well as the size of their community base (# of comments on blog, # of backlinks). Metrics gathered from social networking sites such as YouTube subscribers or Twitter followers can be obtained in order to verify blog reach. In particular, as marketers want to diffuse information about their products to a wide audience, social networking site metrics become increasingly important as Schmidt (marketer), has highlighted. Building on quantitative metrics such as traffic and social media data, marketers are able to identify the nature of a blog’s audience. Therefore, a consistent audience is desired according to Rolten (marketer), as it displays evidence of reliable and consistent work. “When building relationships, it is necessary to look for someone that blogs regularly and with a certain quality”, Freisel (marketer) clarifies. It can be further argued that a loyal readership base is not only an indicator for credibility for their readers but also for marketers:

“Then we have a third aspect that is very qualitative. We look at what the blog looks like, how relevant the topics are for us and how often or how he writes overall. If he only writes once a month it is also negative. Then we form our ranking based on these metrics and create a list of potential partners.”

Mistel, marketer

Apart from audience type and publication cycle, additional qualitative measures are considered. Prominent in findings has been the importance of blog appearance and writing style. They provide further insight into the actor’s audience type and give a further indication of how professionally an actor operates. Backed by Hall (marketer) and although measured quantitatively, qualitative attributes such as good content and reliant work over a period of time and minimises cooperation risks.
7.3.3 Forming a relationship

The incorporation of credibility measures and quality can be seen as indicators in that marketers aim to establish a more sustainable cooperation with actors. Moreover, actors are often referred to as partners, which could be due to the desire of marketers to form a relationship. Similarly, as identified previously, actors seek a relationship with marketers. However, the type of communication from a marketer’s perspective is seen as different to that with traditional occupations such as journalists. Moreover, actors have no experience in interacting with marketers at the beginning. Hence, the relationship is formed and negotiated over time.

**Authentic actors or positive WOM** – Although it is known that marketers want to gain access to a concentrated and relevant audience, it could be understood that they want devices and their clients represented in the best possible way. However, if loaned devices perform badly in a review, actors claim that they need to warn their readers. Consequently, a prominent dispute whilst forming this relationship has been witnessed between an actors’ authenticity vs. positive WOM. As Philipp (technews) highlights, there is a risk involved as manufacturers are not used to having actors write against “the enabler” of the actual review. However, he further notes that “this risk has to be taken, simply because if you start to bend yourself, you have already lost. Before I start to modify my honest and direct way of writing just to please manufacturers, I’d rather give up blogging straight away.” Although there is a clear risk of harming their relationship with marketers, actors insist that they have an obligation to their readership to evaluate the device in an honest way. On the one hand they are seen to increase product awareness for marketers, but on the other they are spokespersons for their audiences, hence both marketers and actors need to find a way that works for both of them.

If devices are evaluated critically, albeit factually justified, it has been found that marketers tolerate critical reviews and do not intervene. Furthermore, Lars (allaboutsamsung) has noted that there is no completely bad review as most devices have a certain position in the market, as they are in fact good devices. However, if there is a critical evaluation, actors are open to providing further feedback and justification to the marketer directly. Schmidt (marketer) argues that as long as there
is a fair evaluation, there is no dispute. Although companies appreciate positive product advice, findings indicate that authenticity as such is critical for marketers despite the importance of positive reviews. Marketers, therefore, are not only utilising their relationship to exploit new audiences, they also use reviews as a social listening tool as Rolten (marketer) states. As marketers are able to obtain feedback from a critical audience, it allows them to get qualitative feedback that can be valuable for future marketing strategies. If he wanted an advertisement, they would have opted for a different strategy. Thus, it seems that marketers have learned to accept critical reviews and apply strategies for dealing with their consequences. Freisel (marketer) argues that actors stand by their opinion which can also be positive. If a device is being reviewed positively, actors similarly defend their evaluations and can create a positive image towards a device.

**Unformulated cooperation** – Potential disputes are partly reasoned by the fact that there is no formalised agreement as such. Although the process of lending devices itself is formal and structured, the return from a marketer’s perspective is less known as iterated. The main output when cooperating with actors is blog content and an increased visibility to the targeted audience. In particular, the opinionated form of evaluation is more uncertain for marketers compared to journalists. Similarly, with more cost intensive collaborations such as invitation to events or further funding, there are no written agreements. Philipp (technews) has elaborated that the funding received from marketers could be up to 10,000 Euro including flights and accommodation for the actor and some of his colleagues:

> “When Sascha [mobilegeeks] travels to Las Vegas for the CES with his team it easily costs around 10,000 Euro altogether. This time a big CE company paid for him. You can read it on his blog as he always makes these figures available. But I do not know if people really want to swap with him, because for the people working there, it’s madness. Everyone believes they fly there for a vacation, but it’s actually hard work.”

*Philipp, technews*

In addition, Philipp (technews) raised the issue of the portrayal of this cooperation for their readership. Readers don’t see the return for companies and hence argue that marketers pay actors for a free vacation. These accusations can have a negative impact on both marketers and actors. Therefore actors need to make clear the reason
for the support proffered, e.g. the opportunity to give their readership improved and more timely content. From an actor’s perspective, practices that have been established between actors provide a level of support in this relationship. Thereby, a public display of an actor’s ethics in relation to the funding they receive has been found to be the most prominent mechanism to display independence (see Section 7.2.3). However, from a marketer’s perspective, there are fewer ways of clarifying this. Mistel (marketer) puts it into perspective when she mentions that disputes between marketers and actors rarely occur.

**Leverage as a form of security** – Mistel (marketer) further notes that if there is a clear disagreement that is not justified, they terminate the cooperation. Freisel (marketer) cites a dispute at a conference where the actor is not being invited for future events:

> “It happens rarely, but then the person is simply not invited the next time. Of course we try to find out what the reason is. It is also legitimate, as some are even in stress especially with conferences that they mention to us two or three weeks afterwards. But with most bloggers we corporate with, we know that they give us credit and make a good story out of it.”

*Freisel, marketer*

Exclusion from further events can be used as leverage according to Freisel (marketer). As Lars (allaboutsamsung) argues, in this competitive market, actors would not be able to sustain their work if they were restraining from all marketer relations. In particular marketers from manufacturers with a large market share use their power to include or exclude actors from access. This has been further confirmed in relation to networking locations (see Section 7.5). On the other hand, if the product that is being marketed is a niche product, marketers need to specifically engage with targeted actors. One example is given by Philipp (technews) where he has been contacted to review a robot hover. He claimed that without the marketer, this product wouldn’t have come to his attention but it received good feedback from his readers. Due to the different levels of power it can be argued that they have a direct influence on the type of relationship between actors and marketers. In other words, it is important if a marketer is representing a product with a high or low market share or if an actor has established a small or large audience in terms of forming a relationship.
7.3.4 Type of relationship

The aim of forming a relationship has been found to be an additional mechanism to reduce the risk of negative WOM from a marketer’s perspective. As argued by marketers, if cooperation went well and it was beneficial for both parties, there is high chance for further collaboration.

Duration of relationship – In overall terms, the duration of a relationship has been found to sustain over several years. In contrast to seeding campaigns, which are campaign-oriented relations for a short period of time, marketers in the consumer electronics sector prefer a continuing relationship with actors. This might be reasoned by the fact that first, marketers take a considerable amount of time and effort to find the right actors to collaborate with. Second, a sustaining cooperation significantly decreases the uncertainty for marketers as Rolten (marketer) has noted. However, the nature of the relationship constantly transforms according to the actors. They claim that based on the relationship built with specific marketers, they are either close or more distant.

Close or distanced relationship – A closer relationship is sought by marketers and actors. From an actor’s perspective this could lead to exclusive information. Moreover, as Lutz (mobiwatch) notes, the closeness of the relationship is often critical if devices are being provided by marketers. He claims that with an established relationship with marketers he is able to speed up the process of receiving devices which allows him to provide unique content earlier. On the other hand, Christian (inside-handy) argues that, the closeness of this relationship has to be on a professional level in order to stay autonomous:

“It is important that we continue to maintain distance and remain independent. We do not want to make friends with a manufacturer, but of course it is helpful if you need information. If you have a query, then the answer also needs to come quickly, that is clear. When we enquire at Samsung we will get the information quickly. It is simply faster now and it has become more significant to us now.”

Christian, inside-handy

One way of indicating the closeness of this relationship is based on the particular communication channel they interact with. Christian raises the importance of having
a direct channel of communication. In order to establish a relationship communication, certain pathways need to be developed. In contrast to journalists, however, actors’ communication channel use is different and may be more complex. As discussed earlier (Section 7.5), communication between actors and marketers online could be either formalised via email or more personal through social networking sites. In particular, actors prefer a more personal connection as information can be requested more quickly and the writing style can be less formal.

From collaboration to partnership – An even closer relationship between actors and marketers has been found in terms of partnerships. Partnerships could be either exclusive to the whole blog or to a specific product section. Sascha (mobilegeeks), for instance, has used partnerships for specific events or types of content respectively. The partnership for specific events includes a public display of partners that funded travel or accommodation costs. Sascha (mobilegeeks) highlights that a public partnership is a transparent way to inform his readership about the types of funding he receives. This also the case with product tests that are sponsored if marketers provide actors with devices to review. An example from Sascha (mobilegeeks) is displayed below. A tech lounge has been set up at the IFA (consumer electronics event) where he interviews marketers in collaboration with Carsten (stadt-bremerhaven). They name them as partner as marketers provide the interview partner and the space to record these interviews.

Blog capture 7.3 – Timetable of interviews with partnerships (Sascha, mobilegeeks)

Whilst a specific partnership is a closer relationship with one specific marketer for a shorter period of time, an exclusive partnership sustains throughout the blog and thus
could be more beneficial for marketers, as Jan (tablethype) argues. In addition to the diffusion of their product information, they would also have exclusive rights over banner advertising or affiliate links. Hence, marketers would be able to directly link to their online shop within product reviews, as Sascha (mobilegeeks) argues. From an actor’s perspective this could be a benefit as they can request further funding and agree on a fixed contract as Rolten (marketer) elaborates. However, the focus on one brand leads to a certain dependency on the part of actors. Because of this Christof (tabtech) questions this form of partnership as it is not publicly visible how independent opinions and content is produced. In close relation to the practices developed between actors, this form of partnership is still in negotiation and is a grey area (see Section 7.2.3). In particular, Sascha (mobilegeeks) mentions that sustaining partnerships leaves a bad impression because although they may be independent in their content choice and writing, it is not guaranteed.

7.4 **Networks with journalists**

Whereas the relationship between actors has been found to be informal and close, relationships with journalists are found to be rather distant. It may be assumed that their distinctive backgrounds and organisational structure has impacted on their relationship. Journalists went through a certain formal educational process where ethical codes have been formed and established. Moreover, journalists are employed by a magazine that guides and shapes their content choice and writing style. The magazine thereby laid down a reputation for objectivity that actors have to establish for their audience over years as Sascha (mobilegeeks) argues. In this context, actors claim that journalists’ reviews are characterised by a neutral writing style that is often based on research rather than testing where they miss the opportunity to evaluate whether a device is good or not. As Jan (tablethype) claims, most of their reviews are almost always a 4/5 stars evaluation that fails to clarify anything. Carsten (stadt-bremerhaven) argues that reviews written by journalists are neutral since they have a disinterest in product reviews but are obligated to perform them anyway. According to him, it often results in a poorly researched evaluation:
"I read through other texts as well where I am quite often convinced that I have opinions that are clearly not compliant. I know the people of the [prestigious online news media in Germany], are looking at the packaging from afar, and then write a review and that annoys me, simply because I have tested and evaluated the device thoroughly myself and know what I'm talking or writing. Therefore I sometimes add that: 'I have read the test because there is this and that, but I have experienced it differently'."

Carsten, stadt-bremerhaven

On the contrary, journalists appear to critique actors in terms of lack of source validity. The former argue that actors are more interested in gaining traffic and attracting readers rather than validating their sources as Fabien (techstage) elaborates. Source credibility in this relation has been found as the main issue between actors and journalists. Actors claim that their information is used by journalists, while the latter do not cite actors as a source. Philipp (technews) stresses that journalists might feel that it would diminish their work if they cited actors. It is assumed that based on the actors’ informal way of working and as yet non-established profession, journalists avoid citing actors. However, due to the closeness with certain companies (marketers) and their specific interest, actors are able to get access to exclusive information and to publish this in a timely manner. Whilst reading this on an actor’s blog, some journalists try to validate this exclusive information by looking at other traditional media. If it is already being published by a known newspaper, journalists tend to cite a newspaper source instead of a blog:

"Although I know that it must be 100% from me because I had the exclusive info, [magazines] do not cite you. I do not understand their work ethics. Does it hurt them to put a link at the end? I do not care, I put my link below. And I always cite sites, also at sites where I know they wouldn’t cite me. That’s my work ethics”.

Christof, tabtech

Work ethics in this context has been of prominent interest. As mentioned previously, based on their institutionalised nature, journalists benefit from clear structures and ways of communication. As a defined occupation, it is argued that there is a certain degree of ethics that is expected of them. In contrast, actors as an emerging category are still negotiating shared practices that are not stable and continuously transforming. They seem to pay closer attention in terms of marketer communication where actors are more transparent as they are being watched carefully by both their
competitors and their readership, as Sascha (mobilegeeks) has noted. As a consequence, actors seemingly pay more attention to their ethics than journalists do:

“This is in our case more difficult because there is no regulation how this is done. I would, however, like to see this in the media. We are much more transparent and also claim to be more transparent than the mainstream media. As an example, we list what companies are supporting us with travel expenses and what they pay. Journalists ask me then if we already see this sponsorship. This is normal for them. But this is very important to us. We cannot be accused that we are bought by some company. I have never accepted money for an item and will never do so”.

Sascha, mobilegeeks

7.4.1 Towards entwined occupations

Establishing and forming certain guidelines could be seen as an indicator to move towards journalistic working practices. As Jan (tablethype) points out, there is a lot to learn from journalists. On the other hand, traditional media in the consumer electronics industry converge closer to actors as their content becomes more visual and more opinionated, at least to a certain degree. Hence the boundaries between actors and journalists in online media have become more interwoven and complex. Whereas a few years ago tech-bloggers were seen as interesting but not serious competitors, actors are becoming more powerful as Sascha (Mobilegeeks) underlines. He argues that this is not only based on work ethics, but also in terms of resources such as equipment or staff, with the gap between online magazines and actors diminishing. Another example is provided by how marketers organise events. Hall (marketer) explains that although their outcome in terms of content may differ, their working patterns are similar:

“There is a great, reasonably homogeneous tech-blogger troop in Germany. However, it has become rather hard to say who has a magazine, who has a blog. So it is difficult to draw boundaries.”

Hall, marketer

From the perspective of companies and readers, it seems that both parties converge on each other. Based on the public portrayal, actors see themselves more as journalists than as traditional bloggers. As Alexander claims, it depends on who is asking.
As actors are not yet established as a profession there is a tendency to be referred as journalists when establishing professional connections. If asked, actors such as Alexander (iphoneblog) don’t have a clear answer as the terms are often used interchangeably:

“This all depends on who's asking. I refer to myself as both. If I mean to sound a bit more serious, then I say ‘journalist’ which most people understand better. If you are invited for an expert interview on the radio, then you know that the target audience understands journalist. They see bloggers as somewhat different. But I suppose I choose expressions that then fit me to the situation, so I have no problem with the two expressions.”

Alexander, iphoneblog

Similarly, Sascha sees a blend of journalists and actors in online media terminology. In the end both publish content online. Moreover, there is an emergent coexistence, in that journalists publish content on their blog as well on news media that incorporate an own blog as outlined by Mistel (marketer). Similarly, Hall (marketer) argues that there are also blogging journalists or bloggers who are employed in print media now. The boundaries have become blurred.

**Journalists becoming actors** – Lutz (mobiwatch) is more rooted in journalistic territory. He started his career as a journalist and has become an actor now, by developing his blog and reviewing devices for large online magazines. An important benefit for magazines is that they do not need to interact with marketers to get access to devices and are able to utilise the actor’s concentrated expertise. This relates to expertise that is not only topic-related, but also to evaluating devices as well as presenting a review in a visual format.

By integrating professional video reviews, Lutz (mobiwatch) reviews are very attractive for a variety of magazines. Hence, in some cases he is reviewing one device for three different online magazines. Similar to Carsten (stadt-bremerhaven), Lutz (mobiwatch) argues that the actual working pattern, e.g. the test of the device, is similar, however the presentation of information is different. Some magazines are very restricted in terms of format and writing style. Specific limitations are not often put into guidelines, but it has been found that actors need to adapt their way of writing to suit the specific magazine:
“In [online magazine 1] it is highly structured, since each post has the same title sequence, so that the reader can also directly compare – equipment, multimedia, handling, and conclusion. For others, such as [online magazine 2], for example, it is not the case, who would rather have a freely written text. Therefore, it is very individual. It depends on the medium.”

Lutz, mobiwatch

**Actors becoming journalists** – Actors are seen as very attractive for traditional magazines as findings indicate that actors develop a unique skillset, as Rolten (marketer) argues. During their development process they acquire technical skills with regards to web development and server maintenance. Based on years of experience in writing, they establish working patterns that can be interesting for journalistic occupations. And last and foremost, the network that they have established over the years with marketers and manufacturers enables them to utilise these connections and to gain further in-depth insights into the consumer electronics industry. Apart from giving up their blog completely, it has been found that there are agreements where the blog is merged or taken over by a traditional magazine. These agreements can be either temporary or permanent, as Lars (allaboutsamsung) has noted.

One contemporary instance is cited by Cartsten (stadt-bremerhaven). He started writing for two different magazines as part of his transition to becoming self-employed (see Section 5.6.1). Whereas guest writers are paid per article, in permanent roles actors become journalists working full time for magazines. Actors in this case fully underlie the organisational structure and working guidelines provided by the magazine. Fabien (techstage), for instance, was hired as a chief editor in a tech section of a magazine, which made him leave his blog. He argues that a permanent position has helped him to balance the workload as he now has more employees himself. The issue of the immense time resources that are needed in order to successfully maintain actors’ blogs and to keep in touch with business partners, has also been highlighted by Sascha (mobilegeeks). He argues that he spends between 11-14 hours a day on blog-related activities at peak times. Moreover, he needs to be present at conferences, new product releases, etc. Combined with the immense pressure to maintain traffic rates in order to be able to develop their blog is not bearable for most actors over a longer duration. As an employer of a traditional
Network formation

magazine, Fabien (techstage) now has the possibility to leave after having reached certain hours per week, which wasn’t imaginable when he was writing his own blog. Of course, he is still passionate about his project, but the possibility to step back has been very appealing to him:

“I am permanently employed and there are also bonuses, but I have my hours per week and if the hours are full, they are full. Then I could drop my pen and go. But of course that will not happen.”

Fabien, techstage

In addition, he argues that the funds available to enable further blog development, e.g. the further employment of writers, have increased. Actors argue that they have a first mover advantage due to less constrained working hours. Christoph (tabtech), for instance, edited product videos recorded at a conference until 4.00am in the morning. Fabien (techstage) argues that he is now able to delegate more writers between normal working hours, thereby allowing him to distribute the overall workload more evenly.

7.5 Offline and online networks

The main opportunities to network and foster relationships with marketers or other actors have been found to be at events and conferences. This can be either consumer electronics conferences such as the CES in Las Vegas, or product presentations initiated by marketers, according to Christof (tabtech). He raises the importance of these events, claiming that most blogs accelerate with their first conference as they are able to provide unique content. The stream of information is so concentrated over its three day duration that there is rarely time to sleep. Thus his first goal “was attending the Consumer Electronics Show” (CES). After taking part in events, he was only then reading other actors’ blogs or hearing from marketers, but these events were Christof’s (tabtech) first opportunity to actively engage with them. These events are usually attended by other actors, marketers/manufacturers and traditional actors such as journalists. Hence it may be argued that these events are an offline resemblance of the “inner system” as McQuarrie et al. (2013) have postulated. In particular, the offline component has been found to play a critical role, especially in
fostering relationships between actors. Actors get to know each other at events and also have the opportunity to engage with other actors about private interests. Lars (allaboutsamsung) mentioned that relationships with actors are established more quickly at events: “Most of them read each other anyway, but a beer after the event and the ice is broken. We talked about our interests and not about how to develop my blog better.” It might be argued that these events had a critical effect on the type of relationship and are also based on the continuity of their meetings. Alexander (iphoneblog), for instance, mentioned that the same people attend the same events every year:

“Every industry has a small group where you constantly see the same faces. Always the same stories, always the same jokes. I really like them and they have grown on me.”

Alexander, iphoneblog

Likewise, Carsten (stadt-bremerhaven) suggests that there is a homogenous group of people. It has been found that most actors attend similar events where a homogenous group has been established. Thus, it could be argued that these events partly shape the actor group. They may only be accepted as a group member if they are present at such events. As Carsten (stadt-bremerhaven) argues, as over the years you always see the same faces at events. He compares it to a class reunion, where the actors are familiar with each other and the atmosphere is relaxed and informal:

“Yes, it always feels like a class reunion. Most of them have become friends and you really enjoy seeing them again. Likewise, then there are some that you never liked in the class (laughs). No, but it is really helpful to exchange ideas or go for some drinks.”

Carsten, stadt-bremerhaven

However, Carsten (stadt-bremerhaven) also notes that there are other actors present at events he personally dislikes. More specifically, Jan (tablethype) argues that actors who do not align to the practices are also present at such events. Thus, these events are not merely facilitated by the actor group but rather by a third party – mostly marketers in this scenario. Marketers decide whom to invite to their own events such as product introductions. Thus, marketers seemingly have the ability to include and exclude actors with no relation to their confirmative behaviour within the actor group. This results in a group formation with the inclusion of other members. For instance, the coalescent between actors and journalists has been partly initiated by
marketers according to Hall (marketer). By grouping them together at events, they lower the boundaries between these members.

As iterated in Section 7.3.3, if actors would not be invited to these events any longer, it would have negative consequences for their blog content and consequently for their audience. Moreover, it could have a negative effect on their role within the actor group as Hall (marketer) elaborates. With regards to content development, events are critical as devices are often first unveiled at such conferences and actors are able to speak directly with marketers. The relationship itself may be more distant, but what Luca (2blog) finds important is that events are mostly those places where further contact details are exchanged. This gives actors the opportunity to have a direct means of communicating with marketers, mostly online. Lutz (mobiwatch) highlights the need for a direct communication channel between actors and marketers as it is a faster and easier way to communicate. He uses the lending of devices as a particular example:

“At best, it runs fully automatically and you get sent the device as soon as they are available. With others manufacturers you have to have more contact, because some change marketers or the spokesperson within the marketing agency changes.”  

Lutz, mobiwatch

In contrast to journalists, however, actors’ use of these channels differs widely, which may be more complex. When actors develop their blog, they are not used to communicating with relatively large companies and their representatives. Moreover, due to their interest in technology, actors prefer to use social media channels to communicate with their audience. Hence, both parties need to give in in order to establish a relationship. Mistel (marketer) claims that marketers have a standardised form of communicating with media. With traditional actors such as newspapers or online magazines, they send out press releases and interact predominantly via email. Actors need to adapt their communication style to be more respected by marketers. In order to get devices or event invitations, actors need to be able to send a formal request via email. However, she noted that these actors disrupt the form of online communication. Likewise, Freisel (marketer) shaped a transformation of manufacturers moving from more formal and sophisticated means of communication to the environment of their target audience, namely social networking sites. In
particular, there is rising manufacturer interest in cooperating with actors, and they need to find ways to contact them. This seems to be beneficial for actors as they have a direct line to manufacturers and prefer a more personalised relationship, as Jan (tablethype) elaborates:

“For one thing it is mainly about getting devices, for another it is current information. When a manufacturer releases new devices, there are usually press releases sent out beforehand via email. In addition I have the spokeswoman for Samsung as a Facebook friend, where I contact her directly. One always thinks that it is totally formal, but it has developed into a very informal and personal relationship.”

Jan, tablethype

Whereas marketers prefer traditional means of communication, actors have been found to communicate where they connect, according to Jan (tablethype). It may be reasoned that, similar to their information searches (see Section 4.2.1), their social interaction is related to new forms of communication such as social networking sites. As Hall (marketer) recalled, when first working with Carsten (stadt-bremerhaven) they connected through a social network. From then on, Carsten considered this as the main information channel:

“I know that Carsten said that he was invited to a [telecommunication company] press conference, then got handed the business cards of the spokespersons, and then connect through Xing. After sending a request on Xing he got the feedback that if he has a request, he should write an e-mail. Because it is just the normal way in which journalists communicate. And that he did not understand, because that’s what Xing is for and why did you then connect with me if you don’t want to communicate with me in that way. So there’s this learning curve already with other marketers and also with bloggers.”

Hall, marketer

Hall (marketer) also mentions that the form of communication depends on the willingness of both parties. Thus, leverage and market position play a large role similar to the type of relationship that prevails between marketers and actors. The more powerful party thereby decides the form of communication online. As Freisel (marketer) suggests, “if you want your product placed on a certain blog, you need to step out of your comfort zone and use different techniques.” This, for instance, could include a transition from email to platforms such as Twitter to communicate with an actor. On the other hand, actors are under pressure to maintain relationships with
marketers, particularly if they want a sustainable cooperation to lend devices. As Lutz (mobicatch) has noted, this means that there should be ongoing conversations in order to be in the “marketer’s mind” if there are any opportunities for collaboration. This also means sending reminders if new products are released, to be able to review them. Overall it has been found that established actors can choose their marketing collaborations strategically, whereas less-established actors need to actively engage with marketers in order to receive their support. On the other hand, it has been found that from a marketer’s perspective, representatives from manufacturers might have gained leverage over actors, as the consumer electronics sector the market is dominated by a few leaders whereas on the other hand, actors – and specifically blogs – are steadily increasing.

7.6 Summary

This chapter outlined the types of networks that actors form and establish as part of their practices. Based on Kozinets et al.’s (2010) network co-production model additional individuals have been identified. A schematic diagram of findings is provided below:

![Network formation diagram](image)

Figure 7.1 – Main findings of network formation
The chapter also discusses content development as it has been found that these actors are assessing and evaluating devices. Actors are not forming practices in isolation but rather considering other actors and marketers.

*Interaction between actors and marketers* – From an actor’s perspective the relationship with marketers is valuable and to some extent essential to deliver blog content. However, actors need to account for this interaction to other actors and their readers. One of the shared practices between actors is to make the cooperation more transparent in order to express their independence. Actors elaborate where their funding is derived from and what it is used for. Although, marketers may favour a positive review, their return is less defined. However, the latter can utilise their leverage and restrict access to further information or devices and, moreover, could exclude actors from events. Particular events such as conferences or product introductions are shaped and facilitated by marketers where they part shape the formation of actors. This has been detected by grouping journalists and actors at events where they gave actors additional credit and consequently lower boundaries between these groups.

*Interaction with other actors* – Product advice or news is formed in close interaction and by continuously negotiating not only with marketers, but also with other actors. Interaction is informing assessment and practice which is also validated by the initial stages of blog development as actors are learning through imitation. They observe other blogs and consequently interact with other actors to compare and align with more established actors. More established actors have been found to be a powerful source for others as they are able to support audience construction by promoting other actors. Furthermore, more established actors can use their formed network to introduce and connect with other actors or marketers. Thus, they actively shape and negotiate practices. Thus, actors reinforce these practices by valuing confirmative and critiquing non-confirmative behaviour. Despite the transparency of cooperation between actors and marketers, source acknowledgement has been underlined as an important factor in actor-actor interactions. Source acknowledgement and source validation appear to derive from journalistic practices. Thus it may be argued that actors align with journalistic practices in order to be more credible and respected.
These communities and relationships shape actors practices and may fit with the notion of an “inner system”. Established members such as marketers are transformed into specialist occupations such as influencer relations in order to interact with actors. This results in a more complex web of relationships where a multitude of interactions occur simultaneously.
Chapter 8  Discussion

8.1  Introduction

This chapter aims to discuss tech-bloggers as a form of emerging actors (Vaast, Davidson and Mattson, 2013). Influential individuals using blogs or related technologies have received substantial scholarly attention (McQuarrie et al., 2013; Vaast, Davidson and Mattson, 2013) and marketing practitioners alike. Due to the nature of eWOM, it is argued that information can diffuse more quickly, has a wider reach and, due to the written format, is more long-lasting than traditional WOM (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004; Godes and Mayzlin, 2004; Berger and Schwartz, 2011). The underlying assumption is that, based on these implications, it enables “average individuals” to become influential individuals in a marketplace (McQuarrie et al., 2013). By looking at tech-bloggers as a form of such emerging actors it has been ascertained that actors have attracted a sizeable audience. In this study, the audience of the actors investigated range from 50,000 to over a million blog visits per month, with the majority of readers reading a particular blog regularly. Moreover, it has been argued that due to their unique content they have the ability to “influence” their readers (McQuarrie et al., 2013). This has been discovered in the increasing success of affiliate links where up to 500 products are purchased from content placed on actors’ blogs (Sascha, mobilegeeks).

Whilst an influential status in the market is apparent, less is known about the underlying ‘practices’ of these actors. Existent studies (Kozinets et al., 2010; McQuarrie et al., 2013; Vaast, Davidson and Mattson, 2013) that have looked at practices have not sought to unpack them in great detail. Further strengthened by a content analysis-dominated research approach, claims of underlying practices have been made that require further evidence.
Thus, this chapter aims to discuss this phenomenon, e.g. “WOM as an outcome” (Godes and Mayzlin, 2004). These processes will be reviewed based on the three main distinct characteristics identified in the previously reviewed literature: audience construction; content development; and network formation. A particular focus will be allocated to the development processes of each section, thus aligning with the overall theme of “emerging actors”. By unveiling what is new and different about those actors, it provides further understanding of the existing concepts.

8.2 Audience construction

As outlined in Section 3.2., one of the distinct traits of actors is that they have constructed a large audience themselves. As McQuarrie et al. (2013, p.136) argues, “the web has made it possible for ordinary consumers to reach a mass audience, to grab hold of the megaphone”. This research also identified that only a small percentage overall is able to attract such sizeable audiences (Schmidt, 2007). In contrast, existing concepts such as opinion leadership (Katz and Lazarsfeld, 1955; King and Summers, 1970) assume the prior existence of a large audience, while failing to look at the processes that go into their construction. Studies in the context of opinion leadership, for instance, argue that existing social structures are utilised for diffusion rather than developing new social structures. It assumes that actors have an established audience that gives them an influential status. However, findings exposed that emerging actors have not gained a sizeable audience prior to blogging. They construct a new social group that is based on interest rather than location facilitated by actors. Thus, this empirical study of emerging actors (and their increase in influence) as discussed in this dissertation has required a simultaneous focus on audience construction and maintenance. Moreover, audience construction is found to be less linear but rather is shaped by interactions where an actor’s audience plays an essential role. Concluding, the research question as follows has been addressed:

How does this emerging actor category construct and maintain its audience online and how does their audience shape the actor’s practice?
Further light is shed on different construction stages, ranging from what might be described as “grabbing the consumer” to transformations of a regular community that has partly been found to be based on increased interaction. A neglected implication of the sizable audience is the nature of ‘interaction’. In contrast, the existing literature has characterised blogs as conversational platforms (Blood, 2004; Herring et al., 2005). Due to increasing audience sizes, however, it becomes increasingly difficult to interact with their readership. Building on Thompson’s (1995) delineation of interaction dimensions, it has been discussed how different audiences evolve as part of audience construction and how actors envisage their audience. Of particular interest is how these actors have been found to monetise their blog, whereas their audience becomes their main source of income. Related to this is the issue that the role of their audience is consequently changing and shaping the actor’s practice.

8.2.1 Constructing an online audience

The existing literature has quite simple views of audience construction, partially based on their reliance on apparently similar technologies. In the context of media studies, Thompson (1995) has argued that audience size is increasing with improved performance. However, he uses the example of television, where viewers have a choice between innumerable channels. The construction of audiences in Thompson’s television illustrations fundamentally differs from online communication as visibility and consumption of content is distinct on blogs. In contrast to television programs, blogs are not visible to their audience by their nature. TV programs and channels can be flicked through, whereas without particular mechanisms readers would not be aware of an actor’s existence.

The importance of being visible – Being visible to a potential audience is an important feature right from the outset of an actor’s existence. From a reader’s perspective, visibility is associated with the ability to find a certain blog article when attempting a direct search for a given product or information. Often referred to as “hedonic browsing” (Moe and Fader, 2004), potential readers look for specific products on search engines. Search engines act as a gatekeeper between the actor and potential readers. Thus, actors develop practices that are valued by search engines, e.g. they place keywords including their domain and blog name (tabtech,
allaboutsamsung, mobilegeeks, etc.) in a certain niche to be found more easily. Furthermore and similar to Schmidt (2007), it has been found here that actors are mindful of two measures: continuous publication and interconnectivity, which are both critical to appearing on search engines, attracting new readers and thereby turning new readers into regular readers. One example of a continuous publication cycle is given by Daniil (tblt) as he does not take a break from his blog fearing that he will lose his search engine ranking and audience. With regards to interconnectivity, being featured, referenced or introduced on other websites have been found to be very helpful. Interconnectivity increases with the size of an audience. This confirms McQuarrie’s (2013, p.149) statement that as “their audience grows, bloggers also gain social connections to prominent insiders within the fashion system, which lends bloggers more prominence.” However, there are instances where actors do not need a sizeable audience in order to gain social connections. Often more established actors feature other actors in the early development stages in order to enable the latter to use their visibility and audience to attract new readers (see Section 8.4.1).

Utilising a range of eWOM channels – Although an actor’s blog is the main channel of content diffusion, additional eWOM channels are used to increase visibility by making use of a channel’s distinct characteristics (Berger and Iyengar, 2013). In particular, social networking sites (hereafter SNS) have been found to be valuable in terms of increasing an actor’s visibility. A distinct feature of SNS is the possibility for readers to follow actors on a regular basis. If readers subscribe to one of the actors’ social network accounts, they will receive a notification for each interaction that has been made. Thus, these platforms combine two dimensions of diffusion: “discovery” and “influence” (Garg, Smith and Telang, 2011). Whereas discovery implies a direct search, influence is related to receiving information from friends or, in this context, from a SNS newsfeed. Whilst both browsing types appear critical (Brynjolfsson and Simester, 2011), influence has been found to be more valuable for actors in the long run (Moe and Fader, 2004). As influence is not related to a direct search or purchase decision, it may lead to a more regular encounter. Moreover, actors may become visible to potential readers through the activities of their existing audience.
Discourse in multiple channels – Although additional channels offer increased visibility, they also offer opportunities for increased discourse which are seen as valuable in audience construction, i.e. to “grab the reader.” It might be argued that due to a reader’s channel familiarity, the discourse between actors and readers is significantly higher than on their blog. Another aspect is that SNS are geared towards relationship management (Trusov, Bucklin and Pauwels, 2009) where it is also argued that SNS stimulate community development. By labelling readers as friends they might be perceived as being closer to them (Marwick and Boyd, 2010). Moreover, as contacts within SNS are mostly real ties, it might lead to a more trustworthy perception (Bhattacherjee and Sanford, 2006). The intention of increased discourse with readers is also mirrored in their content, including critical comments and questions directed to their audience. By giving feedback, responding to questions and by being adaptive to advice or suggestions from their audience, actors actively alter and iterate content based on discourse.

The type of discourse has been found to serve further transformation. It is argued that actors actively try to transform their audience from an imagined audience through mediated interaction (Thompson, 1995). Although mediated interaction narrows down symbolic cues there is a dialogue in which actors can extract information about their audience’s tastes (Thompson, 1995). Moreover, instead of “grabbing” the reader as identified earlier, findings indicate that actors not only want to extract information from potential readers to make their content more useful for them. In the context of Granovetter’s (1973) notion of ties it may be argued that actors want to transform weak ties (or ‘virtual ties’ according to Hoffman and Novak, 1996) into strong ties by building a relationship with their readers. Thus conversations not only have the exclusive purpose of disclosing their audience’s tastes – these conversations are also aimed at building relationships with readers (Nardi, Schiano and Gumbrecht, 2004). Both conjectures have been found here to be echoed in audience characteristics and terms of envisaging the imagined audience.
8.2.2 Distinct audience characteristics

McQuarrie et al. (2013) in their study of when a blog becomes more successful have described a transition from a community to an audience. They argue that actors do not interact as much when they obtain a large audience, an insight similar to Thompson’s (1995) notion of mediated quasi-interaction, e.g. monological interaction. In this study we also found that although actors attracted sizeable audiences (larger than 50,000/month), a high percentage of readers do not actively participate in discussions or other forms of communication.

The findings detailed in this dissertation suggest that loyal readers are found to be a success factor, e.g. Alexander (iphoneblog) claims that 80% of his readers are regulars. Moreover, actors aim for mediated interaction to form a loyal readership that is community-like in nature. The aggregated conversations of a multiple communicator may be regarded as a community that may be based on a “structured set of social relations”. It has been argued that the community formed shares traits with a brand community (Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001) but rather “form[s] around one good or service” (p.426), thus this community developed around one specific actor and his blog. The findings suggest that there is a community within these blogs where readers actively comment and shape content orientation. Readers not only consume content but also co-create them (Kozinets et al., 2010). Thus, it is argued that communication between actors and their readers may share more community characteristics than simply broadcasting information. Actors have a desire to be perceived as being similar to their readers contradicting McQuarrie et al. (2013) who argue that fashion bloggers are taste leaders and act as a role model for their audience. Therefore, it is argued that actors are responsive to their audience.

Findings also suggest that the type of reader depends on the development stage of audience construction. Whereas in the first stages the audience predominantly consists of one-time readers, actors try to transform them into regular readers. As has been highlighted here and countering McQuarrie’s (2013) viewpoint, a distinction between readerships generates a topology of readers that is proposed based on the characteristics observed. Audience types derive directly from notions the actors used.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Behaviour</th>
<th>Audience construction implication</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The one time reader</td>
<td>This type of reader predominantly visits the blog through a search engine to read one article only.</td>
<td>Visibility in this context has been found as a key mechanism to attract one-time readers. However, they could transform to a follower-type reader.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The follower</td>
<td>The follower is regarded as a regular reader who subscribed to one of the various social networking site channels. He follows updates or directly visits the blog on a regular basis.</td>
<td>Although this type pays attention to the identity of the actor and the overall blog, he is not actively communicating with the actor or other readers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The communicator</td>
<td>The communicator is a regular reader, but actively engages in comments and helps other readers.</td>
<td>The communicator co-shapes blog content and is taken into consideration in terms of the blog’s future orientation.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 8.1 – Overview of audience types

According to findings, the one-time reader and follower type are dependent on visibility that can be both hedonic or discovery-oriented (Garg, Smith and Telang, 2011). Although the follower type may visit the site directly and as often as the communicator, he is not actively engaging in discourse. However, these two types – as the findings suggest – largely read blogs based on the author in contrast to the one-time reader who disregards author information. In contrast, the communicator, based on discourse with the blog has been found to be critical to audience construction, whereas the one time reader and follower are unknown and thus resemble imagined audiences (Thompson, 1995) and the communicator engages through mediated interaction. With regards to the importance of discourse, the communicator is the only type of audience in interaction with the actor.

8.2.3 Envisaging the imagined audience

A critical aim of audience construction according to the findings has been the transition towards an established or loyal community. Envisaging the imagined audience may help in driving the transformation to loyal readers as content can be altered to audiences’ tastes. Moreover, interaction has been found to be beneficial (as the findings suggest), however it is not representative of the whole readership. In other words, the producer of the content is not able to determine how the recipient receives the content (Meyrowitz, 1985). As noted in Section 3.3.1, within online
audiences the most common type of audience interaction is either mediated or quasi-mediated. Thompson (1995) adds that due to the absence of reflexive monitoring, there is little known about the audience, particularly concerning its attributes. Thus, in addition to direct communication with their readers, actors have developed practices to examine the valence of audience tastes.

The uses of analytics – Analytics have been predominantly used to gather information about audience demographics such as total visits within a certain time frame, a reader’s age and location. This gives actors a better understanding of what their audience is like, but gives less indication of their tastes. Another type of analytics is referred to as “information flow” and “behaviour”. Information flow gives actors an indication of where their readership was referred from. This can be organic or through hedonic browsing (Moe and Fader, 2004) or via an SNS referral (Trusov, Bucklin and Pauwels, 2009). “Behaviour” is predominantly used to identify tastes. This type of analytics enables actors to determine if a visitor is new or returning and their length of visit. The length of visit is of particular importance in the context of video reviews as actors are able to identify how long readers watched a video and when they stopped watching. This helps actors to adjust the length and type of review by identifying segments that are of less interest to their audience. Lutz (mobiwatch) referred to this as “the moment where I lose the audience.” Thus, it is argued that content choice and presentation is altered based on the results of analytical tools. Although these results only give a total or average indication, actors are able to recognise patterns in their audience’s taste and attempt to be actively responsive to them.

The incorporation of feedback mechanisms – In addition to site analytics, actors included further functions on their blogs that allow them to interact further with their audience\(^\text{11}\). In contrast to site analytics, these feedback mechanisms give further meaning based on the valence of opinion (Dellarocas, 2006). Moreover, actors publicly display the feedback on their site that can display the importance of their reader’s opinion. Although actors may have the possibility to censor critical

\(^{11}\) One instance found is where actors applied a rating system in addition to their product reviews. This allows users to rate the device as they perceived it. On a broader level, actors have been found to apply rating systems to their articles which allow them to see how much they liked each article.
comments or unfavourable feedback (Cheung and Thadani, 2012), they decided not to.

Thompson’s (1995) concept of “imagined audiences” is formed in such a way that it allows the producer to formulate a message that appeals to both existing and “future” audiences. He argues that it serves as a prerequisite to influence future conditions relating to size, demographics and shared beliefs among the audience. In this study, findings show that actors are not so much acting on their audience but rather reacting to them. That is, it appears that actors are shaping their content to their audience. This might be seen in a follow-up test where actors take readers’ comments in close consideration and closer attention might be drawn to distinct issues (camera, software, battery). Thus, the audience provides them with various constraints to which they are responding. This is complemented by further audience analytics, e.g. methods to ascertain readership tastes and thus reconfigure their blogs accordingly. They release content with an eye to its reception and thus modify it based on responses. Thus, the notion of a “taste leader” (McQuarrie et al., 2013), e.g. someone who directs an audience has become less predominant and is further strengthened due to community features, therefore it might be argued that online collectives are “democratic rather than legalistic or authority driven” (Libai et al., 2010, p.270).

This study proposes the notion of a “taste community” which foregrounds not how an actor leads or drives the preferences of others, but how that direction is worked out through their interactions with a community consisting of their blog readers. The notion of a taste community foreground the more distributed way in which content is constructed. There is not one clear ‘leader’ but an actor who is responding to the affordances of the community they have constructed. The most successful actors are those that probe their community and finds ways to adjust their content based on responses. There was leadership not so much in directing the audience but in terms of finding artful ways to probe and understand the audience. A responsive process has been obtained whereby the actor probes the audience through developing initial content (e.g. where they attempt to shape their readers’ tastes) but where they are responsive to this audience and in response they will adapt their content based on feedback. In the case of Sascha (mobilegeeks), this is a certain level of knowledge he
presupposes which correlates with Wimmer and Dominick’s (1987) critique of an ideal audience. They argue that producers suit the information to their audience to reduce uncertainty about their perception rather than dictating information.

8.2.4 Monetisation of audiences

In the process of constructing audiences, it has become apparent that actors at some stage are looking for ways to transform their large audience and monetise their blog, resulting in a shift of motivations. Their initial drive to start has been found to be either based on self-interest (Feick and Price, 1987), e.g. “Are people actually interested in things I am writing?” (Philipp, technews), or the desire to help others (Arndt, 1967; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004), e.g. “Can I help others to avoid buying mistakes I saw every day in retail” (Carsten, stadt-bremerhaven). The reasons to start a blog have partly matched existing findings in the areas of WOM and eWOM (Angelis et al., 2012). In the process of constructing their audience, it has been found that actors’ motivations change over time. The findings indicate that at a certain stage actors are looking for a return that is beyond self-involvement or self-enhancement. To maintain both the quality of content and their interactions with their audience, further funding and time resources are required. Thus, it is argued that monetary incentives are much more prominent.

The prominence of economic benefits have been indicated to be an aspect of eWOM drivers (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004), however they were only loosely related. In contrast, it is found that some actors sought economic opportunities at the initial stages of audience construction. Even more prominent in later stages were instances where actors transform their blog into a business. Half of the actors in this study claimed that they are blogging as their main occupation. Thus, actors emerge as traditional drivers in order to develop a legitimate business. To gain economic benefits, it is claimed that an actor’s audience is utilised to generate funding. It is argued that the “capital” of their audience is seen as being based on the interplay of strong (community) and weak ties (follower and one time reader) that drive information diffusion (Burt, 1999; Roch, 2005). Actors utilise their constructed audience to monetise their blog through banner advertisement and affiliate links on their website.
The role of their readership – Findings suggest that a larger audience directly affects an actor’s income. As their income is mainly evaluated based on their audience size, it influences the way actors see their readership. A larger audience not only equals more potential income, it also increases attractiveness for marketers to cooperate with actors (McQuarrie et al., 2013). The economic incentive provides additional reasoning for the formation of a taste community rather than taste leadership (McQuarrie, et al., 2013). Actors may see their blog as a service and thus want to keep their “customers” happy which problematizes McQuarrie’s (2013) view of audience construction based on the existence of a “role model” (someone that an audience might want to emulate).

It is also argued that due to information based-presentations, actors may establish a new form of expertise as opposed to cultural expertise suggested by McQuarrie et al. (2013). This dissertation suggests that expertise is developed with a focus on better serving the actors’ audience. Partly based on actors’ income, the findings in this dissertation have indicated that there is an obligation to the actors’ readership. Thus, actors distinguish themselves from company-initiated information by aiming to stay autonomous. Alexander (iphoneblog) for instance argues that “the readership keeps me alive”, indicating that the perceptions of their audience is becoming increasingly important.

Strategies of balancing personalities – As part of this “taste community” actors want to be seen as a member of this community. Actors behave as representatives in relation to their audience and articulate themselves from the perspective of a consumer. On the other hand, actors are striving to be respected as reliable business partners. The commercial nature embedded in this context has been recognised in brand communities (Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001) where the findings indicate a tension between “communal” and “commercial” norms (Kozinets et al., 2010). These norms have become even more apparent as actors need to generate a monthly income. Supplemented by additional cooperation with marketers (see Section 8.4.2.), the findings here indicate an interplay of both personalities. Whereas on their blog and in online discourse actors represent their audience publicly, in offline communication their commercial norms become more apparent. Thus, we argue that there is a
separation of online and offline communication – whereas marketer communication is predominantly private or offline and their public discourse occurs through their blog.

* A blogger’s dilemma – To allow further expansion, actors outsource tasks (e.g. web development) in order to attract additional potential readers by offering better services. Outsourcing has not affected their audience when it comes to technical development or content preparation. However, outsourcing content production, e.g. hiring other writers has been found to cause controversy (see Section 8.3.3). In overall terms, it has been found that to generate more revenue through their blog actors are planning to strategically maximise their existing income opportunities and to further expand their blog content to attract more readers. Although further funding could allow actors to develop their blog on a full time basis, they don’t have enough time resources.

### 8.3 Content development

The increasing importance of audience construction and maintenance affects content development. Overall content has been investigated mainly in terms of valence rather than content itself (Berger, 2014). Studies (Cheung and Rabjohn, 2006; Cheung and Thadani, 2012) have examined what makes content more successful. However, it remains unexplored regarding in what terms success is measured. In this study, it has become clear that content development is entwined with the construction and maintenance of an audience. Content development, thereby, is seen as influenced by audience construction and vice versa. Thus, existing factors such as comprehensiveness, timeliness and argument need to be evaluated when considering audience development. This has been done by focussing on underlying practices and content development routines that can be further linked to blog content, e.g. this section will discuss content as an outcome including its processes within the overall emergence of this actor category.

Looking at underlying strategies and routines within both product news and advice (Richins and Root-Shaffer, 1988), it has been found that each type of content has its distinct practices. It confirms the existing literature, in that product news focuses on
information searches and sources, whereas product advice is based on an actor’s experience with a product. However, both are dependent on each other. Product news is regarded as a prerequisite to staying informed with current trends and partly informs actors regarding their product evaluation and encourages them to give accurate advice. Thus, strategies and routines are further discussed by asking:

What are the strategies and routines involved in content development and to what extent is technology shaping the content?

Examining distinct practices will provide further insight into both content production and the development of such where strategies and process will be outlined in relation to content success. First, content success will be further reviewed in consideration of the importance of audiences. Due to the monetisation of audiences (see Section 8.2.3), it has been argued that readers become more important or even essential to maintain an actor’s blog. Second, a further account will be given regarding the different forms of multimedia and how they might shape practices.

8.3.1 A new form of expertise

Content development practices are closely associated with audience construction. As already detailed in initial blogging episodes, information sources are chosen that fit their overall niche. Furthermore, information sources become less relevant to their self-interest but rather are closer to their readers’ interests or those of their intended audience. Thus, actors follow a clear strategy to acquire information within a certain genre in order to attract new readers (Blank, 2007). Their main aim at the first stages has been to gain deep product knowledge and develop topical expertise in a certain area, which validates findings from opinion leadership (Goldsmith, Flynn and Goldsmith, 2003). The findings here suggest that they want to gain expertise in a certain field to become more respected and thereby attract new readership. Thus, practices are developed predominantly to gain expert status and maintain their audience. Due to the systematisation and development of such practices it may be argued that actors become experts but this form of expertise is seen as distinct from traditional forms. To unpack this phenomenon the researcher turns to work from the Sociology of Expertise.
Drawing on Turner’s (2003) topology of expertise, how actors develop a new form of expertise i.e. *actors have established an audience for which they are an expert* is foregrounded. Due to the emergence of actors, they need to prove “themselves to their audience by their actions” (Turner, 2001, p.131). Actors need to establish an audience to develop authority. Thus authority is sustained by practices developed in relation to a specific audience, which is referred to as “The expert with a cause” (Turner, 2003). In contrast, traditional professions such as physicists have already achieved cognitive authority where practices have been widely accepted. Institutionalised experts are readily accepted by a wider community, whereas the expert with a cause claims expertise in the hope that his views will convince a wider public that could give further reasoning as to why actors aim to construct a larger audience. Turner’s (2003) work gives a clearer idea of the new form of expertise that is formed by these actors by claiming that actors express expertise through attracting an audience. This is validated by the importance of the monetisation of audiences and where actors are not taste leaders but rather form a taste community. As this dissertation has found, an essential role of audiences is to sustain and increase economic capital (McQuarrie et al., 2013), while it may also be argued that these actors gain authority based on their audience size. Paired with changes in content development, actors develop a new form of expertise, one that is leveraged by their audience. This is further strengthened by the fact that an actor’s content is not only critical to attract an audience but is also commercial in nature.

Thus, actors focus equally on *the entertaining factor of content* that has been neglected in existing research. Karpik (2010) has postulated that content can be either “critical” or “commercial”. Critical content is centred solely on the actor and his opinion whereas commercial content is also concerned with the “conquest and keeping of costumers” (p.52), or in this context an audience. Although actors outlined that a review requires a critical statement to be heard, they made sure that the review is visible and actively engaging in order to address the reader and make a review more meaningful. In particular attracting and engaging the audience has been found to be one of the key factors as discussed in Section 8.2.2. Closely aligned is information attractiveness, whereby a receiver finds the information as appealing, however not only on a textual level but also on a visual one. By actively engaging
and addressing the reader, actors aim to make the review more appealing and entertaining to the reader. In this context, Sascha (mobilegeeks) refers to himself as a “techtainer”, an entertainer about tech. This transformation from informative reviews to entertaining reviews is also seen as due to the personal focus on content. Kozinets et al. (2010) refers to this as “character narrative” where the personal focus shapes content. Although products are evaluated based on their experience, their narrative and opinionated form of review writing is critical to blog success. Thus, an increasing part of the content, despite critical information, is devoted to personal information to make it more entertaining for readers and to draw them closer to their blog. According to actors, this form of content is performed to create a closer connection with the reader.

The opinion-centred and entertaining focus on content has implications for content practices. Thus, it may be argued that new practices emerge out of existing practices as reviewed in Section 3.4. Whilst it has been confirmed that actors also focus on product news and advice, the focus here will be on unique and distinct content practices as it is claimed that an actor’s content moves beyond giving product advice.

### 8.3.2 Emerging content practices

Practices overall have been found to be distinct in terms of content type (advice and news) as well as dependent on the overall development stage of their blog. In particular, product news has been found to be the first type of content development as it involves strategic processes regarding information search. Whereas blogs initially begin to build their knowledge repository in terms of product category involvement (Richins and Bloch, 1986; Venkatraman, 1990), information search is more systemised, including a repository of trustworthy sources. By stretching these information sources beyond their main market, actors are able to grasp product information that a potential audience is not aware of (King and Summers, 1970). These include information from foreign markets (Asia and the U.S.) and which are made relevant to readers. An integration of quality sources in distinct markets is argued here as giving actors a time advantage that can illustrate their product expertise and further increase visibility (see Section 8.2.1 for further discussion of visibility).
The move from knowledge replicators to knowledge producers – Another process identified in this dissertation has been the move to content production rather than replication. As has been remarked earlier, an actor’s “task is to give them something they are not able to get somewhere else” (Carsten, stadt-bremerhaven). Thus, actors need to acquire information that has been found to emerge from information filter practices (Blood, 2002). New and (most importantly) unique content is needed to distinguish actors from competitors and in order to attract audiences. With regards to product news, this has been detected in the increasingly opinionated form of content where actors draw inferences from their own knowledge repository rather than from other sources. A prerequisite factor is seen in the increased product knowledge that has been obtained over prolonged interest in a product (Feick and Price, 1987). Prolonged interest is further expressed in an engagement beyond gathering information sources; it requires social skills to get exclusive information early on. This is achieved through interviews with experts and relationships with manufacturers that are essential when gathering new information. These findings contrast with Lyon and Henderson’s (2005) work, as actors’ content generation is influenced equally by social integration and online searches. If content is published exclusively from social sources, actors can express further expertise by not only being a first mover, but also by obtaining information exclusively whereas other media need to reference them as a source. Being cited in other blogs or traditional media may produce a ripple effect of information (Phelps et al., 2004, Huang et al., 2011) with the actor as a source, thus reaching further audiences. Unique content production is further expressed with the increasing importance of product advice as part of content, which includes further activities and skills that need to be developed in relation to blog development.

Blogs become judgement devices – In contrast to product news, reviewing products relies on the actor’s ability to evaluate and judge different products. Karpik (2010) has coined the term “judgement device” to evaluate a product’s quality. As product quality is in most cases uncertain and highly subjective, consumers rely on judgement devices that inform their decision-making. In particular, consumer electronics have been found to be singularities, “goods and services that cannot be studied by standard methods because they are multidimensional, incommensurable,
and of uncertain quality” (Karpik, 2010, p.4). Thus actors assess knowledge that can be added to their own storage to form explicit evaluations. Karpik (2010, p.50) has noted that “[p]erfect information would be of no help, but knowledge, even imperfect will overcome the incommensurability of the singularities if it is presented in a way suited to making a choice.” Part of actors’ expertise, therefore, is the evaluation of a product.

Findings suggest that the conclusion of a product review is critical, as there should be a clear statement if the device is recommended or not, i.e. “readers want to know if I would buy this device or not” (Lutz, mobiwatch). The actual product advice as part of the review requires thoughtful arguments that draw on argument strength and quality, in which a combination of both forms an overall informative judgement (Bhattacherjee and Sanford, 2006). This is either done in a written conclusion that brings together positive and negative arguments that together form an evaluation or is increasingly achieved through rankings. Contradicting Blank’s (2007) argument that technical products are mostly evaluated in a procedural way, it has become apparent that actors evaluate devices in a distinctive manner. They evaluate devices in terms of a use setting (connoisseurial) rather than in a laboratory setting (procedural). However, it has to be noted that the evaluation process has been found here to have become more systemised in such a way that it could be argued that it shares the characteristics of a procedural evaluation.

One of the reasons is – as Karpik (2010) argues – to allow large-scale comparisons of multiple entities whilst respecting product uniqueness. Similarly, in this study it has been found that actors developed rankings to allow for comparison, which is frequently used in procedural advice as Lutz (mobiwatch) has outlined. In contrast, Carsten’s (stadt-bremerhaven) evaluation ascribes less importance to comparability but rather wants to convey a “feeling for the device”. In addition, the findings displayed an incorporation of the user’s feedback in order to contemplate their ranking. This allows readers to rank devices as well, devolving a more critical judgement role to the actor’s community. The application of ranking devices and the thoughtful formulation of arguments is intended to make content more
comprehensive and to increase argument strength (Cheung and Thadani, 2012) and to undermine their opinion with further justifications.

*Interplay of comprehensiveness and timeliness* – To make an evaluation more convincing it is argued that the comprehensiveness of the information given in the review is critical (Nelson, Todd and Wixom, 2005). However, and similar to product news, it has been found that timeliness is still important in terms of attracting new readers. A first mover advantage has been obtained where devices are selected and gathered before they are on public sale, which requires further social contacts, e.g. marketers. As a critical part of content production, product advice is also influenced by social integration (King and Summers, 1970). Overall it has been found that blog content becomes less dependent on other sources such as traditional media. Further, this study argues that eWOM message success is dependent on the type of eWOM (product news and advice). Overall, timeliness has been found to be more critical to eWOM message success compared to comprehensiveness (in contrast to Cheung and Thadani 2012). However, findings showed that timeliness is seen as more critical in product news whereas comprehensiveness is the key factor in product reviews. In particular, the amount of information and arguments is seen as important in product reviews.

### 8.3.3 Effects of content practices

Product news in an information filter setting (Blood, 2004) can refer to other sources that help to make content more credible. Thereby the reputation of other sources is utilised to make an actor's content more trustworthy. However, with content that is generated by actors, the validity of information is based purely on their reputation. Thus, the increasing importance of new and unique content devolves a more prominent role to the actor as a source of information.

*Actors as representatives of their content* – In this context Karpik (2010) has noted that information is transferred through representatives, thereby devoting a critical role to its success. The increased opinionated display of information is pushing actors to the forefront of their blog, a phenomena that has also been found in the development of product reviews.
Discussion

Therefore, authorship tends to play a much larger role. Kozinets et al. (2010) refers to this type of writing as “character narrative”, where stories are shared from the actor’s viewpoint. Furthermore, they argue that their narratives are related to “identity projects”. Similarly, in this study we found that actors’ content is mainly devoted to a product category where their persona plays a critical role. Thus, actors express not only their opinions but also themselves and thus reveal emotions (Nardi et al., 2004). However, in contrast to Lenhart (2006), they are fully disclosing their persona. One of the participants claimed that although product news and advice are both important, “to be successful requires something that gives the platform a face” (Felix, curved). A practice thereof has been identified, which includes personal articles in addition to product news and advice. In these articles, actors respond to questions by their audience or they show the latter their place of work. This has been found to foreground the working environment, whereby the reader can see where the actor is writing his or her content. Disclosing personal information to their audience may allow the reader to thoroughly evaluate the actors, which has been confirmed in earlier studies around blogging (Nardi et al., 2004). Their names are clearly affiliated with the blog and its content is focussed on them and their experiences. In particular the blog becomes a medium that allows actors to add personal topics or to incorporate their persona.

Disclosing personal information is partly grounded on the fact that actors want to be perceived as being authentic. Further reasoning is given by the increasing importance of produced knowledge (see Section 8.3.1) by actors, which can be paired with the weak relationship between sender and receiver that has to be considered in eWOM communication (Cheung and Thadani, 2012). This study aligns with Holt (1995) who argues that authenticity is used to distance market-constructed meanings and is seen as a key indicator of credibility. Actors are actively engaging with their audience in an informal manner and do not censor errors made during the content development process and instead respond to these. Due to the allowances of computer-mediated communication, actors could refine their posts at a later stage (Berger and Iyengar, 2013) but they do not alter content once it is published. This aligns with the iteration of a “taste community” where actors aim to decrease boundaries in order to be perceived as more authentic. If actors fail to be seen as “honest” with their
readership, it could be argued that their unique content is less powerful. Thus, actors are not only interacting with readers to construct an audience; they tie the audience closer to ensure that they are seen as an authentic, credible source. This has been further validated with the use of technology contemplating content and the production of own images. In particular, the appearance of actors in video reviews has been found to increase the degree of review authenticity. With regards to the limited social cues that have been part of the critique of eWOM communication, videos and also blog appearance has enable actors to appear more credible and closer to their audience.

8.3.4 The increasing importance of multimedia

Technical knowledge has been found as critical from the start. Without acquiring technical skills in terms of setting up their blog, actors would not be able to publish content. Furthermore the visualisation of content in terms of graphs, images and videos has been found to be a prime distinction factor relating to existing concepts. On a higher level, blog presentation in general supplements an actor’s content in various ways. It strengthens their character narrative and visual cues, allowing them to create a unique experience and to attract a large audience.

Schmidt (2007) in his work raised the importance of “code” as part of blogging practices. It has been found that due access to technologies or affordance of technologies have influenced and transformed the use of online communication channels. As part of these influences, it has been found that, in particular, multimedia has a potential transformative character. McQuarrie et al. (2013) have investigated fashion bloggers’ behaviour and observed a professionalization of media use, especially in relation to images: “Part of the professionalism of the blogger’s pictures comes from better training and equipment, and advances in web technology” (McQuarrie et al., 2013, p.148). Similarly, in this study a professionalization of media has been found to be part of the professionalization process overall.

Decreasing time to publish – In addition to pictures, videos and audio recording have been very frequently discussed. According to the findings of this study, multimedia such as videos has been incorporated in order to reduce workload. Instead of
transcribing interviews or writing product evaluations, actors are able to publish information directly and over a shorter period of time\textsuperscript{12}. If supplemented with written blog content, content overall becomes even more comprehensive (Cheung and Thadani, 2012). However, in addition to the actual writing process, videos need to be produced and images taken and edited. Apart from the increased workload, additional skills need to be acquired. As Felix (curved) argues, an actor is now a “writer, photographer, picture editor, media designer and video cutter all in one person.” To maintain their overall quality, content needs to be planned and executed deliberately – in particular given the importance of being a first mover.

Reviews in the making – Due to the increased time pressure, actors review products in front of the camera. Thus they review the product while being filmed where readers can see a “review in the making.” This has been found to be a critical step as expertise is expressed as products are evaluated in front of a camera, uncut and unscripted. This form of expertise might be seen as less institutionalised and rather evidence-based. It foregrounds invisible work (Star and Strauss, 1999) by evaluating products in front of the camera. By going through product specifications, they combine both their arguments and facts by displaying it to the potential reader. On the one hand, this gives readers a further insight into the evaluation process and strengthens actors’ arguments as they are able to display flaws with the product, for instance.

On the other hand, this enables the audience to see the practices in a live demonstration with a multiplicity of cues (Thompson, 1995). A video-based review as a form of communication is much more similar to traditional WOM as all visual cues are available, e.g. gestures and face expressions. This is a clear contrast to eWOM messages where limited cues have been widely critiqued. In this scenario, the identity of the reviewer is at the forefront whilst he reviews the product or elaborates on product news. The focus of the person presenting a device contrasts with most views on online communication (see Section3.1.2.) as actors are transformed from

\textsuperscript{12} In particular at product events or conferences, there are various different devices used to evaluate products within a short period of time. Filming first impressions of a product, referred to as hands-on videos have been found to be a practice used to publish information about a product in a timely manner.
“hiding” behind their computer” (Lyon and Henderson, 2005) to actively participating in front of the camera. In addition to the increased appeal of professional images as McQuarrie et al. (2013) have raised in their study, it has been found in this research that it gives additional value to the written blog format. Press images are not replicated in a similar fashion, while their focus is on “devices in their use”. Thus, pictures are, for example, illustrating the display of the camera including the actor himself. It transforms the neutral display of the device into the actor’s embedded narrative.

*Entertainment through authenticity* – According to actors, videos are unscripted and require only a few edits with the aim to make the reviewing process more authentic. Information is less altered and the review not refined (in contrast to Berger and Iyengar, 2013). The natural setting in terms of reviewing products in front of the camera is also seen as making the reviewing experience livelier according to the findings detailed earlier. Due to the flexibility and extended possibilities of video reviews, it gives actors the potential to distinguish themselves from others. It further strengthens the argument that product reviews emerged from critical to commercial devices to attract and engage with an audience. In contrast to written reviews, actors link their persona even more to the evaluation of a review.

### 8.4 Network formation

Evidence from content development and audience construction indicates that actors actively engage with their audience, whereas the existing literature has characterised influential individuals as a rather isolated entity (Tsang and Zhou, 2005; Blood, 2004). Network formation in this study has been found to be crucial to content development, audience construction, and vice versa. McQuarrie et al. (2013) have outlined that “once a consumer gains a large audience this can be converted into institutional access and further leveraged thereby” (p.137). This leverage has been found to be utilised mainly to gain access to unique information or devices to review before they are on sale. Through unique access, actors are able to produce content that is more timely and accurate, thereby attracting a wider audience.
It is not only rewards in terms of access that are in an actor’s interest – their social position improves when they receive invitations to events or receive further funding to develop their blog. They become more and more integrated in the “larger system” or ecosystem. On the one hand they are receiving information from marketers and they diffuse this to their audience. As described in blog studies (Schmidt, 2007; Herring et al., 2005), interaction with other actors has been found to be critical from the initial idea of starting a blog. Although these studies acknowledge the shared practices between actors, practices and ethics, actor-marketer communication remains unexplored to date. Kozinets et al. (2010) have noted that actors feel flattered and threatened at the same time when cooperating with marketers. As their intentions become less clear, actors need to find ways to present their involvement in marketer relationships. Karpik (2010) claims that judgement devices are also ‘trust’ devices. This study argues that eWOM message success is dependent on the specific type of eWOM (product news and advice). Overall, timeliness has been found to be more critical to eWOM message success as compared to comprehensiveness (in contrast to Cheung and Thadani, 2012). However, timeliness is seen as more critical in terms of product news, whereas comprehensiveness is the key factor in product reviews. In particular, the amount of information and arguments generated is seen as important in product reviews.

Thus, it has been discussed here regarding how networks are formed when actors enter an established ecosystem. In particular, the practices that are developed are of great interest and also influence these practices. To conclude, this section aims to examine the issues raised by addressing:

*What are the relationships involved in network formation and to what extent is interaction shaping practices?*

### 8.4.1 A community of practice

Referred to as the ‘blogosphere’ (Schmidt, 2007), it is argued that there is an on-going conversation between actors. In the first stages of actors’ blog development, they had already sought to build relations with other actors. It has been found that they learn from imitating other blogs, e.g. they replicate practices from more
established actors, whereas later they develop their own practices to distinguish themselves. A close connection with more established actors has been seen as very beneficial according to participants. They can give advice, introduce them to marketers or help them in constructing their audience. The latter has been especially observed when introducing other blogs on their blog or constantly linking each other, which can attract audiences, thereby this confirm the findings of Kumar et al. (2004) who claim that actors are in constant interaction with each other. However, actors claimed that their interaction is much more goal-oriented. This is reinforced by the fact that interaction between actors is very concentrated in the first stages (Blood, 2004). However, on-going communication has been found in all blog development stages. As a result, shared practices have developed based on replication and partly to show alignment and conformity with the actor category. In particular ethics have been found to provide two main practices (Perlmutter and Schoen, 2007) including: 1) the practice of validating/citing sources; and 2) the practice of funding transparency

*Practice of validating and citing sources* – The practice of validating and citing sources is part of the wider practices required to become more respected among potential readers and collaborative partners. Actors have been found to draw on journalistic practices. A shared practice that has been established is to acknowledge work from other actors by citing them (Perlmutter and Schoen, 2007). Citing others is not only seen as adhering with ethical concerns, but moreover acknowledges other actors’ works which has been found as an indicator of community building (Nardi et al., 2004). In a similar way, actors need to carefully validate sources before publishing, which is seen as an active attempt to emulate other occupational groups such as journalists (Hass 2005). This further aligns with the findings from Domingo et al. (2008) who argue that actors enter a journalist-dominated field and therefore are also influenced by their practices. Thus, it might be argued that actors are departing from average consumers (McQuarrie et al., 2013).

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13 The most relevant practice is seen as the code of plagiarism where journalists need to cite or refer to other text sections if they are used. This includes quotation marks for copied text or citations if a text is paraphrased (Domingo et al., 2008), which is similar to academic practices.
Practice of funding transparency – As part of their formalisation, actors need to justify their interaction with marketers. Particularly, Kozinets et al. (2010, p.83) mention in their work that they have issues with the “dual role of consumer–marketer colo[u]rs.” Moreover, McQuarrie et al. (2013) have noted that interaction with marketers is increasing given the large audience, and it has been ascertained here that those actors found mechanisms to keep their independence whilst cooperating with marketers, e.g. actors created separate pages where all forms of support and its purpose is listed. Actors emphasize that their blog is “not only a professional but also a commercial tech-blog” (Fabien, techstage).

The findings emphasized the importance of actors align with shared practices within the “blogosphere (Schmidt, 2007). The terminology “community of practices” is based on Schmidt’s (2007) blogging framework: these practices are not only restricted to ethics, such as source acknowledgment and transparency in funding, they are seen as the shared routines and expectations of blog usage. These practices influence relationship management with their audience (see Section 8.2), their content production (see Section 8.3) or practices within network formation (iterated above). However, whereas the first two are not actively reinforced, the latter is seen as critical to the “community of practice”. If actors do not behave according to certain ethical practices, they will distance themselves from those actors in order to express their disaffiliation. Findings outlined here the importance of transparency, such as quoting one another. If actors fail to quote others, non-cited actors will refrain from reading or referencing non-quoting individuals in future. Thus, it is reasoned that there is a self-regulation between actors that distinguishes credible actors from others (Perlmutter and Schoen, 2007). This is expressed by either being supportive of confirmative behaviour or instigating by a public critique of non-confirmative behaviour. It includes actors publicly supporting confirmative behaviour in terms of transparency of funding and public critique for not citing sources.

On the one hand, established actors feel the need to act as a role model for the actor category. In some cases, less experienced actors might be less aware of the consequences when they are willingly giving up their independence to cooperate
with manufacturers to gain better access to companies, and therefore they may harm or lose their audience. Thus, they use their influence within the group to reinforce practices which indicates different status levels (Dressler and Telle, 2009). On the other hand, findings suggest that established actors simply seek to be more respected and develop a level of ethics and guidelines in order be more respected. If an actor is “more established or not” is primarily indicated through audience size. Thus, it confirms Du and Wagner’s (2006) claims that a blog’s readership may be a potential differentiator of social status. It further confirms the notion of the experts in this study where an actor’s social status does not derive from a certain occupation or qualification, such as journalists, but rather is due to attracting an audience.

However, shared practices between actors are similar to a journalist’s code of ethics (Domingo et al., 2008). Thus, it may be assumed that actors become more formalised and converge further with the practices associated with journalism. However, it has been found that journalists equally become more similar to actors. This is further strengthened by the fact that marketers’ relations with actors become increasingly similar to the former’s relations with journalists.

8.4.2 Marketer relations

The desire to become more respected is closely aligned with the aim to be perceived as more credible, not only to their audience, but also to marketers. As actors want to be seen as a credible business partner, the relationship between marketers and actors becomes more formalised. This is because there is an increasing amount of interaction between marketers and actors (see Section 3.4.3). As such, WOM and seeding campaigns (Hinz et al., 2011) become more formalised.

*Relationship versus cooperation* - The nature and duration of the relationship has been found to contrast with existing studies (Godes and Mayzlin, 2009; Libai, Muller and Peres, 2013). It is noted here that a distinction needs to be made between relationship and cooperation. In the existing literature, such as Kozinets et al. (2010), the form of communication has been limited to seeding campaigns. This study gives a further account of seeding campaigns by claiming that although cooperation may be campaign-based, the chances of cooperation decrease dramatically if actors have
not built relationships. In particular as seeding campaigns are not limited to sending devices – marketers have been found to be in constant communication with actors – they give further information or support actors in many different ways such as providing devices for raffles or reimbursing travel expenses. This validates the arguments of Vaast, Davidson and Mattson (2013), who indicate that actors may become a permanent member of the marketplace. Actors are in continuous interaction with marketers where the overall duration of relationship has been found to sustain over several years, thus contrasting seeding campaigns which are campaign-oriented relations that last for a short period of time (Libai, Muller and Peres, 2013), therefore marketers in the consumer electronics industry prefer a continuing relationship with actors.

Depending on the type of collaboration, the relationship between actors and marketers appears to be either closer or more distanced. In other words, some forms of cooperation are interaction intense, whereas others do not require too much interaction14. This has been found to be partly because the contributions from both parties are clearer in a more formalised cooperation such as seeding campaigns. With regards to WOM theory, such as the linear marketer model or the network coproduction model (Kozinets et al., 2010) it has been evident that marketers want to diffuse information to actors that should help them to exploit new audiences.

*Marketer’s return versus actor’s independence* – Although Kozinets et al. (2010) have outlined that the information provided by marketers is altered by actors, they do not account for the consequence of these messages. This is particularly the case due to actors’ opinionated and critical presentations as part of their blog content (see Section 8.3.1), which can result in negative WOM. The findings here have indicated that an established mechanism to express an actor’s independence is embodied in their willingness to write critical reviews. Although marketers would prefer a positive presentation of devices, this study found that they tolerate negative reviews if they are justified. Thus it may align with the notion of Berger, Sorensen and

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14 A formalised collaboration has been found to be lending devices to actors by marketers. In some cases, these are sent out automatically after a short email confirmation and returned within an agreed time frame. However, other forms of agreement which are less formalised require more communication.
Rasmussen (2010) who claim that “any publicity is good publicity”. According to marketers, if reviews are negative to some extent they can increase purchase likelihood by creating an awareness effect (Duan, Gu and Whinston, 2008).

However, to increase the likelihood of a fair evaluation, it might be argued that marketers favour a continuous cooperation with actors. Actors are more experienced in interacting with marketers and are in continuous exchange of information. Part of reducing uncertainty is the leverage marketers gain over actors. This is further strengthened by the form of expertise that actors develop (see Section 8.3.3), while actors are also dependent on marketers. As the findings indicate, without access to devices and unique information an actor would be unable to compete in the marketplace. This has further been found to be the case in terms of access to conferences and press events. Marketers initiate events for product releases or take part in technology conferences where they have the ability to include and exclude guests. Thus it can be argued that marketers have the ability to tie intermediaries closer by inviting them to these events. According to the findings, the divergence of actors and journalists partly derive from marketers as they gave them a similar stage.

Thus, this study devotes a more influential role to marketers refining the empowerment of actors in the marketplace (McQuarrie et al., 2013). Leverage, however, is relative. It depends on two distinct measures for marketers and actors. Marketers are evaluated based on their market share and presence and – assuming that if products are popular amongst consumers – they are attractive to actors. Actors are mainly evaluated by their audience size, which validates the new form of expertise outlined in content development. Thus if actors have a respectable share of the overall actor category they become essential to marketers. Based on these findings, the implications for WOM marketing and seeding campaigns are further discussed.

8.4.3 Widening the scope of word of mouth marketing

As outlined in Chapter 3, seeding campaigns aim to target product sampling at selected consumers. Similarly, influencer marketing tries to focus on specific individuals rather than a broader population. Hinz et al. (2011) have focussed on the
factors that drive successful seeding campaigns. In particularly they flag seeding strategy as “of particular importance” (Hinz et al., 2011), while they also mention that this is a critical factor as yet underrepresented in the research. They further noted the “need for more sophisticated and targeted seeding experimentation” (p. 56).

Emergence of new occupations – As part of developing more sophisticated strategies, it has become apparent during the empirical investigation that occupations emerged that specialise in communicating with actors. Traditional marketers are used to emails and offline events such as conferences to engage with different forms of media. Due to the emergence of these actors, marketers need to accommodate them and their practices. As they mainly communicate online, they need to find ways to communicate with them through social networking sites, for instance. On the other hand, actors need to follow traditional practices such as conferences if they want to be closer to marketers. Thus, this reconfirms the need for specialist occupations communicating with those actors. These marketing specialists refer to themselves as influencer- or blogger-relations and are the main contact point with actors. They are either employed internally in marketing, in public relations departments, or are externally-based such as consultants or campaign managers with a focus on seeding campaigns according to the findings.

Increased importance on identifying actors – Another aspect within a seeding campaign and most important to Hinz et al. (2011) is the identification of these targeted consumers. As the existing literature is focussed on influencers (Watts and Dood, 2007; Trusov, Bucklin and Pauwels, 2009), hubs (Hinz et al., 2011) or experts (Libai, Muller and Peres, 2012), it is known that actors are favourable targets for seeding strategies due to their audience size. The importance of quantitative measures such as audience size has been found in existing studies (Libai, Muller and Peres, 2013; Iyengar, Van den Bulte and Valente, 2011). However, what has also been found is the interplay of quantitative and qualitative sources. Qualitative measures have been included to measure relevance and trustworthiness. According to these specialists, part of their work is to define and measure these metrics. Metrics

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15 Quantitative metrics here consist of website traffic and social networking site metrics such as the number of followers or likes as raised by the study participants.
Discussion

seem to be critical not only in increasing the outcome of seeding campaigns, but are especially beneficial in terms of reducing the risk of an unfavourable return.

_Actors found strategies to account for cooperation_ – Due to the importance of qualitative measures in the targeting process, it may be argued that seeding strategies not only focus on the diffusion of information as suggested by scholars, but also on the type of message that is conveyed and the willingness to participate (Hinz et al., 2011). Moreover, it has been found that systematic ways of cooperation have been formed between actors and marketers. Although these ways are in constant transition, they enable a beneficial cooperation for both parties.

Therefore, it can be argued that those specific individuals are not only sought out based on their influence or audience size, but rather they are preferred as they are more reliable. In particular, less experienced actors in terms of seeding campaigns have been found to be more problematic as the findings suggested. Similarly, Kozinets et al. (2010) in their work have noted that actors felt flattered to be chosen to be selected for cooperation, but faced a dilemma as they had to account for their involvement in a campaign. An on-going debate found that accounting for cooperation was a significant issue. If they were too close to the marketer, it would be seen publicly as constituting amplified WOM (Godes and Mayzlin, 2009), whereby the reputation of actors could be harmed. In contrast, actors have formed practices (see Section 8.4.1) to stake a claim to their independence whilst collaborating with marketers. They also negotiated ways with marketers to evaluate devices in a critical and authentic manner (see Section 8.3.3).

It confirms that marketers have on-going communications with actors (as iterated previously) where they select specific actors for certain campaigns. In other words, instead of targeting influencers, they choose from a pool of influencers they know or have already worked with. Thus, it is noted that a distinction needs to be made between relationship and cooperation. In the existing literature such as Kozinets et al. (2010), the form of communication has been limited to certain campaigns. This study provides a further account by claiming that although cooperation may be campaign-based, the chances of cooperation decrease dramatically if they have failed to build a relationship. This is particularly the case as seeding campaigns are not limited to
sending devices – marketers have been found to be in constant communication with actors – while they give further information or support actors in many different ways such as providing devices for raffles or reimbursing travel expenses. These forms of communication will be further investigated in the context of an ecosystem.

### 8.4.4 A progression of WOM theory

As discussed in Chapter 3, Kozinets et al. (2010) presented a network co-production model of WOM that they refer as the most recent development of WOM theory. In their model, they found two characteristics that make them distinct from previous models (see Section 2.2.3). First, this includes marketers’ use of new tactics and metrics to deliberately and directly target and influence the consumer or opinion leader” (Kozinets et al., 2010, p.72). Second, they acknowledge that messages or reviews are exchanged between consumer groups.

![Network coproduction model](image)

The network co-production model postulated two types of members in this network: 1) The marketer who tries to directly influence one specific consumer; and 2) consumers that exchange information between each other. However, the model is limited to consumer interaction where the overall “system” is neglected. McQuarrie et al. (2013) have highlighted that bloggers do not form an alternative community – they are embedded in the traditional system, including mass media such as journalists. As represented in the multistep-flow (Robinson, 1976), there is, however, a detailed account of the marketplace. Combining both models within the realm of the findings (as previously provided) displays actors as an interconnected intermediary (Fig. 8.2).
Although a combination of both models seemingly offers a fuller picture of members in the ecosystem, the relationships and roles represented are still rather simplistic.

*Variances of marketers and actors* – McQuarrie et al. (2013) argue that once these actors have gained a sizeable audience they are no longer “average consumers”. Therefore, there needs to be a distinction made between actors and other consumers. Similarly, the implications of seeding campaigns illustrate a more important but also more complex role on the part of marketers. It has been found that specific roles have been devoted to communicate and target influencers. Referred to as ‘influencer relations’ or ‘blogger relations’, those individuals have become specialists in communicating and targeting influencers. Thus, there are a multitude of marketer roles involved. With regards to consumers, it has already been displayed that due to the emergence of a new actor category, it disrupts the network proposed by Kozinets et al. (2010). It is shown as marketers react to those influencers by creating new occupations. Based on their practices it has been found that they are actively involved in the production of knowledge. These practices however are aggregated within a group of influencers that conform to some practices (Schmidt, 2007), but also develop distinct practices as shown in Chapter 6. Thus, there is evidence that there is a relatively homogenous group that exchanges information but also shapes practices. However, these actors may have different character narratives as Kozinets et al. (2010) have pointed out. Similar to marketers, it is suggested that there is a multitude of actors that have formed a group. Some of these may be close to traditional blogs as identified in Kozinets et al. (2010); others have been found to share similarities with traditional forms such as journalists (Domingo et al., 2008).
Multiplicty of interactions – Kozinets et al. (2010) have used blogs as an example to justify their network coproduction model but have also neglected the unique channel characteristics of blogs versus other channels (as found in Chapter 6). Actors in this study have been seen to have constant interaction not only with their audience, but also with other actors and marketers. Actors develop practices not in isolation but in consideration of marketers who provide access to devices and information. Furthermore, they are responsive to the audience where they built their “taste community” (see Section 8.2.4). Similarly, actors are responsive to the wider actor category resulting in a co-creation of blog development. Thus, actors are not involved in one-on-one communication anymore as proposed in the network co-production model.

![Diagram](image)

Figure 8.3 – A more detailed representation of the marketplace

Thus a more nuanced model is displayed above that responds to the implications raised. The purpose of this model is threefold. First, it provides a further account of nuances within types of members in the ecosystem. Second, it aims to represent the multiplicity of communication within a multitude of members. Last, this model devotes a prominent role to the following actors:
1) In addition, the suggested model will give further insight into interactions between actors and marketers. Furthermore, a multitude of communications is introduced. There are different forms of specialists. As a consequence, these individuals communicate using different forms of interaction. Actors actively communicate with a variety of marketer roles and vice versa. Specific importance is awarded to the nature of communication, which shifts from a one-way diffusion to a two-way conversation, e.g. information exchange rather than diffusion. The model presented here (Fig. 8.3) provides a more detailed account of the multiplicity and complexity of the communication involved. Kozinets et al. (2010) have noted that there is a consumer reaction to other consumers’ advice, but they have neglected the importance of discursive response;

2) This model portrays the actor, not as a receiver and diffuser of information, but rather as a multi-connected entity. Thus actors are less isolated than previously assumed; they have multiple connections and channels to communicate. On the one hand, they receive information from a multitude of marketers as well as mass media such as journalists or other consumers. On the other hand, this information is processed and evaluated in close communication with other members of this ecosystem. Thus it corresponds to Kozinets et al.’s (2010) notion of co-production, albeit derived from a different actor;

3) The actor as a centre of these multiple conversation provides a further account to these individuals. As they interact with both consumers and marketers, they are an influential entity in this ecosystem as they act as an intermediary (Hennion, 1989). The role of the actor as an intermediary between actors and marketers has been neglected to date. Moreover, due to the fact that actors engage in a multiplicity of conversations through multiple channels this makes the ecosystem more complex.

8.5 Conclusion

This research has examined actors’ practices through three different lenses – as in the role of audience construction, content creation and network formation. Each of these lenses has suggested a variety of potential influences on practices and processes.
Due to the utilisation of audiences, audience construction unveiled a move from the blog as a form of self-involvement or self-enhancement towards the blog as an intermediary artefact and business model. Although having a sizeable audience has been a social reward in terms of being heard, the economic benefit has critically increased in later stages. As expressed in the bloggers’ dilemma, actors are faced with the necessity to maintain their audience size whilst striving for economic benefits. Thus, it is argued that actors transform their audience in a “taste community” where they can monetise their audience by utilising their “blog as a business”.

Audience construction itself has characterised the actor as a new form of expert, one who is not institutionalised but rather defined by attracting an audience (Turner, 2003). In close relation to this, content development is seen as critical to attract an audience. As part of the transition of actors into knowledge producers, the former have been found to drift away from filter-type blogs (Blood, 2004) as actors produce unique content. Thus, the accuracy of the given information is dependent solely on the actor and his reputation. Self-disclosing their own information and incorporating multimedia as part of actors’ content are seen as mechanisms to increase credibility and thus reinforce their expert status.

The practices and processes involved in network formation have foregrounded the embeddedness of an actor in a market. Overall, practices are not formed in isolation but rather shaped in a community of practice with other actors. Moreover actors are actively engaging with marketers to gain unique information to add to their repository in order to create new content. Similarly actors then diffuse content in response to their constructed audience. Thus, actors are an embedded entity in a marketplace and act as “intermediaries”. The role of intermediaries has been given to actors as “he or she is the one that constructs these worlds by trying to bring them into relation” (Hennion, 1989, p. 406). Thus, it may argued that actors transform the marketplace (McQuarrie et al., 2013) by bringing marketers and vendors closer to consumers.

Unveiling these three distinct roles as part of developed practices and processes should shed light on these emerging actors. Partly initiated by technology, these
actors have grown and adapted new roles. The next chapter will summarise these key insights with further theoretical, methodological reflections and their managerial implications.
Chapter 9  Conclusion

9.1  Introduction

The phenomenon of tech-blogs as an emerging actor category as postulated by Vaast, Davidson and Mattson (2013) has been adapted to the arena of eWOM. These actors have become increasingly important to inform consumers’ decision-making processes. As part of their success, they review products regularly and as a result attract a large audience. Moreover, the influence of actors via eWOM communication suggests that they have become critical to the market overall (McQuarrie et al., 2013). This study sheds further light on this phenomenon by examining actors’ practices in relation to the role of audience construction, content creation and network formation. Each of these lenses has suggested a variety of potential influences on practices and processes.

This chapter will highlight the main insights and contributions, recommend future research avenues as well as outlining managerial implications concerning the wider context concerning the emergence of new actors in eWOM communication. Section 9.2 will provide an outline of key theoretical insights while also addressing the main research question and future research avenues. In addition to the dissertation’s theoretical contributions, managerial implications will be discussed to elaborate what the investigation of actors’ practices means to marketing practitioners. As part of this practice-based discussion, justifications and reflections on the overarching researching design will be provided. Further approaches to the study of this phenomenon will be outlined, thus providing an insight regarding the direction of future study.
9.2 Key theoretical insights

The main research question asked:

*What are the practices of tech-bloggers as emerging actors and the implications to our current understanding of electronic Word of Mouth?*

This study has attempted to provide a richer picture of tech-bloggers as an emerging actor category and as such has revealed several aspects of their practices and processes that have been neglected in the existing research. Thus, a refined notion of tech-blogs is given by referring to them as connoisseurs in eWOM or “e-connoisseurs” involved in a multiplicity of interactions between marketers to develop content and construct and manage audiences. Drawing on Blank’s (2006, p.29) work, connoisseurs are “particularly well-informed, experienced, and knowledgeable.” Similar, to the sociology of expertise introduced by Mackenzie (1993), authority is not gained in a traditional way, it is rather “because of unusual talents, extensive experience, or special training” which results in “a refined sensitivity with respect to a certain product genre.” (Blank, 2006, p.29). More specifically, this study found that these actors are distinct on three interrelated practices: audience construction, content development and network formation which are discussed in the next sections.

In particular, as actors appear to gain influence in such a short period of time, insights have been provided in terms of how actors construct and maintain audiences based on the concept of mediated interaction (Thompson, 1995). Existing research indicated a lack of understanding of how audiences are constructed, particularly as actors have been found to have no sizeable audience prior to blogging. Mechanisms have been applied to increase awareness and to tie a potential audience closer to their blog by utilising their blog and a range of eWOM channels (Moe and Fader, 2004; Garg, Smith and Telang, 2011). Similarly, discourse is encouraged in these channels, resulting in increased awareness and mediated interaction. Discourse paired with the use of analytics has been found to be integral to: envisaging audiences; making content more suitable; and to be perceived as more trustworthy. Therefore, it is argued here that this is an aspect of how actors construct their audience. This has been further validated in relation to actors’ responsiveness to reader feedback.
Content is actively co-created by actors and their audiences, resulting in a “taste community” rather than taste leadership as found by McQuarrie et al. (2013).

This study argues that actors manage their audience through content. Content development has been found to be distinct due to the substantial influence an actor’s audience exerts, a dynamic that has been neglected in existing scholarship (Cheung and Thadani, 2012). Together with the increased importance of economic factors identified in terms of audience construction, content development and network formation, actors’ blogs become “commercial devices” (Karpik, 2010). This implies that content development is focused on unique content that not only serves to inform readers but also to entertain and “grab” them, thus giving them an incentive to visit their blog regularly. Therefore, this study argues that actors develop a new form of expertise through attracting an audience. Part of this expertise is expressed through unique content development that is evident in the move from knowledge replicators (Blood, 2004) to knowledge producers. As a consequence, the validity of information is evaluated solely on an actor’s reputation (Berger, 2014) whereby additional information about their persona is provided. Furthermore, content production is heavily dependent on other sources where actors draw on their network to get access to devices or exclusive information. Content is created not in isolation, but in response to opinions from readers. These practices have been found to be shaped partly within the actor category resulting in a “community of practice” (Schmidt, 2007; Kozinets et al., 2010). Actors are not working in a distant evaluative domain but in an arena of interaction. There is necessary contact between these groups. Actors have to work close to the producers in order to obtain insights, products etc. This trade-off raises the issue of independence that these actors are attempting to work out using various strategies – some of which are copied from other domains (citing, declaring connections, etc.).

This study has provided a more complex and nuanced understanding of the interplay between actors, audience, marketer relations within wider practices that, it is hoped, will form the basis of future studies of this phenomenon. A key issue is the role of actors as co-producers of information (Kozinets et al., 2010) along with consumers, as well as marketers and other actors (as Robinson, 1976 discussed in relation to
opinion leaders). By foregrounding the position of actors and looking at the nature of their relationships with companies and other actors, the dissertation was able to identify the ways in which these individuals can influence WOM in an online environment. By investigating product seeding in relation to tech-bloggers and the consumer electronics sector, this study unveiled the complexity of interaction including the multiple relationships involved. By developing a more nuanced model of WOM theory, it extended the understanding of eWOM and WOM. The multiplicity of members in this system and of interaction in active co-creation of multiple parties respectively is represented in this model. By devoting a central role to actors, it confirmed that there are influential individuals in the marketplace similar to opinion leaders that gather information and diffuse it to others (Weimann, 1994). Thus, these actors might be regarded as market intermediaries (Hennion, 1989).

As an intermediary between the production and consumption of product news and advice, this study argues that actors are individuals with notable influence in eWOM communication. Similarly, this study suggests that our understanding of existing WOM theory should be refined due to the implications of what is discussed here, such as the multiplicity of conversations and co-shaping of content. As part of eWOM implications there is a need to reflect on existing notions of influential individuals. McQuarrie et al. (2013) note that “one could label the phenomenon electronic word of mouth and call these bloggers opinion leaders or market mavens (Feick and Price, 1987; Kozinets et al., 2010), but this obscures what is new and different about their consumer behaviour” (p.137). Therefore, the next sections will provide a further account of these distinct practices by reflecting on existing concepts that are discussed in the light of the dissertation’s theoretical findings. It has to be noted that this study captured the emergence of this actor category, implying that the practices that evolved are dependent on the developmental stage of each actor. By drawing on the two main concepts – opinion leaders and bloggers – it provides a clearer understanding of the actor’s role in eWOM communication.
9.2.1 Actors as opinion leaders

Based on existing research (see Section 2.4.1), it has become evident that actors are potentially distinct from opinion leaders due to the major implications eWOM serves compared to traditional WOM. Let us begin with the obvious difference. The form of communication involved is asynchronous, lasts longer and reaches further than face-to-face conversation (Hoffmann and Novak, 1996; Huang et al., 2011).

Thus, a much higher importance is attached to information diffusion itself. However, underlying practices may share similarities with the concept of opinion leaders.

Actors started blogging based on their interest in a product category, i.e. product involvement (Richins and Root-Shaffer, 1988), which is similar to opinion leaders. Actors are enthusiastic about a product category and more willing to share their experience. In the same way, different aspects of involvement have been found, such as “other-involvement” (Dichter, 1966) and “self-involvement” (Sundaram, Mitra and Webster, 1998). Other involvement has been related to a desire to help others, as expressed in frustration about current reporting in this specific product category. Self-enhancement (Angelis et al., 2012) in particular has been related to actors constructing large audiences, which has been found to increase social status and acceptance. However, this study indicated that economic benefits have been a critical factor related to constructing an audience (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004), a connection that has been neglected in opinion leadership and only showed low correlation in eWOM overall. It is hereby argued that actors are much more driven by a monetary return. This transformation occurred due to increasing audiences and interest from marketers (McQuarrie et al., 2013).

The increased commercial focus (Kozinets et al., 2010) has led to implications for content production. As a consequence, content seems to be created with the building and maintenance of the audience in mind, where practices depend on the development of different types of WOM (product news and product advice). Product news, for instance, needs to be published in a timely manner in order to be relevant to an audience. Therefore, this study characterises actors as early adopters in the diffusion process as indicated in opinion leadership (Rogers, 2003). Katz (1957) has
suggested that opinion leaders are leaders within a social group whereas a computer-mediated environment this social group increases in size a number of times over, as they are location independent. On the one hand, this allows actors to get hold of the “megaphone” (McQuarrie et al., 2013) by constructing a large audience. On the other hand, there is increased competition. Thus, actors need to adopt products and information even earlier, which leads to a transformation of media habits. Specifically for product news, actors are less dependent on mass media in contrast to opinion leaders (Chan and Misra, 1990) as they prefer niche media, e.g. other blogs and social contacts. Moreover, actors have been found to construct a knowledge repository consisting of systemised information sources where they aim to gain an informative advantage by giving potential readers information that is less known to them. Furthermore, this study argues that actors develop their own content and become “knowledge creators” where they try to create value as suggested by Smith and Colgate (2007). Evidence has been found in this study with the increasing focus on “product advice” (Richins and Root-Shaffer, 1988) where actors evaluate products on a regular basis. These products are evaluated in their use (i.e. in a consumption context) rather than in a lab setting, thereby making it distinct from traditional reviews. Thus blogs become “judgement devices” (Karpik, 2010) where actors draw on their experience with the product and summarise them in a product review in contrast with the findings of Blank (2007) where judgements rely on quantitative test results. This study has provided a more detailed account of practices in relation to product news and advice (Richins and Root-Shaffer, 1988) where actors do not simply filter mass media information and diffuse them to their social nexus as argued by a number of scholars (Katz, 1955; King and Summers, 1970; Weimann, 1991). Actors create new information and diffuse theis to their constructed audience.

Apart from product knowledge, findings indicate that the expertise that is emerging is not only topical. Online communication thus far has emphasized on anonymity and limited visible cues (Berger and Iyengar, 2013) that both characterise this new medium. However, with a transition to multimedia, actors are foregrounded, and visible cues are present as in face-to-face communication. They are seen as “representatives” of their content, thereby linking their persona to their topical expertise that has been found to act as a prime indicator of influence in offline WOM
(Reynolds and Darden, 1971). Although demographics such as age or gender have been found to be less critical (Katz, 1957), this study found that social status is important. Social status, however, is expressed in audience size or followers through social networking channels. However, due to the importance of audience size in signalling social status as well as generating income, social integration and communication is most important in confirming opinion leadership (Jacoby and Hoyer, 1981) – particularly as actors’ monetise their audiences. Thus it may be argued that their audience is seen as an actor’s greatest asset. In order to construct and maintain their audience, a variety of practices have been incorporated such as being visible, incorporating social networking channels and enhanced possibilities to engage on their blog. Although they attract large audiences, these practices help their readers to envisage them and thus transforming their relationship. Linking to social closeness (Brown, Broderick and Lee, 2007) it has been found that actors’ aim involves transforming their weak ties (Granovetter, 1973) that are “one time” or “regular readers” into strong ties, e.g. community members that actively shape their blog. Actors found that a loyal membership is easier to maintain where actors adjust content which is relevant for these readers, contrasting with McQuarrie et al.’s (2013) view of taste leadership.

Overall, this study provided an elaborative overview of practices that are distinct from opinion leaders. It treats this emerging actor category as a very confined actor both in the production – as well as in the consumption – of content. As most studies just look at one aspect, this study integrated the community, content and wider interactions that influences practices which gives a more detailed and nuanced account of opinion leadership and online WOM.

### 9.2.2 Actors as bloggers

This study suggested that actors often refer to themselves as tech-bloggers. Furthermore, bloggers can also have a product focus similar to actors in this study (Zhao and Belk, 2007; McQuarrie et al., 2013), which may lead to shared practices. Although actors are diffusing information via blogs or blog-associated technologies (Vaast, Davidson and Mattson, 2013), based on their unique practices, actors become...
more distanced to the traditional image of a blogger. This has been found to be based on the characteristics of a traditional blog as a private display of information (Blood, 2002) to a small audience (Schmidt, 2007). As actors constructed a sizeable audience and are socially integrated in the marketplace (Vaast, Davidson and Mattson, 2014) actors’ blogs are intended for public display and use. Whereas blogs in a traditional sense may be altered to be invisible to search engines (Nardi et al., 2004), actors are dependent on visibility to construct their audience.

Based on the audience size of actors, it could be argued that they are similar to a specific type of blogger i.e. A-list bloggers who are characterised by their frequency of updates and connectedness. However, A-list blogs have been found to be predominantly filter-type blogs (Herring et al., 2004) and – based on their incoming and outgoing content references – are well connected. Thus A-list bloggers’ audiences mainly consist of one-time readers rather than a regular audience (as shown in Section 8.2.2). In contrast to A-list bloggers and bloggers overall, actors do not simply filter and replicate information – characterising the latter as a knowledge producer. This study showed that actors create their own information repository that not only consists of online sources (Schmidt, 2007), but also raised the importance of personal contacts in terms of gathering further information. For instance, this study showed how actors actively interact with marketers in order to acquire exclusive information early on. Therefore, actors’ content is driven by generating new and unique information that makes them distinct from other blogs. Moreover, the publication itself differs as their writing style is different (Schler et al., 2006), thereby allowing them to build a narrative (Kozinets et al., 2010). Although bloggers are claimed to have the choice to disclose information (Miller and Shepherd, 2004), the actors in this study have been found to market themselves by promoting their persona. The incorporation of multimedia may be seen as a transformation towards authorship as actors are reviewing products in front of the camera, thereby eliminating the issues that arise with blog anonymity (Blood, 2004; Nardi et al., 2004) such as lack of trust.

Another aspect of this study has been the discourse with other actors. Existing studies of blogs has highlighted that bloggers actively comment on each other’s blog,
which in an aggregated format is referred to as “the blogosphere” (Schmidt, 2007). Although this study emphasized the shared practices that are formed in alignment with other actors that may result in a “blog community” (Blood, 2002), information exchange on blogs is merely between the actor and his readers rather than other actors. Communication between actors is frequent, but predominantly obtained in other channels such as SNS channels or offline communication at events or conferences. However, they are of critical importance as actors can help to construct audiences, e.g. by referring to others on their blog. Therefore it is argued that these communities are critical in order to construct audiences and to increase content quality. Furthermore, “communal practices” (Kozinets et al., 2010), have been a prominent feature of this study. In particular, the practice of transparency in terms of the funding and acknowledgement of sources has been found to constitute shared expectations between actors. These practices are publicly reinforced by actors when they acknowledge and support confirmative behaviour and publicly distance themselves from non-confirmative behaviour. Thus, if actors do not follow communal practices, they will not be considered as part of the community (Perlmutter and Schoen, 2007).

This study further argues that actors not only refine blogging practices but also existing blogging types (Krishnamurthy, 2002; Blood, 2004; Herring et al., 2005). The personally-focussed presentation and the unique presentation might be argued to be similar to a “journal-type” blog. However, a journal-type blog is characterised by actors developing content from a blogger’s personal experiences infrequently. Similarly to journal-type blogs, actors develop content based on their personal experience (Nardi et al., 2004), but the latter are also using external sources such as events or news. Moreover, the role of actors in this study has been devoted to constructing a community that is critical to attracting a sizeable audience. Based on Krishnamurthy’s (2002) distinction between individual- or community-driven blogs, this study argues that actors’ blogs are individually-driven but community dependent, incorporating opinions from their readership and adjusting blog design as well as content. Actors disclose information about themselves, thus raising the importance of authorship (Nardi et al., 2004; Lenhart, 2006). Therefore this study points to a new type of blog, one facilitated by emerging actors.
Overall, this study showed the implications of all three blogging practice dimensions as identified by Schmidt (2007). Prior to this study, a coherent view of blogs did not exist. To unpack the puzzle, this study drew on blogging practices using a multidisciplinary perspective, which provided a more refined understanding of bloggers. A comprehensive account of the literature has been reviewed based on various disciplines such as Information Systems as well as Politics and Health (Lawson-Borders, 2005; Trammell and Keshelashvili, 2005; Herring et al., 2005; Huffaker and Calvert, 2005; Schmidt, 2007), a literature stream that has been coined as “blog studies” in this study. Thus, contributions are not limited to the arena of consumer electronics. As an on-going interest in blogs has been observed in a variety of disciplines, this study provided new insights into blogging practices, thereby offering new research avenues to study blogging.

9.3 Methodological reflections

The adoption of a practice-based discussion pointed to methodological concerns, which led to reconsidering the scope of the research design in relation to the phenomenon. The methodological journey of this study has been one of the main challenges of this thesis. The limitations of existing research have been identified in Chapter 2 where a quantitative approach is predominantly used. As such, these studies have tended to adopt simplistic methods to study this phenomenon. Blank (2007), for instance, outlined that content analysis is carried out at “an unnecessary arm’s length” as interviews could answer the question more directly. To deepen our understanding of this phenomenon there is a clear need to use methods that are able to capture the activities and processes that emerge in a wider field of practices on which actors draw. In particular, as the phenomenon is still relatively unexplored due to development of Web 2.0 and as discussed in recent studies (Berger, 2014; McQuarrie et al., 2013; Vaast, Davidson and Mattson, 2013), there is a need for a conceptually-grounded qualitative research approach. The nature of the research that needs to be conducted questions some of the methods used in previous studies ranging from opinion leadership (King and Summers, 1970; Childers, 1986; Iyengar,
Van den Bulte and Valente, 2011) to blog studies (Trammell and Keshelashvili, 2005; Kretz, 2010; Kozinets et al., 2010; McQuarrie et al., 2013).

To open the black box of this phenomenon, a practice-based discussion was used to emphasize the observation of activities in a natural setting (Holt, 1995). As the phenomenon was not well understood prior to conducting this research, a prolonged engagement has been sought where the research could explore the field setting and get a feel for the main activities and controversies that would arise. Incorporating a single case study prior to the main stage of data collection has been critical to capturing routines and processes. These have been obtained in a wider field of practices, skills and technological components, e.g. the backend of the blog that has been neglected in previous research (Schmidt, 2007).

However, opening the black box is not an easy process. The main stage focussed on the practices of thirteen actors, using interviews as a main form of data collection. Although interviews are found to be suitable for capturing constantly-transforming and reflective practices (Bryman, 1988; Belk, 2007), access to information and sampling proved to be more difficult. Earlier research has predominantly focussed on content analysis, thus overcoming issues with data access as blog information is publicly available (Blood, 2004; Herring et al., 2005). Sampling strategies have been found to being mainly undocumented or exclusively focussed on a single platform which led to a potentially skewed sample. This study draws attention to the relatively small number of actors in this product category (similar to Kozinets et al., 2013 who sampled 83 bloggers). Using a qualitative approach in this dissertation there was a high level of uncertainty if the actors would agree to participate as an interview informant. Herring et al. (2005), however, outlines that bloggers in general like to talk about their experiences, a finding that has been validated in this study. Thus, interviews – despite their potential risks – have been conducted as the potential benefits were found to be higher.

Another feature of a practice-based approach is the incorporation of a wider setting where actors form a shared understanding and interact with other members of the same system. In previous studies, there is a tendency to see actors as independent from the wider environment that they are a part of (Kretz, 2010; McQuarrie et al.,
Similar practice-based discussions are often critiqued as simply focusing on a situational context, thereby neglecting extended practices (Nicolini, Gherardi and Yanow, 2003). As identified in this study, actors are essential members of the ecosystem, which means that future studies will require additional emphasis on the context surrounding the phenomenon (McQuarrie et al., 2013). Including interviews from members of this ecosystem (e.g. marketers) proved useful when validating information and acquiring further insight into the nature of relationships and networks. Thus, instead of merely looking at what occurs within the strict boundaries of the phenomenon, this study, by adopting further contextual features and interacting with related actors, has shown a greater understanding of practices, including its environment. Furthermore, existing studies have been critiqued due to their disconnection between output, e.g. content and their underlying practices. Evidence is provided concerning the fading practice-centred approach with the move to a web-based form of communication in the existing research (Nardi et al., 2004). Therefore, analysing blog format and content has been found to be necessary in order to link distinct practices to blog outcomes.

Overall, the findings of this study showed that the emerging actor category is a phenomenon with a dynamic and evolving character, resulting in a multiplicity of practices and interactions that seem too complex to understand using statistical variables. Furthermore, this study emphasized practices as an evolving process where existing studies, particularly in the context of WOM marketing have tended to look at the phenomenon as a one-time event (Hinz et al., 2011). Thus, this study has highlighted the need to investigate practices in a wider setting using flexible methods that are able to reduce the ambiguity of this phenomenon.

9.4 Directions for future research

A limitation of this study is the empirical underrepresentation of consumers as part of the developed network and audience construction. However, it has been decided to specifically focus on the actor so as to explore this emerging phenomenon in-depth, rather than delivering a broad empirical result. This means that this study, as a result, has not looked in depth at the consumption of the content created by actors.
Consequently, a potential future research avenue is to provide an account of blog readers. In particular, those identified as actively engaging and co-shaping an actor’s blog would be of interest. Moreover, a quantitative study could be applied to examine readers’ perceptions of information quality construction in order to examine perception gaps between the information provided by actors and their audience. As part of this debate tensions between communal and commercial norms have been highlighted in this study (Kozinets et al., 2010). An alternative way to study these tensions would be to draw on the “certainty trough” introduced by MacKenzie (1993) that claims that the perceived uncertainty of knowledge is incomparably higher if readers are away from the actual site of knowledge production. Thus, it might be argued that readers are in fact less critical to marketer cooperation than other actors, marketers, or other members of the ecosystem.

Overall, given the changing interaction between marketers and actors, this thesis unveils a more problematic collaboration in the future, one where blogs may become fully sponsored by marketers. In addition, these collaborations could be externally managed, which demands increased transparency. There is a future need for actors to open new revenue streams beyond known forms that can be formed by considering both marketers and their audience. The vastly changing roles of both marketers and actors will be further outlined in the managerial implications of this study.

The increasing importance of technological changes such as the move towards video-based reviews has become apparent in the later stages of the research, which could provide an interesting avenue for future studies. In particular, communication through videos is still mediated but now includes a multiplicity of cues such as gestures, facial expressions that are more related to a traditional face-to-face setting. In addition, message characteristics are altered as video reviews give actors fewer possibilities to construct and refine communication (Berger and Iyengar, 2013). Thus, actors’ work might become more visible (Star and Strauss, 1999) which requires further evidence. Considering technological advances, this study addressed the importance of a visual focus in blog analysis, but it has not been the main form of

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16 This is further strengthened by actors claiming that banner-based advertising is becoming less lucrative given consumers’ use of ad-blockers.
research method used in this study. As outlined earlier, blog presentation becomes more interactive and differs from the traditional use of blog systems where there is a need to methodologically capture these distinct transformations. This study found that as part of the character narrative, actors choose a blog design that resembles their overall narrative but less is known regarding what effect this has on consumers’ perceptions of the blog.

Lastly, the phenomenon of an emerging actor category is not restricted to blogs. With the choice of diverse online communication channels where eWOM could be diffused (Berger and Iyengar, 2013) influential individuals might emerge in other channels in a similar way, e.g. Instagram, Snapchat. Thus, it is hoped that this study has provided insights beyond blogging by offering a new approach to the study of these individuals.

9.5 Managerial and policy implications

The complexity of interaction that stretches over a variety of communication channels has several managerial implications. Practices and processes that have been outlined have aimed to provide a better understanding of actors’ everyday activities with a substantial interest in their communications. As actors are in continuous interaction with marketers, audiences and other actors, interaction becomes more complex. This study argues that marketers need to converge to communication practices to remain in close contact. Despite the rise of online channels, offline communication has still been found to be essential. Although interaction is predominantly facilitated online, offline communications are sought out to foster relationships.

Given the more complex nature of communication paired with the substantial role of actors in the marketplace, it is suggested that there is a need for marketing specialists to react to these new ways of interaction over a longer period, thereby establishing long term relationships with actors. Continuous cooperation might reduce uncertainty (in terms of expected return) as actors found ways to account for this relationship,
e.g. they established a transparency that allows independence whilst collaborating with marketers. Furthermore, the dilemma of actors cooperating with marketers has been highlighted as the increasing commercial factor could harm an actor’s reputation. As intermediaries, actors are located between marketers and consumers, thus gaining a vital role in terms of providing impartial and independent information (similar to opinion leaders or market mavens). Actors found ways to maintain their relationship with both their audience and companies over a longer period. This sustaining relationship also influences the identification of targeted individuals in seeding campaigns as the findings indicated that potential collaborators are chosen from a pool of actors who marketers have already worked with. As relationships are intended to be sustained over a number of years, in addition to quantitative metrics (such as reach), qualitative metrics have been highlighted in this study that are used to “rank” actors, marketers want to cooperate with (such as the nature of community and relevance).

This study similarly provides implications for bloggers who want to construct and manage sizeable audiences. By extending the existing understanding of blogs it open avenues of blogs that are not focusing on a private display but rather want to construct and manage audiences. By highlighting the various forms of engagements with audiences resulting in three distinct audience types it gives a clearer understanding of distinct steps of audience development. Further, this study has shown that audiences are primarily managed through content devoting a pivotal role to unique content production including the acquisition and utilization of networks to do so.

Policy implications mainly draw on unregulated practices between actors and marketers that are continuously transforming, resulting in a “grey area” of practices (McQuarrie et al., 2013). Overall, the increasing commercial focus of actors’ blogs needs to be addressed. As actors are not institutionalised, they have not developed a clear code of ethics. Within the relationship between marketers and actors, a variety of collaboration formats apart from seeding products have emerged which require further identification. Findings for instance outlined that actors could be entirely sponsored by a marketer that raises questions of integrity.
9.6 Concluding remarks

This study has outlined a more profound overview of tech-bloggers as an emerging actor category, unveiling several aspects of practices and processes that have been neglected in existent research.

Among these is a lack of understanding of how these actors have emerged in such a short period of time, and how they have been able to construct such large audiences, particularly as actors have been found to have no sizeable audience prior to blogging. As a consequence, the prevailing scholarship has looked at information quality in the context of content creation but in the process has also provided rather generic insights that are not applicable to actors. Actors have been found to move from knowledge replicators to knowledge producers. Therefore, content is not created in isolation, but rather in response to feedback from readers. Moreover, to some extent practices have been found to be shaped within the actor category, resulting in a community of practice. Paired with marketer relations this study has provided a more complex and nuanced understanding of the interplay between actors, audience, marketer relations within wider practices, based on which – it is hoped – future studies of this phenomenon can build upon.
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Appendix

Appendix A – Participant information

Appendix B – Consent form
Appendix A – Participant information

Participant Information

Data Protection

All data collected in this interview will be held anonymously and securely in accordance with the Data Protection Act (1998) and is conform to the University of Edinburgh guidelines. No personal data is asked for or retained except name and occupation.

PhD Research Title

The emergence of a new actor category in electronic Word of Mouth communication.

Description

You are invited to participate in a research study on a new actor category that emerges in electronic Word of Mouth communication. You will take part in an interview as an industry expert to share your experiences and practices in this context. Expert interviews are conducted to further explore and elaborate characteristics and behaviour of emerging actors.

Risks and benefits

Your data will be anonymised for your privacy. There is a low risk of being identified in the research findings but we take your privacy seriously and the researcher will take every care to ensure this does not occur. You can be sent a copy of the findings if you would like and this may be of benefit to your own continuous professional development or understanding of the role of social actors in electronic Word of Mouth communication.

Time Involvement

Your participation in this research interview may take up to 60 minutes. A follow up interview can be agreed on.

Your Rights

If you have decided to participate in this project, please understand your participation is voluntary and you have the right to withdraw your consent or discontinue participation at any time without penalty. You have the right to refuse to answer particular questions. Your individual privacy will be maintained in all published and written data resulting from this work.

Please read the following information carefully. You will be asked to indicate that you understand and consent to taking part.
Appendix B – Consent form

Consent Form

I volunteer to participate in a research project conducted by Benjamin Koeck from the University of Edinburgh Business School. I understand that the project is designed to gather information about emerging actors in electronic Word of Mouth communication, the purpose of this PhD research.

1. My participation in this project is voluntary. I understand that I will not be paid for my participation. I may withdraw and discontinue participation at any time without penalty.
2. I have the right to decline to answer any question or to end the interview.
3. Participation involves being interviewed and notes will be written during the interview. In addition, the interview is audio captured. I understand that direct quotes from this interview might be used in future reports or publications. I am aware that all information and documents shared will be used for research purpose only, not any forms of commercial use.
4. I understand that the researcher will not identify me by personal information in any reports using information obtained from this interview, and that my confidentiality as a participant in this study will remain secure.
5. Subsequent uses of records and data will be subject to standard data use policies which protect the anonymity of individuals and institutions.
6. Faculty from my campus or any third party will neither be present at the interview nor have access to raw notes or transcripts.
7. I understand that this research study has been reviewed and approved by the University of Edinburgh Business School Marketing Research Group. For research problems or questions regarding subjects, the research can be contacted through email or phone.
8. I have read and understand the explanation provided to me. I have had all my questions answered to my satisfaction.
9. I have been given a copy of this consent form.

Based on these statements I therefore agree to be interviewed and share any further information.

Name of Participant

Benjamin Koeck

Name of Interviewee

Signature of Participant

Signature of Interviewee

For further information, please contact: Benjamin Koeck, University of Edinburgh Business School, Room 3.02, 29 Buccleuch Place, EH8 9JS Edinburgh, United Kingdom, b.koeck@ed.ac.uk