A Comparative Study of
Value Creation in Online Brand Communities

by

Guoyu Wang

A Thesis
presented to
The University of Guelph

In partial fulfillment of requirements
for the degree of
Master of Science
in
Marketing and Consumer Studies

Guelph, Ontario, Canada

© Guoyu Wang, December 2014
This study investigated globalization and localization impacts on value creation in two online forums of high-tech products. Currently, few comparative studies have been conducted to understand the localization impact, especially for globalized high-tech products, such as iPhones. This study applied a Netnography of everythingiCafe and weiphone.com iPhone forums and explored four values, functional, social, entertainment, and cultural, created respectively in both forums. Furthermore, this study investigated similarities, differences as well as some unique elements reflecting the local consumption context of each value. Findings in this thesis are beneficial to the academic community as they take diverse local consumption cultures into account and offer an extended conceptual understanding of online brand communities. This study also offers implications for companies and marketers in creating marketing strategies.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my advisor Professor May Aung for her continuous support and guidance during my M.Sc research. Thank you for your patience and encouragement, your inspiration and enthusiasm. I truly appreciate having had the opportunity to work with and learn from you.

I would also like to thank my committee member, Professor Melanie Dempsey. Thank you for your insightful ideas and critical comments on this thesis.

Additionally, I would like to extend my deep appreciation to the entire Department of Marketing and Consumer Studies. Thank you to all the professors and secretaries in the department. In specific: Jian Zhou, Towhidul Islam, Vinay Kanetkar, and Karen Gough. You have all made great impact to my academic experience. Thank you to all my fellow classmates and my dear friends. It has been my pleasure to be a member of this big family and to know you all. Thank you for your valuable help and support.

I am also grateful for the kindness and patience of my cousin Juan. Thank you for always being there for me and giving me guidance and support during my M.Sc study. You are family, friend, and teacher to me. Thank you!

Moreover, special thanks to my fiancé Qing. Thank you for your love, care and encouragement.

Most importantly, I would like to thank my dearest parents. Thank you Mom and Dad for believing in me and being the biggest inspirations in my life. Thank you for supporting me spiritually and pushing me consistently throughout my life. This thesis is dedicated to you!
# Table of Contents

## Chapter One: Introduction

1.1 Research Objectives and Questions ................................................................. 3

1.2 Literature Background ....................................................................................... 4

1.3 Research Context ............................................................................................... 7

1.4 Research Methodology ..................................................................................... 7

1.5 Research Contributions ..................................................................................... 8

  1.5.1 Conceptual Contributions ............................................................................. 8
  1.5.2 Managerial Contributions ........................................................................... 8

## Chapter Two: Literature Review

2.1 Online Communities and Online Brand Communities ...................................... 10

  2.1.1 Traditional and Online Communities ............................................................. 11
  2.1.2 Brand Community and Online Brand Communities ...................................... 12

2.2 Studies in Online Brand Communities from Different Perspectives ............... 15

  2.2.1 Relationships in Online Brand Communities ................................................ 16
  2.2.2 Motivations for Participating in Online Brand Communities ...................... 19
  2.2.3 Value Creation in Online Brand Communities .............................................. 24
  2.2.4 Literature Investigating Both Motivations and Value Creation in Online Brand Communities .......................................................... 29
  2.2.5 Globalization and Localization .................................................................... 31

2.3 Research Gap .................................................................................................... 35

## Chapter Three: Research Methodology

3.1 Research Site .................................................................................................... 38

  3.1.1 EverythingiCafe iPhone Forum .................................................................... 40
  3.1.2 Weiphone.com iPhone Forum ...................................................................... 41

3.2 Netnography ..................................................................................................... 43

3.3 Data Collection ................................................................................................. 44

3.4 Data Analysis .................................................................................................... 45

3.5 Criteria to Evaluate Research ........................................................................... 47

3.6 Research Ethics ................................................................................................. 48

## Chapter Four: Research Findings

4.1 Functional Value ............................................................................................... 50

  4.1.1 Similarities in Demonstrating Functional Values ........................................... 51
  4.1.2 Relevancy of Local Consumption Context: Online Messaging Medium in China .................................................................................. 55
  4.1.3 Relevancy of Local Consumption Context: Extreme Caution Regarding iPhone Features .......................................................... 56

4.2 Social Value ....................................................................................................... 57

  4.2.1 Similarities in Demonstrating Social Values ................................................ 57
  4.2.2 Relevancy of Local Consumption Context: Embedded in Traditional Culture .................................................................................. 64
  4.2.3 Relevancy of Local Consumption Context: Embedded in Local Marketplace .................................................................................. 66
  4.2.4 Relevancy of Local Consumption Context: From Online to Offline .................. 68

4.3 Entertainment Value ......................................................................................... 69
4.3.1 Similarities in Demonstrating Entertainment Values
4.3.2 Relevancy of Local Consumption Context: Professional Platform and Guidance
4.3.3 Relevancy of Local Consumption Context: Entertainment Value for Life

4.4 CULTURAL VALUE
4.4.1 Self-Governed Culture
4.4.2 Inclusive Cultural Context
4.4.3 Exclusive Cultural Context

4.5 SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION
5.1 DISCUSSION
5.1.1 Discussion – General Content and Activity
5.1.2 Discussion – Values Created in Online Forums
5.1.3 Discussion – Impacts of Localization in Value Creation

5.2 CONTRIBUTIONS
5.2.1 Conceptual Contributions
5.2.2 Managerial Contributions

5.3 CONCLUSIONS
5.3.1 Limitations
5.3.2 Future Research Directions

REFERENCES

APPENDICES
Appendix A: everythingiCafe homepage
Appendix B: everythingiCafe forum page
Appendix C: everythingiCafe iPhone forum page
Appendix D: iPhone 5 sub-forum and threads in there
Appendix E: Screenshot of a thread and postings in there
Appendix F: weiphone.com homepage
Appendix G: weiphone.com forum page
Appendix H: weiphone.com iPhone forum page
Appendix I: iPhone 5S sub-forum and threads in there
Appendix J: Screenshot of a thread and postings in there
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Customer-Customer-Brand Trial Relationship Model (Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001)…..13
Figure 2: From Off-Line Community to Virtual Community (Sicilia & Palazon, 2008)……..15
Figure 3: Customer-Centric Model (McAlexander et al., 2002)………………………………..17
Figure 4: Customers Sharing beyond Their Own Brand………………………………………………..18
Figure 5: Movement of Meaning (McCracken, 1986)………………………………………………32
Figure 6: Screenshot of an online game “The Adventures of Cindy” in Feng Games…………77
Figure 7: Screenshot of postings around the game “The Adventures of Cindy”……………77
Figure 8: Screenshot of a Personal Centre in Feng Games…………………………………………78
Figure 9: Screenshot of forum regulations in weiphone.com……………………………………81
Figure 10: Screenshot of a blocked posting in weiphone.com…………………………………83
LIST OF TABLES

Table 1: Brief summary of studies on motivations for participation in online brand communities .................................................................23

Table 2: Brief summary of studies on value creation in online brand communities........28

Table 3: Brief summary of studies on motivations and value creation in online brand communities.................................................................................................31

Table 4: Brief summary of findings.................................................................................................................................................................91
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Due to the rapid increase of economic globalization and the swift development of Internet industry, massive new opportunities and challenges have emerged for marketing brands and products (Bellman et al., 2006). Studies on brand community have been evolving during the last two decades, making this field into a valuable domain for scholars. Nonetheless, the role of social media and the relevance of online brand communities represent a fledgling field that requires special attention (Claricini and Scarpi, 2007).

Recent studies have shed light upon the nature of online brand communities in the contexts of various brands, countries and consumption cultures (Sicilia and Palazon, 2008; Ewing, 2008; Jawecki et al., 2011; Seraj, 2012; etc.). Overall, it is believed that the meaning of brand and brand communities should transcend national boundaries because online brand communities are “liberated from geography” (Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001, p 413). However, Rokka (2010) investigated a modified netnographic inquiry for better understanding of “translocal sites,” and underlined the importance of consumer culture within transnational online communities and consumer networks. According to McCracken (1986), consumer goods have the ability to “carry and communicate cultural meaning” (McCracken, 1986, p 71). Cultural meanings can move continually from a culturally constituted world to consumer goods, and then transfer to individual consumers. Although the impact of localization and globalization has captured the attention of some researchers, it deserves more attention by scholars. Understanding different local consumption contexts, especially the localization impacts on globalized brands, can help companies and marketers improve their marketing strategies and to better promote their products.
Furthermore, high-tech products (often described by researchers as new/novel products) are becoming more and more popular among marketers and consumers due to their novelty and inherent characteristics. On the one hand, consumers increasingly chase this “high-tech fashion” and are passionate about knowing this kind of product. On the other hand, according to Thomke and Von Hippel (2002), new product development is nonetheless difficult in terms of understanding what the consumers want and how to satisfy their needs: “The linking process between the manufacturer and the customer can be both costly and lengthy” (Kim and Bae, 2008, p 357).

One way to understand consumers better is by examining the values that are relevant to them in each consumption context. To date, some studies have been conducted on understanding value creation in online brand communities (Sicilia and Palazon, 2008; Ewing, 2008; Seraj, 2012; etc.). For example, a study by Sicilia and Palazon (2008) found functional value, social value, and experiential value as relevant values for online brand communities. According to Seraj (2012), intellectual value, social value and cultural value are relevant values for an online brand community. However, most of the studies were conducted within the context of one research site (i.e., in a single country or single consumption culture). Moreover, most of these studies focused only on certain product categories, such as convenience products (Sicilia and Palazon, 2008) or niche brands (Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001; McAlexander et al., 2002; etc.). Thus, there is a need to conduct comparative studies (that is, comparative studies of online brand communities developed and operated within certain local country/cultural groups) in the context of high-tech products, such as iPhones.
This study adopted the methodology of netnography (Kozinets, 1999, 2002), and conducted ethnography online of the two most popular local iPhone online communities: weiphone.com (bbs.feng.com) and everythingiCafe (forums.everythingiCafe.com) iPhone forums. The study focused on the extensive postings of forum members, exploring the similarities as well as differences in value creation between these two online brand forums. In other words, this study attempted to understand two online brand communities representing different localized consumption cultural groups. For companies and marketers, it is of great importance to know how their marketing strategies operate by investigating and understanding different values created by users in their online brand communities. Understanding the characteristics of an online brand community that can deliver value to its consumers, stimulate consumer participation and trigger positive word-of-mouth has crucial business implications.

1.1 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES AND QUESTIONS

The ultimate goal of this study is to provide a better understanding of online forums dedicated to high-tech products. The findings are beneficial to the academic community by extending the conceptual understanding of online brand communities and providing insight on running a successful and sustainable online community that brings satisfaction, commitment, and customer loyalty. This study also has implications for companies and marketers in creating marketing strategies.

Specifically, this study raised the following research questions:-

1) What are the similarities and differences between online brand communities of different consumption culture contexts, in terms of general content and activities?
2) What are the values (e.g., functional and social values – Sicilia and Palazon, 2008; Seraj, 2012) created in the online brand communities of high-tech products?

3) Are these values different for online brand communities of different consumption cultural-based contexts (that is, the globalization and localization impacts on consumption culture of two online contexts)? How do these values impact/guide the existence of these communities?

1.2 LITERATURE BACKGROUND

This literature review primarily explored existing concepts in online brand communities, and also examined studies in online brand communities that have been conducted from different important perspectives. These perspectives included relationships in online brand communities, motivations for participating in them, and value creation within them, as well as studies concerning globalization and localization in online brand communities.

Concepts concerning online community are the foundational literature for this study. According to Rheingold (1993, p 7), online communities are “social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace.” People get together online in virtual worlds, trying to reach group or individual goals, in addition to feeling that they belong to a certain community (Dholakia et al., 2004). One of the strengths of the Internet is that, in terms of communication, it helps to provide an impetus for overcoming the constraints of time and space.
When online communities relate to specific brands, they are defined as “online brand communities” (Cova and Pace, 2006, Sicilia and Palazon, 2008, etc.). Even though research concerning online brand communities has been growing this past decade, none of the existing studies have come to a precise and widely agreed-upon definition of online brand communities. While there have been some attempts, there is little consensus. For example, Sicilia and Palazon (2008) made the first attempt, defining an online brand community as “a group of individuals with common interests in a brand who communicate with each other electronically in a platform provided by the company which supports the brand” (Sicilia and Palazon, 2008, p 257). In a different example, De Valck et al. (2009, p 185) defined an online brand community as “a specialized, non-geographically bound, online community, based on social communications and relationships among a brand’s consumers.” Despite the lack of an exact definition, many questions regarding online brand communities have been studied during the past decade, providing some insights to brand managers and marketers regarding how to make their websites more attractive and effective (Sicilia and Palazon, 2008).

Due to the data-driven nature, this study used existing literature on value creation in online brand communities and studies concerning globalization and localization in brand communities as conceptual foundations. Zeithaml (1988, p 14) defined “value” as “the consumer’s overall assessment of the utility of a product based on perceptions of what is received and what is given.” Social interactions between consumers and brands create values beyond the products’ intended functional benefits (Cova, 1997). Meanwhile, value creation via interactions between consumers is also of vital importance (Schau et al., 2009).
To date, previous studies have conducted research on value creation in online brand communities (Sicilia and Palazon, 2008; Ewing, 2008; Seraj, 2012; etc.). However, most of these studies were conducted within the context of one research site, for example within one country/one consumption culture. Moreover, most of these studies only focused on certain products, such as convenience products (Sicilia and Palazon, 2008) or niche brands (Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001; McAlexander et al., 2002; etc.).

Likewise, most existing literature concerning globalization and localization in brand communities has been conducted in the context of the same global level of culture, with little regard for the localization impacts (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995; Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001; Cova et al., 2007; Arnone et al., 2010). According to McCracken (1986), cultural meanings can move from a culturally constituted world to consumer goods, and then transfer to individual consumers. This indicates that consumption culture could also have impacts on online brand communities. Indeed, local consumers sometimes have greater control over the meaning of a global brand (Cova and Pace, 2006). Nonetheless, to date few online brand community studies have been conducted to explore the likely impact from localized cultures.

So far, there have been very few comparative studies examining multiple localized online brand communities. This study sought to address this gap, focusing on value creation in two iPhone forums under different consumption culture contexts. In doing so, this study investigated localization impacts in them, providing further understanding of this research field and raising in-depth implications for both theoretical and managerial aspects.
1.3 RESEARCH CONTEXT

Two forums representing consumer-initiated online brand communities dedicated to iPhone were selected as the research contexts for this study: everythingiCafe (forums.everythingiCafe.com) and weiphone.com (bbs.feng.com). The everythingiCafe forum, founded by “crazy ones” for iPhone in early 2006 (9 months before Steve Jobs announced the first iPhone), is a public website “for people with a passion for iPhones and iPads” (About Us: everythingiCafe, n.d.). It is a popular website for Apple fans in the United States: As of Sept. 16, 2013, everythingiCafe had been publicly recommended by 247 people on Google+ and liked by 2,800 people on Facebook, in addition to having 4,023 followers on Twitter. Weiphone.com, founded by Apple fans in China on Jan. 10th, 2007, is the first professional Apple online brand community in China, and provides a communication, discussion and study platform for Apple product users. As of 4:30am, Sep. 20, 2013 (China time zone), weiphone.com forum had 14,203 visits that day, 151,623 visit the day before, 91,044,189 threads, and 6,294,353 members. So far, weiphone.com is the most popular and widely recognized professional website in China among Apple product (including iPhone) users and fans.

1.4 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

To explore perceived values in these iPhone forums, netnography (Kozinets, 1999, 2002), a qualitative exploratory research, was employed. Netnography “uses computer-mediated communications as a source of data to arrive at the ethnographic understanding and representation of a cultural or communal phenomenon” (Kozinets, 2010, p.60). As a qualitative research method, netnography can offer greater insight into the virtual space in relation to consumers’ needs and wants, choices, symbolic meanings and more (Xun and Reynolds, 2010).
The data were analyzed using analytical coding and hermeneutic interpretation (Kozinets, 2010). Also, NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software, was applied in analytical coding.

1.5 RESEARCH CONTRIBUTIONS

This study offered both conceptual and managerial contributions.

1.5.1 Conceptual Contributions

This study examined the impacts of localization through values created in online brand communities and provided insights on value-guided content and activities of the online brand communities. Comparative studies on value creation in online forums of high-tech products have yet to be conducted, and this study addressed that shortcoming of the field. This study of value creation in brand communities was distinguished from the current literature in three important ways: (1) this study was comparative research; (2) this study investigated values in online forums of high-tech products under different consumption contexts, providing insights on value-guided content and activities; and (3) this study indicated avenues for future research on transnational online brand communities.

1.5.2 Managerial Contributions

From a managerial point of view, this study provided information about how best to collaborate with communities across different cultures. For companies and marketers, it is crucial to know how their marketing strategies operate in different countries by investigating and understanding different values created by users in their online brand communities. Exploring main characteristics of an online brand community that can deliver value to its consumers, stimulate
consumer participation and trigger positive e-WOM, has crucial business implications. Furthermore, understanding the similarities and differences among consumption cultures can help companies and marketers improve their marketing strategies in order to better promote their products, especially in the case of high-tech products.
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review begins with an overview of the work on both traditional and online communities, and then reviews offline versus online brand communities with the intent of providing a general sense of the important constructs and definitions. Next, this section provides a glimpse of the existing studies on online brand communities that have been conducted from different perspectives. These studies are organized under five sub-sections: (1) studies on relationships in online brand communities, exploring how brand community members interact with each other; (2) studies on motivations for participating in online brand communities, which investigate what makes community members participate; (3) studies on value creation in online brand communities, which seek to understand what values community members create and are beneficial for running a successful and sustainable online brand community; (4) studies including both participation motivations and value creation in online brand communities, examining the motivations and values as well as their relationship; and, (5) studies concerning globalization and localization in online brand communities. This section concludes with a discussion on important research gaps.

2.1 ONLINE COMMUNITIES AND ONLINE BRAND COMMUNITIES

In general, communities can be defined as a traditional community and an online community. Also communities relating to specific brands can be defined and portrayed as traditional brand community and online brand community.
2.1.1 Traditional and Online Communities

So far, there have been numerous definitions of communities. For example, in both anthropological and sociological research a community is discussed primarily with respect to its origin (Anderson, 2005). Rothaermel and Sugiyama (2001), scholars in anthropology, defined a community as a phenomenon where people regularly get together and share certain interests. According to Tönnies (1912), a pioneer in research on communities, traditional communities are characterized as a certain group of people with time and space interrelationships. People get together and are dependent on each other, developing “specific interaction patterns guided by socially constructed rules and norms” (Anderson, 2005, p 286).

Communities are further traditionally seen as being constrained and characterized by location (Anderson, 2005). However, the development of computers and the Internet has fostered the emergence and growth of online/virtual communities (Rheingold, 1993), providing the impetus for overcoming the constraints of space and time otherwise involved in traditional community settings. In other words, the Internet has helped reduce the barriers for interaction and has enhanced the effectiveness of communication and interaction among community members (Anderson, 2005). This evolved notion of community is further evident in Rheingold’s (1993, p7) definition, in which an online community involves “social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace.” Here, participants share a common focus in an online community, which is specialized but not geographically bound (Dholakia et al., 2004). Indeed, the Internet has stimulated and enhanced the development of community activities beyond its prior boundaries (Anderson, 2005).
Finally, the advent of technological advancements has further influenced communities by shaping the ways in which socialization occurs (Seraj, 2012). Seraj (2012, p210) stated that “social factors such as the evolving needs for individuals to build relationships and belong to communities urged them to gather online and participate in such networks.” An online community is like virtual glue for people with the desire to belong to a group (Simmons, 2008). Thus, people gather together in virtual worlds, trying to reach group or individual goals and feel belonging to a certain community (Dholakia et al., 2004).

### 2.1.2 Brand Community and Online Brand Communities

The concept of community can also be used to describe consumers who exhibit similar patterns of behaviors in the marketplace. Specifically, many researchers have focused their work on brand communities, which is defined as “a specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relationships among users of a brand” (Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001, p.412). This work by Muniz and O’Guinn (2001) marked the introduction of the concept of ‘brand community’ into the consumer behavior literature. Using traditional ethnographic methods, including interviews and informal online data collection, the authors presented a new customer-customer-brand trial relationship model (Figure 1) and outlined three main mechanisms that, together, facilitate the brand community experience: consciousness of kind, rituals and traditions, and moral responsibility (Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001; O’Guinn and Muniz, 2005).

A brand community can be understood as an authorized form of community as it provides a platform for people sharing experiences or exchanging information related to a certain brand.
According to Cova and Pace (2006), a brand community is a group of people with common interests in a specific brand, which together produces a parallel social universe that has its own stories, values, vocabulary and hierarchy. Indeed, research on brand communities has argued that a brand community is in fact a community that forms around a brand (Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001, Bagozzi and Dholakia, 2006; Hoppe et al., 2007).

![Figure 1: Customer-Customer-Brand Trial Relationship Model](source: Muniz and O’Guinn (2001))

Since Muniz and O’Guinn’s (2001) seminal work, a growing body of literature focusing on virtual/online communities of brands has emerged (Cova and Pace, 2006; Brown et al., 2007; Jayanti, 2010; Seraj, 2012, etc.). Questions regarding both offline and online brand communities have been addressed during the past decade, giving insights to brand managers and marketers regarding how to make their websites more attractive and effective (Sicilia and Palazon, 2008).

Despite this emerging body of knowledge, none of the existing studies have come to a widely agreed-upon definition of what an online brand community is. While, there has been some attempt at defining online brand communities, it is important to note that the various definitions
have not seen consensus. For example, Sicilia and Palazon (2008) made the first attempt to fill in this gap and defined a virtual (online) brand community as “a group of individuals with common interests in a brand who communicate with each other electronically in a platform provided by the company which supports the brand” (Sicilia and Palazon, 2008, p 257). In their case study of Coco-Cola’s Spanish virtual community, Sicilia and Palazon investigated the differences between brand communities versus virtual brand communities, and demonstrated the gradual shift from off-line brand communities to virtual brand communities (Figure 2). Meanwhile, “(offline) community members may establish a brand related discussion but they may also share opinions about any other topic of interest” (Sicilia and Palazon, 2008, p 257) as well.

In a different example, De Valck et al. (2009, p 185) defined online brand community as “a specialized, non-geographically bound, online community, based on social communications and relationships among a brand’s consumers.” Brand community members share common interests, which simulate affinity and can create a bond (De Valck et al., 2009). Still, these aforementioned definitions either confine online brand communities as established or facilitated by companies, or instead give no explanation about the establishers. Some researchers, challenging these statements, have demonstrated that brand communities can exist on their own or through the establishment by consumers and brand fans (Hollenbeck and Zinkhan, 2006; Cova et al., 2007; Ewing, 2008; Zaglia, 2013, etc.). Both company-facilitated and consumer/brand fan-facilitated online brand communities are worthy of research attention, especially the latter.
2.2 STUDIES IN ONLINE BRAND COMMUNITIES FROM DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES

Studies in online brand communities are conducted from many different perspectives. The following sub-sections discuss the most relevant concepts for studying online brand communities. These sub-sections include perspectives on relationships in online brand communities, motivations for participating in online brand communities, value creation in online brand communities, literatures on both motivations and value creation in online brand communities, and studies concerning globalization and localization in brand communities.
2.2.1 Relationships in Online Brand Communities

The brand community concept is situated primarily in the relationship and branding marketing literature. During the 1990’s, little empirical work had been conducted about how consumers and their brands interacted. Fournier (1998) is among the most well known researchers to investigate the validity of the relationship proposition within the context of consumers and brands. Fournier’s (1998) work provided a framework for better understanding the different types of consumer-brand relationships and demonstrated that the consumer-brand relationship effect went beyond simple brand loyalty. This work explored brand relationship quality and proposed that consumers become involved with a brand in a way that allows meaning to be constructed via their activities and actions.

Since Fournier, additional researchers have tackled the relationship aspect of brand communities. For example, Muniz and O’Guinn (2001) included other consumers into their triad model of brand communities, describing a brand community as a combination of customer-customer-brand relationships and suggesting that, apart from the relationships between consumers and brands, relationships between community members are also of vital importance (Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001). Researchers have since agreed that it is impossible for an online brand community to be successful without relationships among community members (Sicilia and Palazon, 2008). According to Sicilia and Palazon (2008), community members’ feelings of connection with each other may be even stronger and more important than their feelings towards the brand itself.
McAlexander et al. (2002)’s customer-centric model (Figure 3) extended Muniz and O’Guinn (2001)’s model by studying Harley Davidson clubs and Jeep communities. Their research elucidated two more relationships beyond those between the consumers and the firm. Specifically, they suggested an important relationship exists between the product and the consumers. This customer-centric model has since contributed a lot to the literature on brand relationships, especially with respect to consumer identities. According to this more extensive model, brand communities “enhance consumer identification with the brand and foster the development of a strong corporate feeling” (Sicilia and Palazon, 2008). Additionally, according to McAlexander et al. (2002), marketers and companies may improve the relationships between the firm and consumers by advancing shared consumers experiences, and by forming better platforms for their community.

As discussed previously, online brand communities free community members from geographical restrictions and enable them to communicate with others in any location and at any time. Interestingly, such communities further allow for the development of rich relationships – not
only with the brand, but also among community members. As suggested by Sicilia and Palazon (2008, p. 257-258), “crucial relationships arise among fellow consumers that are even more important than relationships established with the brand or firm.” Also of importance, the accessibility of these communities means that anyone can use them. Without the limitations of time and space, online brand community members experience more flexibility and in this case, allow consumers within any given online brand community to engage in the sharing of content beyond the focal brand (Figure 4). Most recently, Zaglia (2013) stated that members of online brand communities form not just around one product or service, but around a constellation of brands. In addition, a given community may feature not only supporters/fans of a brand, but also objectors and critics. In this regard, relationships in an online brand community include those between: 1) community members/consumers, 2) consumers and the firm, 3) consumers and the brand, 4) consumers and the product, and 5) consumers/members from one online brand community and consumers/members from another online brand community.

**Figure 4: Customers Sharing beyond Their Own Brand**

In summary, online brand communities are crucial platforms for consumers communicating with each other and for companies marketing their brands (Sicilia and Palazon, 2008; Schau et al.,
These online platforms “not only provide companies with an additional marketing communication channel, but also enable the company to establish linkages to devote to users of their product” (Anderson, 2005, p 285). Without the existence of physical contact, the social context and the relationships among members may change accordingly (Sicilia and Palazon, 2008). Such relationships have been recognized as “dynamic multiplex phenomena” (Aung et al., 2013). Through interactions, varies values created in online brand communities. Understanding the relationships among different roles in online brand communities and how consumers connect to each other is fundamental to the exploration of value creation in online brand communities.

2.2.2 Motivations for Participating in Online Brand Communities

Researchers have suggested that people are motivated to participate in online brand communities for various reasons (Bagozzi and Dholakia, 2006), mostly related to the internal and personal characteristics of consumer individuals.

Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004) listed eight key factors motivating consumers to participate and make contributions to online brand communities: (1) venting negative feelings; (2) concern for other consumers; (3) self-enhancement; (4) advice-seeking; (5) social benefits; (6) economic benefits; (7) platform assistance; and (8) helping the company. They stated in their study that social benefits are of vital importance and represent the most significant factors affecting consumers’ participation. Many researchers have made similar or consistent conclusions, providing an extensive literature detailing the motivations driving participation in online brand communities full and rich (Figallo, 1998; Oldenburg, 1999; Mathwick et al., 2008; etc.).
For example, researchers have suggested that people are motivated to participate in online brand communities in order to reach group or individual goals ranging from participation in co-creation and innovation (Fuller et al., 2007; Jawecki et al., 2011), to recreation (Ridings and Gefen, 2004; Molesworth and Denegri-Knott, 2007) and self-exhibition (Simmons, 2008). Fuller et al.’s (2007) study focused on joint-development activities within online consumer groups, examining consumer innovation activities for basketball shoes in user innovation communities (i.e., Niketalk, Basketball-boards, Kicksology, etc.). They showed that consumers participating in these communities were driven by the excitement of co-creation and innovation rather than by pure needs for product improvement (Fuller et al., 2007). In a different study, Jawecki et al. (2011) explored innovation activities in basketball shoe communities, adding some Chinese-speaking ones (i.e., Chinese Streetball, Good Shoes, Xinxin Sport Shoes, etc). In this comparative study, findings reflected deeper cross-cultural differences regarding co-creation and innovation activities in online communities (Jawecki et al., 2011).

Other motivations cited by the literature include the “desire for social action” (Bagozzi and Dholakia, 2002), “social link” (Cova, 1997), and “re-tribalization” (Kozinets, 1999; Cova and Cova, 2002), all indicating higher-order social goals. Individuals’ desires to build relationships with each other and to create feelings of belonging to communities drive them to get together online and participate in online communities. Ridings and Gefen (2004) further point out that factors such as information exchange, social support, friendship, and recreation are often cited as reasons by individuals who “hang out online” with others. These individuals’ satisfaction in their interactions with other community members further informs and affects their subsequent participation in online brand communities (Langerak et al., 2003). Indeed, Gordon (2010) names
interactivity and online social interactions as examples of “interactive engagement,” which together demonstrate the higher-order factors of participation, socializing, and community experiences.

Another example worth discussing regarding motivations for participation is Ewing’s (2008) case study on the online music community “I Love Music.” This particular work not only temporally traced members of an online community, but also provided insights into the changing nature of members’ online participation. Unlike most of the existing research, Ewing (2008) tracked the online community from its inception in 2000 through 2005. His research captured two types of motivation driving members’ involvement in this music community: content-based motivations and social-based motivations (Ewing, 2008). Ewing (2008) identified the key differences between these motivations, stating that content motivations “can operate whoever the other participants in a community are” (p 580), whereas social motivations are “based on interactions with specific members of the community” (p 580). With this interpretation, Ewing (2008) proposed that the life cycle of consumers’/community members’ participation involves a shift from content motivations to social motivations. As a result, Ewing’s (2008) work provides valuable insight into the dynamic nature of online communities.

The following table provides a summary of the relevant research on consumers’ motivations for participation in online brand communities. Interestingly, it appears that social factors are the most widely explored. Individual goals, such as self-enhancement, self-exhibition, advice seeking, and information exchange come next, followed by individuals’ feelings of belonging. It is important to note that the research contexts vary from online to offline in these studies and the
brand communities range from a focus on convenience products to niche brands and online music communities.
### Table 1: Brief summary of studies on motivations for participation in online brand communities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author &amp; Year</th>
<th>Motivations</th>
<th>Context(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cova (1997)</td>
<td>“Social link”</td>
<td>N/A (Literature review)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Re-tribalization</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kozinets (1999)</td>
<td>Social factors, Re-tribalization</td>
<td>Virtual communities of consumption</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>e.g., alt.coffee newsgroup, The Official X-Files Home Page</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(Offline, United States)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(Online and offline)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004)</td>
<td>Venting negative feelings; Concern for other consumers; Self-enhancement; Advise-seeking; Social benefits; Economic benefits; Platform assistance; Helping the company.</td>
<td>German web-based consumer opinion platform – epinion.com.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ridings &amp; Gefen (2004)</td>
<td>Information exchange; Social support; Friendship; Recreation.</td>
<td>27 bulletin board type online communities addressing different topics.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simmons (2008)</td>
<td>Self-exhibition</td>
<td>N/A (Literature review)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In conclusion, most of the motivations cited above are from the standpoint of the individual consumer, relating to their internal and personal aspects. Further, most of these studies are
situated in just one or similar contexts (i.e., within one country/culture). Only a few researchers, such as Jawecki et al. (2011), have ventured into comparative studies (i.e., comparing English and Chinese-speaking online communities). Since online brand communities transcend the limits of time and geography, the impact of differences in consumers’ consumption behavior – particularly as they are expressed online – merit more attention.

### 2.2.3 Value Creation in Online Brand Communities

Value creation in online brand communities is another crucial segment of the literature on online communities. Value creation is an important concept for researchers as it is an antecedent to consumer loyalty, member satisfaction and community sustainability (Seraj, 2012). Zeithaml (1988, p 14) defines “value” as “the consumer’s overall assessment of the utility of a product based on perceptions of what is received and what is given.” Literatures concerning value creation in online brand communities vary.

For example, Sicilia and Palazon (2008) investigated a theoretical explanation for consumers’ participation in online brand communities using the “uses and gratification paradigm” (U&G) (Katz, 1959). U&G is a media use paradigm proposed by Katz (1959) in the context of mass communication research. According to the U&G paradigm, media satisfies consumers in both their social and psychological needs (Katz et al., 1973). This paradigm suggests reasons why individuals choose a certain medium over others and explains consumers’ underlying motivations (Katz et al., 1973). Sicilia and Palazon (2008) employed the U&G paradigm to study the successful Spanish Coca-Cola online brand community. They explore three main
values, functional, social and experiential, showing that “a web site can act as a marketing tool to develop a group of loyal consumers around the brand” (Sicilia and Palazon, 2008, p 255).

Users obtain functional value, also known as informational value (Mathwick et al., 2008) or purposive value (Dholakia et al., 2004), from the online brand community by sharing resources, advice, information or expertise with other members. These virtual interactions contribute to both web site traffic and brand loyalty (Mathwick et al., 2008). Social value, which includes friendship, emotional support, social status, and social enhancement, can also be derived from an online brand community. Members with similar problems or experiences tend to communicate with each other and interact in online social activities, providing consumers with “interpersonal connectivity.” Finally, experiential value, which has also been characterized as entertainment value in Sicilia and Palazon’s (2008) work, provides a key explanation for consumers’ high interest and involvement with other people in an online brand community. As stated by Sicilia and Palazon (2008, p 266), “virtual communities are not valuable mainly for their informational value, but they may be even more valuable for the social support and entertainment options they offer.”

By exploring these three values as they exist in an online brand community, researchers have not only provided deep insights into what attracts loyal community members, but have also offered useful guidelines for the creation and maintenance of successful online brand communities.

Many researchers have found similar or related values across online brand communities. Through the use of the U&G paradigm, recent studies have been able to elucidate the underlying
values existing in online brand communities (Sangwan, 2005). Further, values such as purposive value, self-discovery, entertainment value, social enhancement, and maintenance of interpersonal connectivity have also gained focus as a research topic (c.f. Cheung and Lee 2009). Similar to Sicilia and Palazon (2008), Cheung and Lee (2009) used information systems continuance (Bhattacherjee, 2001), social influence (Kelman, 1974), and the uses and gratification paradigm (Katz, 1959) in order to explain individuals’ reasons for getting involved in online communities and their criteria for recommending them to others. Another interesting study was conducted by Seraj (2012) under a typical context. By investigating the value creation in a closed brand community, Airliner.net, Seraj found that generation of value – specifically intellectual, social and cultural value – helped stimulate users’ willingness to pay to belong to this brand community.

Perhaps most relevant to understanding value creation in online brand communities is the meta-ethnography literature review conducted by Schau et al. (2009). These authors reviewed the literature on online brand communities and identified “common processes of value creation among networked firm-facing actors in brand-centered communities” (Schau et al., 2009, p31). In doing so, they identified twelve common practices across brand communities, as well as four thematic findings that guide the practices used by brand communities to generate value. While the authors sampled nine brand communities from mainly traditional product categories, all of the chosen brands were niche brands (i.e., Mercedes, Harley Davidson, etc.). While these findings are of great value, the study does not address the important knowledge gap regarding how brand communities interact when the product categories involve more mass-produced brands.
The following table summarizes the existing research studies on value creation in online brand communities. On the one hand, online brand communities involve values such as self-discovery, personal freedom, and self-exhibition. On the other hand, most of these studies also include discussion on functional value (described as intellectual value or informational value by some researchers), social value (embodied in experience sharing, emotional expressing and supporting, as well as social enhancement), and cultural value (a value resulting from deepening and maturing online social relationships). The research contexts included in the listed studies range from online/offline niche brands to convenience products. In addition, geographic regions of research also vary, although minimally, with most of the work falling within one country or one consumption culture (i.e., within the United States, China, or Spain).
Table 2: Brief summary of studies on value creation in online brand communities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author &amp; Year</th>
<th>Values</th>
<th>Context(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Schouten &amp; McAlexander (1995)</td>
<td>Personal freedom; Patriotism and American heritage; Machismo.</td>
<td>Community of Harley-Davidson motorcycle owners. (Offline, United States)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mathwick et al. (2008)</td>
<td>Informational value; Social value; Virtual community commitment.</td>
<td>A virtual P3 community (English-language firm generated forum: development of software for digital media creation and editing)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nolan et. al. (2007)</td>
<td>Utility value; Interests.</td>
<td>An online business community with over 50 small and medium sized enterprises (SEMs), information providers and business experts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sicilia &amp; Palazon (2008)</td>
<td>Functional value; Social value; Experiential value.</td>
<td>Spanish Coco-Cola online brand community.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schau et al. (2009)</td>
<td>Social networking; Community engagement; Impression management; Brand use.</td>
<td>N/A (Literature review)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seraj (2012)</td>
<td>Intellectual value; Social value; Cultural value.</td>
<td>A closed online aviation brand community: Airliner.net. (with members all around the world)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As discussed above, the research on value creation in online brand communities is rather contextually-limited (i.e., geographically or by product type). Researchers should strive to investigate multi-consumption cultural issues and move beyond niche or convenience product limitations, especially given the rich platform of online brand communities.
2.2.4 Literature Investigating Both Motivations and Value Creation in Online Brand Communities

In general, a considerable number of studies have discussed and investigated both motivations for participation and value creation in online brand communities (c.f. Dholakia et al., 2004; Sangwan, 2005; Wiertz and De Ruyter, 2007). According to these researchers, motivations for participation and value creation are more or less integrated – understanding the motivations for joining communities could be used as guidance for the investigation of value creation in online brand communities, and in return, values created in online brand communities could be understood as motivations for consumers’ participation.

For example, in Dholakia et al.’s (2004) study, the researchers used a survey-based approach to investigate a broad range of online communities. This work produced a social influence model of consumer participation for both network- and small-group-based online communities. In this model, values such as purposive, self-discovery, maintenance of interpersonal interconnectivity, social enhancement, and entertainment were captured. Furthermore, the authors drew on the U&G paradigm (Katz, 1959) in order to understand the motives and values for participation in an online community. Some of the most relevant evidence provided by this and subsequent work is that the reason for individuals’ participation and involvement in online brand communities can be attributed to the values created in these communities (Dholakia et al., 2004; Cova and Pace, 2006).

Indeed, in another example, Cova and Pace (2006) found that self-exhibition in front of other consumers was the key motivation for consumers’ participation in an online brand community.
They also suggested that the values in an online brand community have gone beyond the brand to include different aspects of social living. In addition, they noted that their particular community context (“my Nutella The community,” a convenience product) is an “open construction area that will evolve and take shape depending on what participants do with it” (Cova and Pace, 2006, p1096). As a result, social factors, the co-creation of knowledge/information, and the formative quality content contribute to values in online brand communities; in return, values in these online brand communities motivate individuals to have more interactions in them.

The following table summarizes the research studies on both motivations and value creation in online brand communities. These studies suggest that there is some overlap areas between motivations and values created in online brand communities. The findings derived from these varied contexts will help researchers determine what is the emphasis to focus.
Table 3: Brief summary of studies on both motivations and value creation in online brand communities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author &amp; Year</th>
<th>Motivations &amp; Values</th>
<th>Context(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Dholakia et al. (2004)      | Reach group or individual goals, Informational value (instrumental value, purposive value); Self-discovery value; Maintaining interpersonal connectivity value; Social enhancement value; Entertainment value. | Network-based and small-group-based virtual communities:  
   -- Email lists: The Lord of the Rings enthusiast and the “DisneyDollarLess” Club;  
   -- Website bulletin boards: “Advanced Squad Leader” website;  
   -- Usenet newsgroups: Linux installation, Pokemon, Ford Mustang cars;  
   -- Real-time online-chat systems: ICQ and AOL;  
   -- Web-based chat rooms: AOL and MSN websites;  
   -- Multiplayer virtual games: Diablo II, Dungeon Siege, and Neverwinter Nights;  
   -- Multi-user: Avatar, Wheel of Time, and Xyllomer. |
| Cova and Pace (2006)        | Self-exhibition; Rituals linked to the brand (brand connection).                     | Convenience product online community: My Nutella The Community (Italian) |
| Wiertz & De Ruyter (2007)   | Online interaction propensity; Commitment to the community; Information value.        | English-speaking firm-hosted commercial online communities.                |

2.2.5 Globalization and Localization

This final section discusses aspects of online brand communities as they relate to globalization and localization. In particular, the cultural meaning of goods as introduced by McCracken (1986) provides an appropriate lens through which to understand the changing nature of object meaning in the context of online brand communities.
According to McCracken (1986), consumer goods have the ability to “carry and communicate cultural meaning” (p71). These cultural meanings can move continually from a culturally constituted world to consumer goods, and then transfer to individual consumers (see Figure 5 for the movement of meaning model). In other words, culture meanings can shift along a trajectory of “world to good and good to individual” (McCracken, 1986, p71). McCracken (1986) encouraged researchers to focus on consumers and consumer goods as the “way-station of meaning” and to emphasize structural and dynamic properties of consumption. For example, values created in online brand communities could be different across the different consumption cultures in the United States and China.

Figure 5: Movement of Meaning
Source: McCracken (1986)

Many studies of online brand communities are conducted in a global context, but little consideration has been given to the likely impacts resulting from local consumption cultures. For example, on the one hand, some studies have built on homogeneous foundations at global level
cultural meanings regardless of geography, indicating that “the meaning of the brand is supposed to be able to transcend national boundaries” (Cova et al., 2007, p314). In support of this, a study by Muniz and O’Guinn (2001) investigated three brand communities – Ford Bronco, Macintosh, and Saab. By exploring the brand communities’ characteristics, processes, and particulars, Muniz and O’Guinn (2001) affirmed that brand communities are “liberated from geography” via shared consciousness, ritual and traditions, and sense of moral responsibilities. Although this study enhanced understanding of globalized brands, it did not add to existing knowledge of local contexts.

Being akin to Muniz and O’Guinn’s (2001) research, similar studies have suggested that in order to better manage online brand communities facing globalization, it is important to understand how various brand communities experience differences in meaning co-creation – and some studies have accomplished this (e.g., Arnone et al., 2010; Schouten and McAlexander 1995). However, these studies stressed the homogeneity of the brand meaning under the global context, regardless of local consumption cultures. As a result, little consideration has yet been given to geographic diversity within a single brand community, particularly a global online brand community.

In contrast, literature on global heterogeneity promoting local ethos and local consumption contexts challenges globalization and global ethos. Indeed, Ahn et al. (2010, p 34) suggested that “online consumer-generated brand communities are not culturally neutral, but culture-bound.” For example, in a study of Turkish rock musicians by Yazicioglu (2010), heterogeneity was found with respect to the ways in which they create their own modes of rock music “that is no
longer regarded as foreign” (p 238). This study illustrates the reterritorialization of rock music in Turkey “through the lens of consumption practices and market structures” (Yazicioglu, 2010, p 249). Yazicioglu (2010) concludes that rock music as it exists in this new cultural territory is different from its birthplace and is consequently endowed with new interpretations by its local Turkish ethos.

In a different example, Cova and Pace (2006) looked at one Italian online community called “My Nutella The Community,” based on the large globalized Nutella brand. Using this globalized online brand community, the researchers analyzed the power that an online brand community exerts over a brand of a “mass-marketed convenience product,” demonstrating that local consumers have greater control over the meaning of a global brand than previously thought (Cova and Pace, 2006). Challenging the “non-geographically bound” aspect of brand communities by Muniz and O’Guinn (2001), Cova et al. (2007) conducted a study of both offline and online brand communities associated with the global Warhammer brand. This study highlighted the differences between the way France and US sub-communities, showing that despite the shared global ethos (i.e., shared consciousness) the offline, the offline communities were also highly influenced by their localized ethos.

Still, few online brand community studies have compared communities across cultures. In one example, Jawecki et al. (2011) undertook a study examining the impact of cultural differences on creative processes and innovation creation in both English-speaking and Chinese-speaking online basketball communities. According to Jawecki et al.’s (2011) study, members from different cultures have different expectations and routines. Further, “what communities consider as
creative and innovative may depend on culture” (Jawecki et al., 2011). For marketers, this suggests the possibility of recreating the brand to fit a more local consumption culture, or to structure it to fit that of a larger, more globalized brand ethos.

The development of the Internet and globalization has allowed individuals from different countries or cultures get online and show not only their affection for a but also their resistance to a brand. In the global context, consumers will shape or recreate the meaning of a brand based on their own needs and situation. Local contexts and consumption cultures may have great impacts on global contexts. Based on the existing literature, there is a need to do a comparative study exploring the impacts of localization on a brand, especially on a globalized brand.

2.3 RESEARCH GAP

The literature above provides a conceptual framework for understanding the motivations for participating in online brand communities and the value created within them. Most of the motivations are complex, coming from the standpoint of individual consumers and involving their internal and personal aspects. Values, on the other hand, reflect the product utilities pulling from the communities and group processes. Even though there are overlapping areas between the research on motivations and value creation, patterns of values created in online brand communities are easier to observe and perceive. As a result, this study utilized values concepts as conceptual guidelines.

Nowadays, globalization has become a huge issue for management, especially with respect to global marketing. At the same time, localized consumption culture takes a highly influential
standpoint as well. As discussed above, cultural meanings can move continuously from a culturally constituted world to consumer goods, and then transfer to individual consumers. With the existence of different consumption cultures, the complete understanding of online brand communities becomes more challenging. This area requires better understanding and thus represents the focus of this study.

Existing studies direct little attention toward the localization impacts on online brand communities, especially for globalized brands. Also, few comparative studies have examined the impacts of local consumption cultures in any depth. An online brand community attached to the global context “constitutes a complex phenomenon, one that both integrates and ignores geographical considerations” (Cova et al., 2007, p 314). For future research, it is a challenge to examine the effect of (consumption) culture on online communities (Gallagher and Savage, 2013). Values created in online brand communities could be different across the different consumption cultures, so this variable deserves more attention from scholars.

To date, most studies have only focused on certain product categories, such as convenience products (Sicilia and Palazon, 2008) or niche brands (Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001; McAlexander et al., 2002; etc.). In order to best expand our knowledge in this area, the current study will examine the research contexts of two online brand communities (forums) for a single high-tech product, iPhone, that originate in two different consumption culture (marketplace) contexts: everythingiCafe and weiphone.com.
To conclude, existing research concerning value creation in online brand communities has been conducted from a variety of perspectives. However, comparative research examining the localization impacts across different consumption cultures of high-tech products, such as iPhones, has generally been ignored. This study focuses on the value creation perspective in iPhone forums under two consumption culture contexts, investigating localization impacts, providing a further understanding to this field of research and contributing more in-depth insights to both the literature and practice.
CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research methodology section begins with an introduction of both the English and the Chinese iPhone forums – *everythingiCafe* and *weiphone.com*, respectively. Next, Netnography, the chosen methodology for this study is introduced and explained. The following section details the data collection processes, including the use of archival data. Finally, the criteria for evaluating this study and its research ethics procedures are presented.

3.1 RESEARCH SITE

Two consumer-generated online brand communities dedicated to iPhone were selected as the research contexts for this study. They are *everythingiCafe* ([forums.everythingiCafe.com](http://forums.everythingiCafe.com)) and *weiphone.com* ([bbs.feng.com](http://bbs.feng.com)) iPhone forums. The rationale for choosing these particular forums is detailed below.

Kozinets (1999) identified five types of virtual communities: boards, independent web-pages, lists, multi-user dungeons and chat rooms. Forums represent an additional type that requires more attention from researchers. Generally speaking, forums are low-regulation environments that are usually able to develop with little specific guidance or interference (Ewing, 2008). This special characteristic of forums makes them good study contexts for investigating the ways in which culture emerges within an online community and the effects that culture has on community contents (Ewing, 2008).
To date, many research studies have been conducted in the context of online brand communities for niche brands, such as Mercedes, Harley Davidson, Jeep, Saab and Macintosh computers (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995; Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001; McAlexander et al., 2002; etc.), and convenience products (McWilliam, 2000; Cova and Pace, 2006; Sicilia and Palazon, 2008; Mangold and Fauld, 2009), such as soaps (i.e., Dove) or soft drinks (i.e., Coca-Cola). Nevertheless, few attentions have been paid on high-tech products, such as iPhones.

Lastly, online brand communities have also been classified as “firm-generated” and “consumer-generated” forums or communities (Sung et al., 2010). According to Sung et al. (2010), consumer-generated online brand communities are freer from regulations and provide less regulated environments in which members can communicate freely and form the culture of the community on their own. Thus, this study focused on two consumer-generated online forums.

Also, both forums meet the following criteria for selecting a research site as proposed by Kozinets (2010, p 89):

- **Relevant (relation to the research focus):** The two chosen sites offer different cultural contexts likely indicating impact of different cultural values;
- **Active (recent and regular communications):** The two chosen sites have large numbers of daily postings by fans/consumers;
- **Interactive (flow of participant communications):** The two chosen sites have fans/consumers communicating with each other;
- **Substantial (a critical mass of communicators and an energetic feel):** The two chosen sites have fan/consumers posting and discussions that are practical, interesting and engaging;
- **Heterogeneous (a number of different participants):** The two chosen sites have large
numbers of members of different ages and backgrounds from different locations
(everythingicafe: members from different states of America, and from Canada;
weiphone.com: members from different regions of China)

Next, information about the two selected sites is discussed.

3.1.1 EverythingiCafe iPhone Forum

The everythingiCafe iPhone forum, founded by “crazy ones” for iPhone in early 2006 (9 months before Steve Jobs announced the original iPhone), is a public website “for people with a passion for iPhones and iPads.” It is quite a popular website for Apple fans in the United States (See Appendix A to view the homepage of the everythingiCafe). By Sept. 16, 2013, everythingiCafe had been publicly recommended by 247 people on Google+; had been liked by 2,800 people on Facebook, and had 4,023 followers on twitter. People can choose to join this community by being a member of the forum and can sign up for their bi-weekly newsletter as well. Also, instead of surfing everythingiCafe online with a computer/laptop, they can conveniently browse the forums by using the app downloaded to their iPhones or iPads. In summary, everythingiCafe is a website providing “the absolute best coverage, while helping to foster an awesome community for people to discuss the iPhones and iPads we love so much” (About Us: everythingiCafe, n.d.).

By clicking the “FORUM” button under the banner of the homepage, users can link to the forum page (See Appendix B to view the forum page of the everythingiCafe). In order to become a member of the everythingiCafe forum, users can sign up with either his/her email address or with
his/her Facebook account. The forum statistics state that, as of Sept. 16, 2013, there were 335,981 members, 71,990 discussions and 943,620 messages in the forum. Divided to cover different Apple products, the everythingiCafe includes sub-forums such as iPhone Forums, iPad Forums, Apple Television, iPod, and Apple Computers. Focusing on iPhone Forums, it is a platform for users to “get help and support for your iPhone, ask questions and receive free expert advice on how to fix problems” (See Appendix C to view the iPhone forum page of the everythingiCafe). According to the founders, this iPhone forum is “a great place to learn how to use your iPhone.” The sub-forums are organized by different models of iPhones (e.g., iPhone 5S, iPhone 5, iPhone 5C), popular topics, and for indispensable information about iPhones and iPhone users (e.g., iPhone Apps and Games, iPhone Cases and Accessories, Contests and Giveaways, and iWatch) (See Appendix D to view iPhone 5 sub-forum and a few threads in there). Community members communicate with each other by posting their views and opinions in various existing threads (See Appendix E to view one thread and postings in there).

3.1.2 Weiphone.com iPhone Forum

Founded by Apple fans in China on Jan. 10th, 2007, which is the exact same day Apple Inc. released the very first iPhone to the world, weiphone.com is the first professional Apple brand community, providing a communication, discussion and a study platform for Apple product users in China (See Appendix F to view the homepage of the weiphone.com). Similar to everythingiCafe, weiphone.com has its own forum app for iPhone and iPad users’ convenience.

In March 2014, due to the unauthorized sharing of videos and films, its domain name was blocked by National Copyright Administration of the PRC. Since then, the domain name
weiphone.com has been changed to feng.com. However, the domain name weiphone.com can still be used as a link to the new home page. For this study, the domain name weiphone.com is used to report the findings. So far, weiphone.com is the most popular and widely recognized professional website in China among Chinese Apple product (including iPhone) users and fans.

By clicking the “Forum” button under the banner, users can access weiphone.com forum page, which is also colorful and interspersed with many ads (both on the banner and the forum page) and news (See Appendix G to view the forum page of the weiphone.com). As of 4:30am, Sept. 20, 2013 (China time zone), the weiphone.com forum had 14,203 today’s visit, 151,623 yesterday’s visit, 91,044,189 threads and 6,294,353 members. People can browse as a visitor or sign up to become a member using their email accounts. Forums are divided based on different Apple products, such as “Apple Mac Forum”, “Apple iPad Forum”, “Apple iPod Forum”, “Apple iPhone Forum”, and “Apple TV Forum”, etc. According to the founders, weiphone.com is aimed to “establish the portal site of iPhone for Chinese users” (About Us: weiphone.com, n.d.) (See Appendix H to view the iPhone forum page of the weiphone.com). Similar to everythingiCafe, sub-forums in the weiphone.com iPhone forum are arranged by different models of iPhones (See Appendix I to view iPhone 5S sub-forum and a few threads in there; and Appendix J to view one thread example and postings in there). In summary, weiphone.com is the biggest and the most popular Apple online brand community in China with great spirits of innovation and breakthrough.
3.2 NETNOGRAPHY

To explore and examine postings in both forums, netnography (Kozinets, 1999, 2002), a qualitative exploratory research methodology was used.

Quantitative research often refers to counts and measures of things, relating to numbers and implying precision (Berg, 2009). Qualitative research, on the contrary, refers to the meanings, concepts, characteristics, symbols, and descriptions of things (Berg, 2009). Qualitative methods were described by Berg as the following:

“Qualitative research properly seeks answers to questions by examining various social settings and the individuals who inhabit these settings. Qualitative researchers, then, are most interested in how “humans arrange themselves and their settings and how inhabitants of these settings make sense of this surroundings through symbols, rituals, social structures, social roles and so forth (Berg, 2009, p 8).”

Since the research contexts of this study were two forum settings, and the objective of this study was to understand value creation practice in online brand communities and the impacts from their consumption cultural differences, a qualitative approach, which was more exploratory and descriptive, was regarded as the most appropriate methodology for this study.

Originating in ethnography (Arnould and Wallendorf, 1994), netnography is a participant-observational research based on online fieldwork (Kozinets, 2010). It “uses computer-mediated communications as a source of data to arrive at the ethnographic understanding and representation of a cultural or communal phenomenon” (Kozinets, 2010, p.60). One of the major advantages of netnography is that “it is a naturalistic technique” (Kozinets, 2010, p 56). As a
method, netnography is “faster, simpler, and less expensive than traditional ethnography” (Kozinets, 2002, p 61). Being a qualitative research method by nature, it is suggested that netnography can offer greater insight into the virtual space in relation to consumers’ needs and wants, choices, symbolic meanings and more (Xun and Reynolds, 2010).

3.3 DATA COLLECTION

Data collection in netnography means communicating with members of a culture or community (Kozinets, 2010). According to Kozinets (2010, p 95), this communication means “relevant involvement, engagement, contact, interaction, communion, relation, collaboration and connection with community members – not with a website, server, or a keyboard, but with the people on the other end.” Netnographic researchers should analyze online “content” rather than netnographic participant-observational fieldwork “in” an online community (Kozinets, 2010, p 95). There are three different kinds of netnography data: archival data, elicited data, and fieldnote data. For this study, archival data were collected. During data collection, necessary data including relevant participants’ postings and photos were compiled.

Archival data in this study were data that were directly copied from both everythingiCafe and weiphone.com. These data were unaffected by the actions of the netnographer, and were excellent supplements to extend and deepen the knowledge of the cultural contexts (Kozinets, 2010). Guided by the research questions and available resources (e.g., numbers of threads in each sub-forum, numbers of views and replies in each thread, etc.), threads and postings with significant data were captured by screenshots or were copied and saved in files. In addition, since not all important information was carried in letters and numbers, visual and graphical data, such
as photos and graphs, were captured and saved in files, and classified and sorted into folders and sub-folders (Kozinets, 2010).

Threads for use in the study were selected on the basis of having large numbers of replies (around 50 or more postings), indicating active participation and interest from members, and occurring within a 4-month period from September 20, 2013 (the date iPhone 5S and 5C released simultaneously in China and America) to the end of January 2014. When deciding whether to select particular meaningful threads or postings (some with a certain number of ‘likes’ for example), a flexible number of replies was also acceptable. In addition, since weiphone.com had a huge amount of online users and innumerable threads and postings every day (about 110,000 postings per day), the website only showed the latest threads within a limit of 500 pages in each sub-forum. Members cannot see every thread or posting. In this case, four steps were used to collect data in weiphone.com: (1) searching for key wordings and codings summarized from everythingiCafe in weiphone.com; (2) sorting the threads by the number of replies; (3) choosing which sub-forum the threads belongs to (i.e: iPhone 5S, 5C, iPhone Beer, iPhone Apps and Games, or Meet and Greet of Nationwide Weiphoners); and (4) choosing the popular threads posted within the above-noted time period.

3.4 DATA ANALYSIS

Two types of data analysis in netnography, analytical coding and hermeneutic interpretation were adopted in this study. According to Kozinets (2010), there are six steps in the netnography analytic processes, arranged in sequence (Kozinets, 2010, p 119):
• **Coding**: affixing codes or categories to data drawn from both *everythingiCafe* and *weiphone.com*, such as threads, postings, photographs and so on. Various values that existed in both forums were explored, and themes such as “iPhone functions,” “social values reflected in general lifestyle theme,” and “fun games sharing” were coded;

• **Noting**: reflections on the data or other remarks were noted in the margins of the data, memos were made in order to make comments regarding the coding process;

• **Abstracting and comparing**: identifying similarities and differences between the themes in terms of value creation in the forums, including some unique elements reflecting local consumption context;

• **Checking and refinement**: returning to both forums and collecting more data to check and refine the identified patterns, processes, similarities and differences;

• **Generalizing**: identifying generalizations that accurately explain the trends in the data; and

• **Theorizing**: integrating such generalizations with a formalized, existing body of knowledge.

Furthermore, in order to broaden the analysis (Kozinets, 2010), hermeneutic interpretations were adopted. According to Thompson et al. (1994), a good hermeneutic interpretation delves into both the social and historical contexts of the data for explanations, providing a subtle, specific, and nuanced cultural interpretation. For this study, by observing postings and exploring values that existed in both forums, this hermeneutic interpretation process identified some unique elements in the threads and postings reflecting local consumption context, providing key insights into similarities and differences in value creation between these two forums.
Moreover, since one of the research contexts was in Chinese language, another bilingual coder who is fluent in both English and Chinese was involved in this comparative study. The other coder was responsible for translating the content in English language back into Chinese language to double check if the results were the same, in order to ensure validity of the data.

3.5 CRITERIA TO EVALUATE RESEARCH

Netnography is “essential in shaping our understanding of the Internet, its impact on culture, and culture’s impacts on the Internet” (Baym, 2006, p 79). However, interpretations of observations by researchers are subjective. Criteria to evaluate and inspire qualitative research need to be taken into account. This research was evaluated using the criteria for doing netnographic research proposed by Kozinets (2010).

The first criterion is coherence, which means each different set of interpretations in the netnography is “free from internal contradictions and presents a unified pattern” (Kozinets, 2010, p 163). The analysis in this study was integrated into one coherent pattern, an overriding argument freed from internal contradiction. The second criterion is rigour, meaning “the extent to which the text recognizes and adheres to the standards of netnographic research” (Kozinets, 2010, p 164). This requires that netnographers understand the requirements of conducting netnography and follow its protocols. The next criterion is literacy. A thorough review of past literature in this related area has been done in order to increase the credibility of the netnographic research. For this study, a range of relevant research on online brand community, value creation, and cross-culture had been acquired from relevant journals or books, such as International Journal of Research in Marketing, Global Journal of Business Research, Journal of Marketing
Research, Journal of Interactive Marketing, International Marketing Review, and Journal of consumer Research. The fourth criterion here is groundedness, which calls for data-supported theoretical representations and convincing linkages between data and theory. In this case, a strong sense of culture members’ language was offered and online postings and photos by community members were liberally cited or quoted as well. Finally, innovation is also a crucial criterion of netnography, and one reflected by the knowledge gap identified in the literature prior to conducting the study.

3.6 RESEARCH ETHICS

Marketing researchers desire to use netnographic methodology following ethical guidelines. Internet Research Ethics (or IRE) is “a sphere of inquiry with many disciplinary examinations of what it means to conduct research – ethically – in online or Internet – based environments” (Buchanan, 2004, p 14). According to Kozinets (2010), when conducting a study, there were some ethical issues relevant to netnography that were carefully attended to by researcher.

Firstly, an important concern was whether the research contexts were public or private. Both everythingiCafe and weiphone.com were generated by Apple fans and were public online brand communities. People could easily get into the forums, click in the threads and read the postings. These forums do not require membership or password-related accessibility for this level of access – it is only required if one wants to post their own comments. Studies under this type of context can be exempt from human subject research (Kozinets, 2010). In addition, according to the Research Ethics Board (REB) at the University of Guelph, there is no requirement of getting consent for individual postings on forum pages that belong to the public domain. This unique
ethical position makes data collection in this study relatively straightforward. Since both forums are formed around a high-tech product and are platforms for iPhone fans communication, the postings and photos are not extremely sensitive or personal.

Another concern relates to ensuring confidentiality and anonymity to the informants (Kozinets, 2002). Even though postings in both iPhone forums were public, this does not mean that researchers could use the data without regard for confidentiality issues (Kozinets, 2010). In this study, since most of members used their personal email address or Facebook/Renren accounts during registration, such identifying information was not presented in this study. In addition, each face in photos posted by members were obscured in order to ensure anonymity.
CHAPTER FOUR: RESEARCH FINDINGS

Four values created through postings were found in both everythingiCafe and weiphone.com iPhone forums:

- **Functional value**;
- **Social value**;
- **Entertainment value**; and
- **Cultural value**.

The values most commonly found in both forums were the *functional values*, which were mainly reflected in postings relating to sharing product information and seeking advice by their members. The active participation of Apple enthusiasts and professionals resulted in co-creation of the functional values in both everythingiCafe and weiphone.com. *Social values* were found to be embedded in postings about life, friendship, and love, indicating members’ use of the forums as platforms to meet people online, establishing connections that go beyond the products to which the forums are dedicated. *Entertainment values* were also found in these forums, specifically within typical *iPhone Apps and Games* sub-forum with postings relating to game information and game techniques. In particular, the official IOS game-operating platform, *Feng Games*, offered opportunities for members to participate in online leisure activities. Finally, *cultural values* were reflected in postings that expressed fondness for the forum, to Apple and to the iPhone products. They were also reflected in specific community related rituals and group norms.
The following sections discuss the similarities and differences between the forums with respect to each of these values.

4.1 FUNCTIONAL VALUE

Functional value, also known as “purposive value,” is “the value derived from accomplishing some pre-determined instrumental purpose” (Dholakia et al., 2004, p. 244). Specifically, according to Sicilia and Palazon, functional values can be created through postings concerning “advice, information, and expertise” (2008, p. 259). In other words, online brand community members could obtain functional values through “co-creation of knowledge and the quality of user-generated content” (Seraj, 2012, p. 213).

Illustrations of similarities and differences (including some unique elements reflecting local consumption contexts) in the existence of functional values in everythingiCafe and weiphone.com are presented next.

4.1.1 Similarities in Demonstrating Functional Values

Functional values were frequently shown in themes such as iPhone functions (e.g., fingerprint ID, sound, battery, and camera), physical elements (e.g., buttons and charging plugs), product information (e.g., colors), as well as expertise on topics such as iPhone authentication and selling. In both forums, members could obtain information, resolve problems, and access related resources through their participation.
Functional value could be seen directly in the name of the thread, as shown in the following example titled ‘iPhone 5s sound when shaking’ from the iPhone 5S sub-forum in everythingiCafe. An administrator posted this thread asking about a sound/button functional issue with his iPhone 5S. It had a large number of replies (54) and views (8,366), indicating that numerous people had come across the same issue or had interest in it. This thread was started on Sep 26, 2013, and was discussed until April 28, 2014. See below for some extracted postings from this thread:

Thread Title: iPhone 5s sound when shaking
(http://forums.everythingicafe.com/threads/iphone-5s-sound-when-shaking.103833/)

Sample posts in it:
“When I shake my iPhone 5s (not with any force), there is a noticeable sound, almost as if something is loose inside. I'm not sure if it's normal, since I've only got one iPhone 5s on hand. Is anyone else experiencing the same? It's definitely coming from in or around the home button.” – chris (administrator)

“You don't need to return it. There are moving parts in the phone and it isn't uncommon to hear some rattling when shaking it. My iPhone 4 rattled when I shook it. It functioned perfectly fine so I didn't return it. It still worked fine a year and half later when I sold it and upgraded to the 4S.” – Europa (moderator)

“I'm sorry, no. Brand new mobile phones shouldn't rattle. iPhone or otherwise. The tolerances are so tight that a rattle means something is loose that shouldn't be. Just because it functions properly doesn't mean it's okay.” – jaydoc1 (contributor)

In this example, in addition to the administrator’s postings, other members also gave their advice and opinions. Disagreements concerning the reasons for the issue were also posted. Members debated about whether to return the “rattle phone” or not, and this issue resulted in many postings.
Likewise, a thread and some relevant postings that displayed functional values, selected from iPhone 5S sub-forum in weiphone.com, are offered. This thread was quite a popular one with numerous replies (186) and views (8,973). An excerpt from the thread is as follow:

**Thread Title:** The home button of Space Grey, has anyone seen the phone in person?

**Sample posts in it:**
“\[\text{I haven’t got the phone yet, but I really think the color of the home button is ugly and weird. It doesn’t even match the color of the whole body of the phone. Maybe it would be better when I physically see the phone? I like the space grey though.}\]” – ynnall (White Apple)

“The home button fits perfectly with the phone when you see it.” – mujutao (Platinum Apple)

“I think the space grey looks nice! The colors match perfectly.” – killsting (White Apple)

“Up. Thank you for sharing.” (Platinum Apple)

Postings in this thread involved product information and opinion sharing related to the new iPhone 5S, especially about the colors. The member ‘ynnall’ was asking other members’ points of view on the “Space Grey” iPhone 5S color. Members shared their opinions and gave product information in terms of the available phone colors as well.

Another example of functional value-related postings refers to the iPhone battery. Forums from both everythingiCafe and weiphone.com had considerable numbers of threads and postings concerning this issue.

**Thread Title:** Battery drainage discovery
(everythingiCafe – iPhone 5S, 68 replies & 2,900 views)
Sample posts in it:
“Hi all. I recently bought the 5S (used 4 for 2 years now). I had read about battery drainage issues, but in using the 5S I didn't notice any problems. Well that was until I added a third page of apps. Right away after being fully charged to 100%, it dropped 2 points instantly. I had only added 3 apps. Then I decided to experiment and consolidate my apps into folders, just enough to only need two pages. Now my battery is back to normal. No drainage issues. Anyone notice that?” – TeriFig (new member)

“Adding more pages won't affect the battery. It sometimes drops by 2% because it's just an estimate and not 100% accurate. Using all 64 GB also wouldn't affect the battery life.” – Europa (moderator)

Thread Title: How to maintain your iPhone 5S battery and tips for charging. (weiphone.com – iPhone 5S, 918 replies & 189,780 views) (http://bbs.feng.com/forum.php?mod=viewthread&tid=7185601)

Sample posts in it:
A member posted quite a long article sharing expertise on iPhone batteries and tips for charging. Other members replied it:

“OMG. I finished reading it! Thanks a lot for sharing!” – SADFSDFSAF (Little Apple)

“Even though what you posted are more about theoretical stuffs, they are still very useful.” – join375 (Green Apple)

“It’s golden! Thanks for sharing.” – 花の葬 (White Apple)

“Charging stuffs won’t bother me any more.” – shaner333 (Little Apple)

These examples above indicated that both everythingiCafe and weiphone.com iPhone forums had postings reflecting functional values. Members tended to use these online platforms to ask and answer product related questions, and to share and communicate product information. Threads with functional values were found to be abundant in both everythingiCafe and weiphone.com. Next, the sub-sections will present the unique differences due to the nature of local consumption context.
4.1.2 Relevancy of Local Consumption Context: Online Messaging Medium in China

One of the unique differences found in postings reflecting function value in everythingiCafe and weiphone.com iPhone forums is due to the online messaging medium (QQ) that is common in China and used by many iPhone consumers there. The following is an example:

**Thread Title:** The picture was unclear when I used the front camera to video chat via QQ. The back camera was fine. What was wrong?
(984 replies & 25,338 views)

**Sample posts in it:**
“I just got a new iPhone 5s. When I was video chatting with my friend via QQ, the pictures were unclear using the front camera. The back one was fine. What was wrong with it? My phone was not jail-broken.” – yyn1981 (Green Apple)

“Don’t worry. It must be the incompatibility between the new IOS system and QQ. Just wait for the QQ update then. Your phone is fine. Lots of people have the same issue.” – shmily870531 (Platinum Apple)

“It works fine with FaceTime, but not QQ!” – goalfen (Red Apple)

This example discussed an incompatibility issue between the new IOS system and a Chinese chat software QQ, which was developed by Tencent Co., China, in Feb. 1999 (www.tencent.com). QQ had over 990 million registered users in 2009 and as of Dec. 31, 2012, the active QQ users accounts had amounted to 798.2 million while its peak concurrent users had reached 176.4 million (About Us: Tencent Co. n.d.). ‘QQ for iPhone,’ a customized app for iPhone users in China is one example of local consumption context that leads to the unique content of weiphone.com.
4.1.3 Relevancy of Local Consumption Context: Extreme Caution Regarding iPhone Features

Many threads and posts in weiphone.com conveyed worries about sensitive iPhone features, such as home buttons, lock buttons, and Touch IDs. Postings indicated excessive concerns, reflecting a sense of extreme caution needed for fragile iPhones. The following is an example extracted from the thread “Is there any other way to light up the screen of 5S except using the home or the lock buttons?” that had many replies (68) and lots of views (5,708) within a two day period of postings.

**Thread Title:** Is there any other way to light up the screen of 5S except using the home or the lock buttons?

**Sample posts in it:**
“Is there any other way to light up the screen of 5s except using the home or the lock buttons? I don’t want to use these buttons too often.” – katashuai (Green Apple)

“There’s no other way.” – 呢男 (Platinum Apple)

“The home buttons are not that fragile. A phone is meant to be used.” – xyz8880 (Golden Apple)

Many threads similar to this nature were found in weiphone.com. It seemed that many members had excessive worries of the fragility of iPhones. One reason could be related to the fact that iPhone and its features are new and unfamiliar to them. Another reason could be a different type of warranty program in China that offers less protection to consumers than those in the USA (Apple Inc., 2014a, 2014b). Also iPhone is perceived not as a functional product but more of a luxury product in China (Lv, 2012) and thus consumers are extremely protective of their products.
4.2 SOCIAL VALUE

Social value was reflected in postings from both everythingiCafe and weiphone.com iPhone forums. According to Sicilia and Palazon (2008), “the virtual community implies a social activity between groups of people interacting online, which delivers the consumer value of interpersonal connectivity” (p 259). Specifically, social values were reflected in postings concerning “friendship, emotional support, self-esteem, social status, social enhancement” (Sicilia and Palazon, 2008, p. 259). In addition, online interactions associated with experience sharing through story-telling are also considered as crucial in the creation of social values (Seraj, 2012). In everythingiCafe and weiphone.com, social values were embedded in postings about life, friendship, and love, indicating members’ use of the forums as platforms to meet people online connecting beyond the products.

Similarities, differences, and some unique elements in the creation of social values in both forums are offered next.

4.2.1 Similarities in Demonstrating Social Values

Postings reflecting social values were found in iPhone 5S, iPhone 5C, Photo Sharing, and Off Topic sub-forums in everythingiCafe. As for weiphone.com, postings reflecting social values were seen in iPhone 5S, iPhone 5C, iPhone Beer, and Meet & Greet of Nationwide Weiphoners sub-forums. In both forums, social values were commonly found in postings relating to philosophical and lifestyle themes (relating to general lifestyle as well as iPhone related lifestyle).
4.2.1.1 Social values reflected in philosophical theme

First, the following example shows threads and postings from *everythingiCafe* reflecting social values under the life and philosophical theme.

**Thread Title:** Does dying scare you?
(*everythingiCafe* – *Off Topic*, 64 replies & 1,258 views)

**Sample posts in it:**

“Without getting in a religious discussion, what is your greatest fear about dying? For me my only fear of death is not being around to see my family thrive. How about you?” – Bennyboy (genious)

“Fear of dying is fear of living. Live your life like it's your last day on earth and you'll be fine.” -- Bennyboy (genious) (two ‘likes’ and one ‘agree’)

“I plan to die after iPhone 45” – djwindsor (contributor)

This thread came from *everythingiCafe* with a sensitive philosophical question, “does dying scare you,” that stimulated discussions. Members shared their own opinions about death, and a member ‘djwindsor’ even posted that he/she planned to die after iPhone 45. This creative response showed a brand loyalty to iPhone. The next example showed threads and postings from *weiphone.com* that reflect social value:

**Thread Title:** Do you agree or not to spend so much money on 5s, and cut the spending for daily lives?
(*weiphone.com* – *iPhone 5s*, 141 replies & 6,421 views)
([http://bbs.feng.com/read-htm-tid-6930916.html](http://bbs.feng.com/read-htm-tid-6930916.html))

**Sample posts in it:**

“Thank you for everybody’s suggestions. I was going to take the option of financing. But I thought it over and gave it up. I could spend the money taking my wife and children go out for dinners. I think that could bring me much more fun than a phone. Thanks a lot for your suggestions though. I really appreciated that!” – grpleus (Little Apple)
“That could be around 8000 rmb. You can buy it as a gift for yourself. For the hardworking you’ve done.” – zjane0319 (Golden Apple)

“You can take the option of a 24-month financing, using the credit card by China Merchants Bank.” – LoveGarfield (White Apple)

This thread was about how one could reflect on a lifestyle of iPhone consumption. Since the price of iPhone in Mainland China is relatively high for some of the consumers, they debate before purchasing (Lv, 2012). The member ‘grpleus’ posted his concern about whether to spend the money on an iPhone 5S or to use the money for a better life. Other members talked about their suggestions, such as financing instead of buying or purchasing one as a gift for himself.

4.2.1.2 Social values reflected in the general lifestyle theme

Next, examples of social values reflected in threads talking about general daily life events within each forum are presented. The following are examples from everythingicafe and weiphone.com, respectively:

**Thread Title:** The iPhone 5s video thread
*everythingiCafe – Photo Sharing, 16 views & 774 replies)*
(http://forums.everythingicafe.com/threads/the-iphone-5s-video-thread.103838/)

**Sample posts in it:**
Example (1)
“Share them if you got them! Playing around with slo [SIC] mo [SIC].”
(along with a video of his gf’s daughter doing backward somersault) – ZR-Yancy (genius)
“Dude, that's awesome!!!” – shutter13 (Zealot)

“Who was the gymnast?” – Napoleon PhoneApart (moderator)

“My GF's daughter. She does competition cheer.” -- ZR-Yancy (genius)

Example (2)
“I took my daughter and a couple of her friends to a concert last night.” – shutter13 (Zealot)

Example (3)
“Bacon on anything makes it SING! This is my lunch so it's not on a plate. It's a delicious, healthy salad with kale, tomatoes, red pepper, edamame beans, garlic chunks, boiled egg slices, with a drizzle of olive oil and BACON! HOLY DAMN SMOKES YHIS TASTES SOOOO GOOD! I'm destroying it right now!!” – Sharunda (genius)
The thread and postings above were selected from the Photo Sharing sub-forum of everythingiCafe. It started with a video to test the slow motion feature of the iPhone camera. Members shared their lives by posting videos, thus uncovering social values. Members connected with each other by commenting on and complimenting each other’s postings/videos.

The next thread below was selected from the iPhone Beer sub-forum in weiphone.com. The member ‘eu2010’ posted photos of his iPhone and iPhone cases, as well as a photo of his girlfriend. Other members shared their opinions and comments on his photos.

**Thread Title:** Show your phone cases, show your phone, and show your life! (http://bbs.feng.com/read-htm-tid-7005101.html)

**Sample posts in it:**
The poster ‘eu2010’ posted many photos of his iPhone, iPhone cases, as well as his girlfriend:

“(Photos posted by ‘eu2010’)

“Your case is the same as my husband’s.” – shmily870531 (Platinum Apple)
“The car is the focal point. Is that an SUV?” – IPHONE4SSSSSSSS (White Apple)

“The photos are not clear.” – supply11 (Platinum Apple)

“Your girlfriend is gorgeous. Can she be mine? Haha!” – iPhonexi (White Apple) –
“No way!” – eu 2010 (Red Apple)

4.2.1.3 Social values reflected in iPhone consumption lifestyle theme

The next theme is related to the experience of sharing of iPhone’s consumption lifestyle. Postings were in the form of story-telling, with detailed descriptions of iPhone incidents. Emotional support from others could also be found through the interactions within threads. The following is an example of unfortunate experience related to iPhones from everythingiCafe:

Thread Title: Tragedy Strikes!! Full Blown Disaster Averted
(everythingiCafe – iPhone 5S, 40 replies & 2,650 views)
(http://forums.everythingicafe.com/threads/tragedy-strikes-full-blown-disaster-averted.104200/)

Sample posts in it:
“I never thought it could happen to me, and then today, in the wee hours of the morning, it did. ….. So, I got up and tucked my Golden iPhone into the chest pocket of the t-shirt I had slipped on this morning. I entered the restroom and closed the door. I reached down to lift the sear [SIC], and then leaned forward to rest my hand on the wall in front of me as I sometimes do as I begin my business in the stand up position. And then it happened. Just before I began to change the color of the water in the bowl from clear to a tint of yellow, it happened. Somehow, I managed to knock the Golden iPhone from my chest pocket, and straight into the toilet bowl below! I couldn't believe my eyes. I quickly snatched it out and began to assess the damage. …..
I immediately went to the pantry in search of rice. I found a container of brown rice. I grabbed it out, and placed the phone in a quart sized Ziploc Bag, and then filled the bag with rice, covering the Golden iPhone from view. I sealed the bag, and started to do some critical research. …..
I do feel better now that I have added the AppleCare+ coverage. I've never purchased it in the past, cause "those things won't happen to me." I couldn't have been more wrong.” – bballbob (evangelist)
“That sucks! You did the right thing putting it rice right away. It's best to not attempt to use it all after until it has sat in rice for several days. I would take it out of the bag and put it in a large bowl of rice. …… Leave it in rice for several days and don't attempt to power it on. Good luck with it!” – Europa (moderator)

“Sounds like your "golden phone" got a golden shower. Sure hope you washed it off before putting it to your ear. Lol.” – Kriss (contributor)

“That was great story telling. bballbob! Ever consider writing a book? Or short stories? I can't wait for the sequel. Hopefully a happy ending.” – Ledsteplin (genius)

In the above example, the poster ‘bballbob’ shared his tragic experience of dropping his new gold iPhone 5S into the toilet. His original posting was a long and detailed story – vivid and lively. He described this experience as a ‘disaster’ and expressed his sadness. In addition, he shared how he put the phone into rice in order to dry and fix it. Other members posted their sympathies and provided supportive comments, including tips about how to deal with iPhones falling into water. Such story-telling threads with a similar theme were also seen in weiphone.com:

**Thread Title:** First day using gold iPhones 5S, dropped it in the toilet – saved it finally
(weiphone.com – iPhone 5S, 235 replies & 56,162 views)

**Sample posts in it:**
“I got my new gold iPhone 5s yesterday. This was a gift from my friend. I was so happy to have it. BUT! It accidentally dropped into the toilet by my wife last night! Finally I made it work again! I’ll unveil the method later! LOL” – deo.jiang (Red Apple)

“Sorry to hear that.” – nick 10000 (White Apple)

“Tragedy…” – xiayq1986 (Red Apple)

“Pat, pat. Don't let women use electronic goods…” – DT27 (White Apple)
Similar to the thread in *everythingiCafe*, the member ‘deo.jiang’ shared his experience of accidentally dropping his phone into the toilet, and how he made it work again. Other members showed their sympathies and emotional support, and offered their ideas about how to deal with the issue.

These examples demonstrate that both *everythingiCafe* and *weiphone.com* offered similar social values in their postings. Forum members interacted with each other through sharing daily life experiences and providing emotional support to each other. A sense of belonging, trust, caring and sharing was generated through these dialogues.

### 4.2.2 Relevancy of Local Consumption Context: Embedded in Traditional Culture

In *weiphone.com*, themes of Chinese traditions and Chinese lifestyles were commonly seen embedded in social values-related postings. The following are two examples of postings reflecting Chinese New Year that usually happens around January or February every year:

**Thread Title:** Hope this sad thing brings out a happy new year.  
(*weiphone.com* – iPhone Beer, 30 replies & 2,270 views)  

**Sample posts in it:**

“My gold iPhone 5s was totally broken during the New Year. I was so sad…” – wf87210 (Golden Apple)

“My condolence.” – byjust (White Apple)

“Broken things may bring you a happy and peaceful new year!” – cjj90425 (White Apple)

“Happy New Year. Wish you have a new one soon.” – 空白夜 (Red Apple)
In the above thread, the poster “wf87210” was depressed about his iPhone breaking right during the Chinese New Year, posting the details of his experience and sharing his sadness. Members showed their sympathies to this “tragedy” and wished him a happy Chinese New Year.

**Thread Title:** Lonely New Year, AGAIN…  
(weiphone.com – iPhone Beer, 20 replies & 505 views)  

**Sample posts in it:**
“"I was going to my sister’s for the New Year. My wife took my daughter home. Sigh.” – adidas280 (Blue Diamond Apple)"

“"It feels so sad to be alone for New Year.” – adidas280 (Blue Diamond Apple)"

“"Why don’t you go with them?” – 小怪兽 v (Weiphone Winner)  
“I have to work.” – adidas280 (Blue Diamond Apple)"

“"You are not alone. We have a lot of weiphoners here!” – 过客~匆匆 (Blue Diamond Apple)"

In the second thread above, the poster “adidas280” expressed his loneliness on the Chinese New Year because he had to work that day. Since Chinese New Year is one of the most important Chinese traditional festivals, strongly associated with family and togetherness, other members showed that they cared and offered emotional support to him.

This kind of online social interaction demonstrated a typical sense of belonging, reflecting the value of collectivism (Hofstede, 1980). Chinese consumers emphasize “in group” perspectives and goals rather than individual ones. Thus, most of the Chinese traditional festivals are family-oriented and value reunion.
4.2.3 Relevancy of Local Consumption Context: Embedded in Local Marketplace

Some of the differences between everythingiCafe and weiphone.com result from how the iPhone markets in North America and China differ. To date, smartphone companies such as Apple have developed long-term relationships with communication and media companies in North America. As a result, in the United States and Canada, smartphones are usually offered at relatively low prices. In contrast, in Mainland China, the iPhone market is younger and less regulated, and thus fake or refurbished smartphones are common in the market, leading to fraud issues.

The following is an example from everythingiCafe:

**Thread Title:** Got my iPhone 5C for free!
*(everythingiCafe – iPhone 5C, 5 replies & 744 views)*
*(http://forums.everythingicafe.com/threads/got-my-iphone-5c-for-free.104604/)*

**Sample posts in it:**
“So they had a deal for the 16gb iPhone 5C at Target for $50 and if you were upgrading or starting a new contract they gave a $50 Target gift card. I also used my Target debit card for an extra 5% off and got it down to $47.99, so it was like they were paying ME the remaining $2 bucks to get it. I'm a happy camper now I can also get rid of my 30 pin cables because I gave my wife my old iP5. So check your local Targets, don't know how long this deal is for.” – mrbunglez (contributor)

“That is very awesome. Congrats!” – MoneyMaker79 (evangelist)

In the example above, the poster “mrbunglez” shared his purchasing experience of getting his iPhone 5C for free at Target. Other members replied and said congratulations to him. This was a common thread in everythingiCafe, but was barely seen in weiphone.com.
In *weiphone.com*, purchasing experiences were discussed differently. The following is an example:

**Thread Title:** My iPhone 5c purchasing experience of being defrauded
(*weiphone.com – iPhone 5C, 133 replies & 15,367 views*)

**Sample posts in it:**

“October 19, 2013, I’ve been doing enough research on iPhone 5C for two weeks, and have known how to identify authentic iPhones. So I went to Zhongguancun to get an iPhone 5C.

……

Since the quote of the authentic National version was about 4600 (RMB), which was too high for me, I chose to by the Hong Kong version, which was about 3500 (RMB). … I finally realized that this was a refurbished iPhone 5C. … We must be careful in the future, don’t try to buy good stuff in lower price… The following is a picture I took of the store, you’d better not go…” – masikkk (Red Apple)

(A photo of the store posted by the member “masikkk”)

“You should have called the police. Don’t waste time with them!” – szjzll (Golden Apple)

“Profiteers!” – 固件 ios7 (Red Apple)

“You should have recorded first. Then you could have had the evidence for the police.” – EIDISU (Red Apple)

“Poor you. I’ve been through this before…” – tracydoulei (Red Apple)
In the above thread, the member “masikkk” posted in detail his experience of being defrauded in purchasing his iPhone 5c. He also attached a photo of the store in order to warn other members. Members shared their feelings and opinions on such fraud, including their sympathies for the poster.

4.2.4 Relevancy of Local Consumption Context: From Online to Offline

Social value in weiphone.com evolved in the realm of social interactions developing from online to offline. This context was particularly unique to the China marketplace. The following is an example:

**Thread Title:** Feelings after the meet and greet of Shanghai Weiphoners (weiphone.com – Meet & Greet of Nationwide Weiphoners, 16 replies & 869 views)  
(http://bbs.feng.com/read-htm-tid-5569762.html)

**Sample posts in it:**
“I got up at 9:00am today and took the bus to Jiading. Thanks Douzi for driving me all the way from Nanxiang to the hotel. (…….)  
All the Weiphoners were so passionate. Almost half of the seats were taken. Thankfully I find a spot at the front row and got to see some of the moderators and administrators. I was really excited! (…….) The following are some photos I took during the event!” – pikaawesome (WEIP group)
Members in *weiphone.com* had social events set up offline. Weiphoners in the same city could meet with each other and have fun together in the real world. The above thread was posted by a member reminiscing about a meet and greet event for Shanghai Weiphoners. He posted his experience and expressed his enjoyment of the event, also sharing some pictures that he took of it. This offline meet and greet event is unique for the *weiphone.com* iPhone forum, making connections among weiphoners stronger. This offline communication aided the maintenance of interpersonal connectivity among forum members.

### 4.3 ENTERTAINMENT VALUE

Entertainment value “stems from fun and relaxation through playing or otherwise interacting with others” (Sicilia and Palazon, 2008, p. 259), was found in both *everythingiCafe* and *weiphone.com*. According to Sicilia and Palazon (2008, p. 259), “consumers enjoy, show a high interest and involvement with other people, and feel a sense of time distortion during their common interaction.”
In *everythingiCafe*, members had access to game-related content through the sub-forum *iPhone Apps And Games*, which was “the place to discuss the best apps for iPhone, iPad and iPod touch” ([http://forums.everythingicafe.com/forums/iphone-apps-and-games/](http://forums.everythingicafe.com/forums/iphone-apps-and-games/)). Within this sub-forum, members posted threads to ask and answer game-related questions, as well to share and discuss iPhone games. In *weiphone.com*, however, beyond the similar sub-forum *iPhone Apps And Games*, members had diverse access to game-related content, such as through built-in game ads, sub-forum game links, and *Feng Games*.

Traditionally, companies create entertaining messages such as humorous ads in order to provide entertainment value via its online brand community (Sicilia and Palazon, 2008). In *weiphone.com*, members can see a mass of built-in ads for various games on every webpage they browse. However, this sensation of entertainment was short-lived (Sicilia and Palazon, 2008). *Weiphone.com* had areas offering long-lived entertainment, specifically through *Feng Games*, which was not only an IOS game operating platform but also a comprehensive type of player community providing carefully selected IOS authentic games. In this platform, members were able to enjoy a different gaming experience, such as talking to millions of players, watching technical game videos, learning about the latest games, earning competition honors, building game pages, interacting with the game stars, and enjoying a one-stop service.

Similarities, differences, and some unique elements in entertainment value created in both forums are offered next.
4.3.1 Similarities in Demonstrating Entertainment Values

Entertainment values were seen in both *everythingiCafe* and *weiphone.com* within *iPhone Apps And Games* sub-forums. Entertainment value was reflected in themes such as fun games sharing, as well as expression of feelings and attitudes about iPhone games.

4.3.1.1 Fun games sharing

The following represent examples of fun game sharing from each forum.

**Thread Title:** FUN game alarms?
(*everythingiCafe – IPhone Apps And Games*, 11 replies & 656 views)  

**Sample posts in it:**
“Greetings! So, I'm looking for a way of easier becoming awake in the morning, that is to help me get out of bed. I've tried a lot of things, and what seems to be working best for me is playing games - it wakes my mind when I start caring. I don't like the frantic alarms, like shaking your phone etc, because I want the waking to be a pleasant experience. I've looked around at the games showing up on AppStore when searching 'Game alarm', but these seem pretty dull: math problems and such. Are there any alarms which are fun, more like DoodleJump? Or perhaps I can time a website to launch where a game is activated? How? If I can solve this it would much improve my quality of life - so, please, help! 😃” – simon (new member)

“Try FreakyAlarm. It will force you to think and solve puzzles and logic games to prove you have successfully pried your mind into wakefulness.” – Kadelic (genius)

**Thread Title:** Can anyone recommend me some fun car racing games?
(*weiphone.com – Iphone Apps And Games*, 64 replies & 3,705 views)  
([http://bbs.feng.com/read-htm-tid-7310957.html](http://bbs.feng.com/read-htm-tid-7310957.html))

**Sample posts in it:**
“Can anyone recommend me some fun car racing games?” – 爱笑咪咪 (Red Apple)

“RR3.” – Email (Golden Apple)
“Try ‘Perfect On File’, there are lots of fun games in it.” – helmsenyidan (Little Apple)

“I recommend ‘Real 3’.” – laosan987 (Red Apple)

“I like ‘Temple Run’.” – commessong (Little Apple)

In the first example, the poster was asking for recommendations of fun games that could help him to wake up in the morning. Other members gave him suggestions in their replies. Similarly, in the second example, the poster in weiphone.com asked for fun car racing games and got numerous replies and recommendations from other members.

4.3.1.2 Feelings and attitudes about iPhone games

Entertainment values were also embedded in community members’ feelings and attitudes about iPhone games. The following are examples from everythingiCafe and weiphone.com, respectively:

**Thread Title:** Angry Birds Go or should I say Mario Cart for iPhone (everythingiCafe - Iphone Apps And Games, 11 replies & 873 views) (http://forums.everythingicafe.com/threads/angry-birds-go-or-should-i-say-mario-cart-for-iphone.104571/)

**Sample posts in it:**

“I downloaded Angry Birds Go! this morning and it's exactly what I expected. It is a cart racer, which will draw comparisons to Nintendo's Mario Cart. Trouble is, at least for Nintendo, Mario Cart is not on the App Store. Matter of fact, Nintendo has zero apps on the App Store, opting for exclusivity to their Wii, Wii U, etc. platforms. I enjoy Angry Birds and the few minutes I've spent playing Go! have been fun. Early reviews seem to agree. With Rovio as an established brand in the App Store, expect this app to be number one by the end of the day.” – chris (administrator)

“I just downloaded it and played the first few races. I had to play without sound since I'm in my doctors office, but the game play is nice
and smooth with the polish you'd expect from the Angry Birds crew.” – Kadelic (genius)

“I refuse to invest in in-game currency, and pay for this game as if it were a subscription service” – Rafagon (genius)

**Thread Title:** A classic game: the king of fighters ‘97
(weiphone.com - Iphone Apps And Games, 67 replies & 11,413 views)

**Sample posts in it:**
The classic game – the king of fighters ’97 has finally launched!! – aenea (WEIP software group)

(Screenshot of “the king of fighters’97” posted by member “aenea”)

“God. I missed the game a lot!” – 黒色柳丁 (White Diamond Apple)

“That’s soooo classic!” – Email (Golden Apple)

“Thank you so much for sharing!” – 过桥米线 (Red Apple)

“It doesn't work with my iPhone 4s.” – yuzhang0 (Red Apple)

“I’ve got to download one!” – vokbolk (Platinum Apple)
In the first example from *everythingiCafe*, members shared opinions and feelings on a game called *Angry Birds Go*. Most of them were satisfied with this game on their iPhones. A member “Rafagon” also expressed his thoughts about game subscription. In terms of the second thread from *weiphone.com*, a member from the WEIP software group posted a newly released classic game and stimulated forum discussion. Nearly everyone replied and expressed his/her cherished memory and expectation of this golden game.

In summary, the examples above indicated that both *everythingiCafe* and *weiphone.com* have similar entertainment values. Members interacted with each other, using these platforms to share fun games and feelings about iPhone games.

4.3.2 Relevancy of Local Consumption Context: Professional Platform and Guidance

In *weiphone.com*, in addition to sharing game information and feelings about games, members also shared technical videos and game skills. In this platform, entertainment value became more technical and complex. This is demonstrated in the following example:

*Thread Title:* Videos of some games/playing games, thanks for some weiphoners’ supplementary information *(weiphone.com – iPhone Apps And Games, 85 replies & 5,152 views)*
(http://bbs.feng.com/read-htm-tid-7215384.html)

*Sample posts in it:*
“It’s Monday again. Let’s share some excellent videos about some fun games!” – layeway (Green Apple)
In the above example, the poster “layeway” shared 10 videos of some game masters playing different iPhone games, and also asked other members to share similar videos. In response to the poster, some members showed their opinions and feelings on the videos, expressing their praise and admiration, while some also posted related videos in their replies. This thread was representative of more technical types of entertainment value occurring on a more professional and diversified level. Threads of this type were not found in everythingiCafe.

More so than the North American forum, weiphone.com has already become a professional platform, having been founded by a mature game developing and maintaining group, WEIP Resource Group, which provided game information, techniques and guidance. With the help of this professional group, members could not only share fun games, but also acquire valuable technical game information and professional guidance.
The sample thread “A classic game: the king of fighters ’97,” provided as an example in previous sub-section, was posted by a member of WEIP Resource Group, introducing a newly released classic game by their group. This game was first developed in early 1997 and had no iPhone or iPad versions back then, especially for jail-broken iPhones. In this case, WEIP Resource Group produced a version in order to meet the massive needs of the Chinese iPhone users. The thread was met with overwhelmingly positive reactions and high levels of satisfaction.

4.3.3 Relevancy of Local Consumption Context: Entertainment Value for Life

In weiphone.com, Feng Games is an official IOS game-operating platform, offering online games for weiphoners (http://g.feng.com). Hence, weiphone.com had become a leisure place where members had the opportunity to play games online. According to Sicilia and Palazon (2008, p. 264), “games provide escapism, diversion, and possibly emotional release.” In this case, the entertainment value in this Chinese forum offered entertainment value for life.

Feng Games provided a Game Centre offering introductions and downloads of varies games, which was a strong incentive for members to visit. Feng Games also had self-developed games, creating a professional platform for game technique communication and sharing. Game players could also communicate with each other online through the Player QQ Group, which typically connected players closely together. The following example (Figure 6) is a screenshot of an online game called “The Adventures of Cindy” from the Game Centre provided by Feng Games. It not only gave an introduction of the game, but also provided download links. Members posted threads under it discussing and communicating about the game (Figure 7).
In addition, members had *Personal Centre* in *Feng Games*, which provided personal pages. Through these pages, players could follow and be followed by each other, making friends and playing online games together. Members could also get *Feng Game Coins* and earn experience.
while playing online games in order to achieve online social status. Figure 8 is a screenshot of a

*Personal Centre in Feng Games:*

![Screenshot of a Personal Centre in Feng Games](image)

**Figure 8: Screenshot of a Personal Centre in Feng Games**

In China, a majority of the games are free – but these free games tend to be of relatively poor quality (Gao, 2006; Piao, 2009). In addition, it is an area of vicious competition (Gao, 2006). Given this, there is a growing need for a quality platform for online games, including those for iPhone and iPad. To that end, *weiphone.com* developed its own online games and established an online game center, thus providing a place where members could play games online and share game information and game techniques. This unique and special platform enabled members a more professional and diversified environment filled with entertainment value. This entertainment value aided and further reinforced social interactions within the forum.
4.4 CULTURAL VALUE

The last but not least value found through postings in both *everythingiCafe* and *weiphone.com* was cultural value. According to Seraj (2012), “cultural values develop as a result of interactions on the Internet with the deepening and maturing online social relationships” (Seraj, 2012, p. 216). Specifically, cultural values in an online brand community were reflected in a specific self-governed culture, complete with group norms, specific regulations and policies (Seraj, 2012). In addition, communications between iPhone professionals and enthusiasts demonstrated the inclusive-exclusive nature of the community culture (Seraj, 2012). Through interactions, not just brand loyalties but also community oriented rituals were established and displayed.

In *everythingiCafe*, threads and postings concerning cultural values were found in many sub-forums, such as *iPhone 5S, Feedback And Site Help*, and *Photo Sharing*. Similar patterns were seen in many sub-forums in *weiphone.com*, including *iPhone 5S, !WeiPhone News And Announcements*, and *iPhone Beer*. In both forums, cultural values were mainly reflected in the realms of self-governed culture, inclusive cultural context and exclusive cultural context.

4.4.1 Self-Governed Culture

In order to govern the interactions and maintain order, an online brand community has to have policies (Gordon, 2010). *Self-governed culture* refers to an online brand community culture with specific regulations and policies, which are related to postings of “constructive feedbacks, respect of opinions, purposeful criticism, and courtesy towards other members” (Seraj, 2012, p. 218).
Both *everythingiCafe* and *weiphone.com* had postings related typical rules and policies implemented in order to guide the conduct of community members. The following is a representative example from *everythingiCafe*:

**Thread Title:** Guidelines To Help Improve Our Community
(*everythingiCafe – Feedback and Site Help*, 44 replies & 2,184 views)

**Sample posts in it:**

“3 Ways You Can Help Improve Our Community:
Be Descriptive When creating a new topic or posting in an existing topic, please be descriptive in the title and within your post. You are more likely to get responses, interaction and help foster discussion. (……)
Give Us Your Best (……) Improving the quality of content benefits everyone. Where possible, we'd greatly appreciate members doing their best to add value to discussions, while being mindful of how their contributions will read. (……)
Be Friendly Whether you are new here or have been kicking around since 2006, be nice. Be friendly to others. (……)” – chris (administrator)

“I think that's a short, sweet, and useful set of guidelines. This place is already known for being one of the friendliest forums on the web. I think we can all raise our game a little in terms of quality of discussions.” – patrickj (gold)

In the above example, the administrator “chris” posted “an extensive laundry list” of policies guiding members’ conduct. A member “patrickj” agreed with “chris” and complimented *everythingiCafe* as “the friendliest forum on the web.” Similar threads and discussions could be found in *weiphone.com* as well. Figure 9 is a screenshot of forum regulations posted in this Chinese forum by administrators:
Figure 9: Screenshot of forum regulations in weiphone.com

The screenshot was an announcement of brief forum regulations posted in every sub-forum in weiphone.com. Members could also click on the red link in order to see a thread containing detailed rules and policies:

**Thread Title:** Rules and policies in Weiphone Forum (Detail)
(weiphone.com – !WeiPhone News And Announcements, 338 replies & 427,351 views)
(http://bbs.feng.com/read-htm-tid-7940899.html)

**Sample posts in it:**
“Chapter Two: Member Related (……)
Regulations on Replies:
1) We encourage more replies of asking and answering technique questions. Positive contents are welcome.
2) Please respect every Weiphoners’ postings. Do not reply for causing disturbances or hurting others.
3) Please do not reply with only emoticons, alphabetic characters, or meaningless contents.
(……)” – ibook (administrator)

“It’s good to be strict. Thank you!” – 稀里花拉 (White Apple)

Overall, this study found self-governed culture in both forums. However, it is noteworthy that moderators and administrators in everythingiCafe played a very active role in this respect,
immersing themselves to a much greater degree in the communications and interactions with their members than did those in weiphone.com. In addition to posting forum rules and regulations, there were a considerable number of original threads and postings by the forum moderators and administrators in everythingiCafe, encouraging discussions and communications among its members. In contrast, administrators in weiphone.com seemed to be more involved with monitoring for violation of forum rules.

The following is an example from the 5C sub-forum from everythingiCafe, demonstrating the proactive posting style of administrators:

**Thread Title:** Photos of the green iPhone 5c  

**Sample posts in it:**  
“I picked up the green iPhone 5c today. My original plan was to leave with a gold iPhone 5s and blue iPhone 5c. I wasn't crazy about the blue and didn't have enough guts to buy a pink iPhone, although it was my favorite of the bunch. Like everyone else, I got saddled with space gray. Here are a few shots of the iPhone 5c in green.” – Chris (administrator)

“Third party vendors will have lots of different color backs in no time!” – liberated (evangelist)

The above example started with a photo of the new green iPhone 5c by “Chris”, an administrator in the forum. Even though the sample thread above had relatively few replies (12), it had many views (999) due to the proactive posting of the administrator.

In weiphone.com however, no threads of this nature were posted by moderators or administrators. Moderators and administrators in weiphone.com just ensured that there were no off-topic or
meaningless postings, or illegal advertisement. For example, in a thread talking about “The home button of Space Grey, has anyone seen the phone in person” (about the color of the new iPhone 5S), there were 186 replies and 8,973 views among which about 45 postings were marked off-topic or being blocked.

Figure 10: Screenshot of a blocked posting in weiphone.com

Figure 10 above was a screenshot with a caption “Reminder: This member has been banned or deleted. Content is automatically blocked.” It was likely blocked either because of the inappropriate wordings or because of an illegal advertisement.

4.4.2 Inclusive Cultural Context

The forums were inclusive in the sense that they were not only governed by professionals but also by the community members (Seraj, 2012). Indeed, this study found that both forums were run not only by iPhone professionals (i.e., administrators & moderators) but also governed by knowledgeable iPhone enthusiasts (i.e., community members). Through the interactions between iPhone professionals and enthusiasts, quality content was generated in these forums.
Specifically, in an inclusive cultural context, community members helped to govern the communities. Upon encountering off-topic postings, aggressive interactions, or illegal advertisements, community members warned the posters and/or reported them to the moderators. Members also gave assistance by helping newbies in the forums.

In the following example from everythingiCafe, the member “Iloveiphones” posted a suggestion about adding a new sub-forum. Other members and an administrator posted their opinions as well.

**Thread Title:** Another forum needed  
(everythingiCafe – Feedback and Site Help, 8 replies & 521 views)  
(http://forums.everythingicafe.com/threads/another-forum-needed.98914/)

**Sample posts in it:**
“I think a forum named something along the lines of "carrier" is needed. There we could post all of our speedboats, and everything relating to Verizon, sprint or att. I am having a hard time posting a thread as I don't know whee it should go, it's not off topic, it doesn't have nothing to do Witt the iPhone, and it doesn't deserve to be put in the att archives. Thanks.” – Iloveiphones (platinum)

“Haha. It was a funny typo. I agree about the carrier forums. Maybe a carrier forum with a sub forum for each major carrier?” – Hondamaker (gold)
“We've moved away from laundry list forums, but let me give it some thought.” – chris (administrator)

The following is another example from weiphone.com posted by a community member helping to clarify for newbies the rules regarding personal account upgrades:

**Thread Title:** Account upgrade rule in weiphone – good for newbies  
(weiphone.com – iPhone 5S, 669 replies & 15,876 views)  

**Sample posts in it:**
“Each reply: 1 point (experience), each thread: 2 points (experience)
The following are rules of account upgrades, upgrading is based on experience you get in the forum~!

Little apple: 5 points  
Green apple: 50 points  
Red apple: 200 points  
White apple: 500 points  
Gold apple: 1500 points  
Platinum apple: 3000 points  
Red diamond apple: 6000 points  
Yellow diamond apple: 8000 points  
Blue diamond apple: 10000 points  
White diamond apple: 14000 points” – zyinhe (white apple)

4.4.3 Exclusive Cultural Context

Both forums were also exclusive in the sense that emphasis was placed exclusively on the focal brand and products (i.e., more passionate in nature) and less on competing brands and products (Seraj, 2012). This study found that content focus was mainly on Apple products, such as iPhones. Both everythingiCafe and weiphone.com were exclusive to specific groups of people who were interested, curious, and knowledgeable in Apple and iPhones.

The following is an example from everythingiCafe reflecting the exclusive nature with respect to fondness for Apple/iPhone. Members were passionate about the products and were proud of being involved in the online community:

**Thread Title:** So pleased I did not give up on Apple!  
(*everythingiCafe – iPhone 5S, 7 replies & 632 views*)  

**Sample posts in it:**

“A few of you may know that I was frustrated w [SIC] Apple and the screen size. For a yr [SIC] now I've had my eye on the Nokia windows phone for its bigness and vibrancy. 3 days ago I purchased the 5s and IM IN LOVE!!
The screen on this phone doesn’t make my eyes blurry (as it did on previous: 4s), and I can set to make just as vibrant as the Nokia. I just wanted ppl [SIC] who we’re thinking of switching to try the 5s out. Only prob [SIC] is that no 32GB’s avail so had to get 64GB. I want to learn how to use this camera to the fullest extent so I can use up the GB’s.” – Redhotchili (member)

“OH WOW! WELCOME BACK HOME TO APPLE! I’m so glad you gave the 5s a chance and YOU LOVE IT! This is such a nice story. ……
Again, welcome back!” – Sharunda (genius)

The poster “Redhotchili” was happy to choose and to fall in love with iPhone 5s, and shared her satisfaction with everybody else. Other members welcomed her “back home to Apple.” This conceptualization of the forum and more precisely the product as “home” highlights the community-oriented nature and brand loyalty within the community.

Exclusive nature was also reflected in postings concerning comparisons between iPhones and other brands of phones in both forums. The following is an example from weiphone.com:

**Thread Title:** Samsung Galaxy S4 vs. iPhone 5S, S4 sucks!
(weiphone.com – iPhone 5S, 152 replies & 34,945 views)
(http://bbs.feng.com/read-htm-tid-7333746.html)

**Sample posts in it:**
“I’ve got to say s4 and android suck. The ppi441 large screen makes my eyes tired. The 1.6 GHz Octa-Core processor is even slower than iPhone 4. All of the test data of 4S are fake. You can open some more apps and you will see. The hardware of S4 seems to be strong, however, when you compare the camera with iPhone for example, you will see s4 sucks.” – hkshan (Red Apple)

“Your points were of no standard. I’ve been using both Samsung and Apple since their first series. Technically, both of them have their own advantages.” – dudu0ne (Red Apple)

“According to the test and review abroad, both the camera and screen of S4 were much better than 5s. Don't be too obsessive.” – deathpain (Little Apple)
“Two of my friends bought s4 a couple of months ago. At first, they felt good. The batteries had problems after a few months though. One of them regretted buying s4 and changed it to iPhone 5s. I bought my 5s directly and I never regret it.” – CanOE (Platinum Apple)

In the above thread, the poster “hkshan” thought that Samsung Galaxy S4 was much worse than iPhone 5S. Members did comparisons between Samsung Galaxy S4 and iPhone 5S in their replies, leading to debates between S4 and 5S users with both sides presenting their reasons and explanations.

However, one difference exited between everythingiCafe and weiphone.com with respect to comparisons between iPhone and other brands of phones. Members in weiphone.com had stronger negative emotional reactions regarding competing brands.

The following is an example from everythingiCafe:

**Thread Title:** Nexus 5 vs iPhone 5s  
(everythingiCafe – iPhone 5S, 27 replies & 2272 views)  
(http://forums.everythingicafe.com/threads/nexus-5-vs-iphone-5s.104186/)

**Sample posts in it:**

“Let's discuss these two great phones* and enjoy some good, healthy smartphone discussion.” – chris (administrator)

“All in all I hope the phone sells well. Competition breeds innovation.” – diverdown (contributor)

“I really do enjoy Android and the Nexus quite a bit, so I'll be sticking with them for the time being until Apple comes out with something more impressive to me.” – psylichon (moderator)

“I'm finding it fun to get a jailbreak-like experience without the cat-and-mouse game of jailbreaking iOS. Unlocked, rooted, and ROMmed, the
sky really is the limit with regards to customization. I'm loving all my gesture shortcuts and navigation on a whole is much faster for how I use the phone.” – psylichon (moderator)

“I've got the iPhone 5s and a 2013 Nexus 7.... Best of both worlds....” – diverdown (contributor)

In the above postings, members did comparisons between Nexus 5 and iPhones, giving their opinions and reasons. It was a positive and relatively objective discussion – members in this forum love iPhones but also show respect to other brands of phones.

However, in weiphone.com, within the thread “Samsung Galaxy S4 vs. iPhone 5S, S4 sucks!”, this study found that members used some extreme wordings such as “suck” and “fake” in describing a competing phone, demonstrating a strong negative and extreme subjective response.

Sample postings:
“Samsungs are worse than iPhones anyway.” – hkshan (Red Apple)

“I agree with his opinion. S4 SUCKS!” – s398498540 (Green Apple)

In this case, it might be possible to conclude that members of weiphone.com exhibited stronger emotional exclusivity in nature than those of everythingiCafe.

To sum up, both everythingiCafe and weiphone.com had cultural values reflected in the themes of self-governed culture, inclusive cultural context and exclusive cultural context. Administrators and moderators, as well as their members, made efforts in forming specific cultures consisting of their own communal values, norms, rules, and regulations. Overall, community-oriented group rituals and embedded brand loyalty underlined the culture of these communities.
4.5 SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Overall, four values were detected through postings in both *everythingiCafe* and *weiphone.com*. They were *functional value*, *social value*, *entertainment value* and *cultural value*. In comparing two local consumption contexts, this study found similarities, differences, and some unique elements with respect to each of these values.

*Functional value* was the most commonly seen value in both forums. Both *everythingiCafe* and *weiphone.com* had threads and postings reflecting functional values in the themes such as iPhone functions, iPhone physical elements, product information, and expertise on iPhone authenticate and selling. There were differences between the forums that related to the components of the local consumption context (e.g., as the common online messaging medium in China and extreme caution regarding iPhone features). *Social values* in *everythingiCafe* and *weiphone.com* were mainly reflected in philosophical, general lifestyle, and iPhone consumption lifestyle themes. Differences between the forums existed with regard to local consumption context – *weiphone.com* had social values embedded in traditional culture and local marketplace. Typically, communications in this forum evolved from online to offline, signifying a marked difference from the North American forum. *Entertainment values* were reflected in the themes such as the sharing of fun games, as well as feelings and attitudes about iPhone games in *everythingiCafe* and *weiphone.com*. Typically, *weiphone.com* was a more professional platform and provided guidance for weiphoners on iPhone games. Moreover, *Feng Games* in this forum offered online game playing and communicating, providing an entertainment value for life. Lastly, *cultural value* was reflected in both forums, evident in self-governed culture, inclusive cultural context and exclusive cultural context. Minor differences also existed between them.
The following table is a brief summary of findings, showing similarities and differences, as well as some unique elements reflecting the local consumption context with respect to each value.
Table 4: Brief summary of findings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Values</th>
<th>Similarities in demonstrating functional values</th>
<th>everythingiCafe</th>
<th>weiphone.com</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Functional Value</td>
<td>Similarities in demonstrating functional values</td>
<td>• iPhone functions (fingerprint ID, sound, battery &amp; camera);</td>
<td>Online messaging medium in China.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• iPhone physical elements (buttons &amp; charging plugs);</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Product information (colors);</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Expertise (iPhone authentication &amp; selling).</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relevancy of local</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>consumption context</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Online messaging medium in China.</td>
<td>Extreme caution regarding iPhone features.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Values</th>
<th>Similarities in demonstrating social values</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social Value</td>
<td>Similarities in demonstrating social values</td>
<td>• Social values reflected in philosophical theme;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Social values reflected in general lifestyle theme;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Social values reflected in iPhone consumption lifestyle theme.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relevancy of local</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>consumption context</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Embedded in traditional culture.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Embedded in local marketplace.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>From online to offline.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Values</th>
<th>Similarities in demonstrating entertainment values</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Entertainment Value</td>
<td>Similarities in demonstrating entertainment values</td>
<td>• Fun games sharing;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Feelings &amp; attitudes about iPhone games.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relevancy of local</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>consumption context</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Professional platform &amp; guidance.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Entertainment value for life (Feng Games).</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural Value</td>
<td>Self-governed culture</td>
<td>Rules, regulations &amp; policies guiding members’ conducts.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------</td>
<td>-----------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Active role &amp; more immerse.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>More involved with monitoring.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inclusive cultural context</td>
<td>Governed by both iPhone professionals (i.e., administrators &amp; moderators) and knowledgeable iPhone enthusiasts (i.e., community members).</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Exclusive cultural context | • Apple products (iPhone) focused;  
|                            | • Fondness (passionate) for Apple/iPhone;  
|                            | • Comparisons between iPhones (totally favorable) and other brands of phones. |
|                |                       | Stronger emotional exclusivity in nature.                 |
CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This chapter begins with a discussion of the results, followed by conceptual and managerial contributions. Finally, in the conclusion section, limitations and future research directions are offered.

5.1 DISCUSSION

The ultimate goal of this study was to provide a better understanding of online brand communities dedicated to high-tech products. Prior to this study, little attention had been paid to the localization impacts on online brand communities, especially for a globalized brand. Few comparative studies have explored in detail the impacts of local consumption cultures. Findings from this study detected similarities and differences between online brand communities of different consumption culture contexts in terms of general content and activities, values created in two online forums about high-tech products; and revealed differences in value creation across two consumption cultures.

This section is divided into three sub-sections: general content and activity (similarities and differences between the two forums); values created in online forums; and impacts of localization in value creation.

5.1.1 Discussion – General Content and Activity

The first research objective in this study was to investigate the similarities and differences between online brand communities situated in different consumption culture contexts in terms of
their general content and activities. Findings in this study provided novel insights on this topic while also extending previous studies by offering both similarities and differences in this regard between two high-tech forums of different localities.

The results indicate that everythingiCafe and weiphone.com have similar structures and organizations. Both forums are organized based on different iPhone models (i.e., iPhone 6, 5S, 5C, etc.) and by iPhone related products (i.e., iPhone Apps and Games, iPhone Cases and Accessories, etc.). This forum structure makes it easy and convenient for online users to get involved in different threads and postings with certain topics. However, minor differences could also be seen upon deeper exploration. For instance, in everythingiCafe, members can easily track related threads and postings that occur each day, by either scrolling down the sub-forums page-by-page or searching by key words. In the case of weiphone.com, due to the massive number of daily postings (about 110,000 postings per day), the sub-forums show only the latest threads within a limit of 100 pages. In this case, members cannot possibly see every thread or posting. In this forum, organization of data in the sub-forums is disorganized, and tracking of all postings is not possible.

Generally speaking, postings in everythingiCafe were found to be more proactive in nature (in terms of iPhone product information) than postings in weiphone.com. For example, the everythingiCafe was founded nearly 9 months prior to Steve Jobs announcing the very first iPhone product on Jan. 10, 2007. In addition, it offers sub-forums, such as iPhone 6, prior to the release of that new iPhone model. This suggests that the everythingiCafe has a focus on the future and goes beyond community members’ and Apple fans’ current needs. Weiphone.com, on
the other hand, is more focused on issues relating to current Apple and iPhone products. This forum was founded on the day the first iPhone was introduced and consistently offers instantaneous information on newly released iPhones and other Apple products. For example, the start date of the two sub-forums *iPhone 5S* and *iPhone 5C* in this forum were on the exact same date which Apple announced these two models of phones.

This kind of difference between the two forums is likely due to the marketplace that they represent. Compared to North America, China is a huge but relatively new market for iPhones. Although consumers in China have high levels of passion for every model of iPhone, its availability for consumers is still limited (Smith, 2013). This likely contributed to the different content nature (that is, less information on up-coming iPhone models as well as less sharing of relevant information by its inexperienced members) for *weiphone.com*.

Studies concerning online brand communities across cultures have been done in different contexts looking into different aspects. For example, Jawcki et al. (2011) conducted a comparative study of creative behaviors in English- and Chinese-speaking online basketball communities, investigating innovation development in different online consumer groups. Results in their study revealed similarities in terms of high quality and quantity of creative outputs, as well as differences between innovation patterns and the particular kinds of emerging innovations. In the current study, findings revealed differences related to posting quantity and quality between two online forums of high-tech products. The *everythingiCafe* has higher quality but a smaller quantity of postings than *weiphone.com*. In *everythingiCafe*, members have a tendency to reply to others with not only their comments, but also their own opinions and feelings – or sometimes
even photos. Compared to the community members of weiphone.com, the community members of everythingCafe are much more willing to share. Indeed, under the influence of Chinese traditional culture, weiphone.com members are shy and are sometimes excessively modest, resulting in some cautious and short replies. As a result, while numbers of postings in this forum are very large, the quality is often limited by one-line questions and comments, and photos or pictures are rarely seen. A considerable number of postings in this forum are found to be off topic or have little value in them. This finding may be explained in part by the results of Ahn et al.’s (2010) study, which suggested that Chinese consumers have been evolving out of collectivism to be more individualistic. Hence, when there are higher levels of collectivistic characteristics, Chinese members may have a stronger desire to achieve individual goals (driven by individualistic motives), such as posting irrelevant content in order to achieve higher member status in the forum. Another explanation of these differences could be the cultural differences between the United States and China. When answering questions in the offline environment, most of the weiphone.com community members prefer neutral answers without pros or cons, personal opinions or reasons, whereas most of the community members in everythingCafe are much more willing to share with others.

5.1.2 Discussion – Values Created in Online Forums

The second research objective in this study was to determine the values created in the online forums of high-tech products. The findings indicated that there are four values created in both everythingCafe and weiphone.com: functional value, social value, entertainment value, and cultural value.
Functional value was the most commonly observed value in both everythingiCafe and weiphone.com, evident primarily in members’ co-creation of product information and knowledge, as well as the high quality of contents generated. In other words, functional values are frequently reflected through the resource sharing processes undertaken by iPhone enthusiasts and professionals. In both forums, members can obtain information, resolve problems, and get related resources through their participation.

This study found similar themes throughout the postings in both forums, including iPhone functions, iPhone physical elements, product information, as well as expertise, demonstrating functional values. The findings in this study agreed with the results from some previous studies. Sicilia and Palazon (2008) defined functional value as the sharing of “advice, information, and expertise,” providing evidence that the Spanish Coca-Cola online brand community has functional values as the primary elements for website traffic and brand loyalty. Likewise, Seraj (2012) highlighted the co-creation of aviation knowledge and the “quality of user-generated content” as the community’s functional value in the study. The aviation community produces functional value through “user-generated, co-created content,” providing a platform for aviation knowledge exchange.

In addition, findings in the current study not only revealed functional values in both everythingiCafe and weiphone.com, but also indicated that both forums had similar themes, demonstrating functional values – regardless of the local consumption culture differences. As a high-tech product, the iPhone is a milestone in smartphone innovation, offering lots of new elements for consumers to discover. Passion for knowing this kind of product may drive
consumers to pursue iPhone information both offline and online. Another explanation could be that the iPhone is a globalized product used by consumers all around the world. Most community members in both forums are iPhone professionals or enthusiasts, and many people are likely to have come across the same technical issues or have been interested in similar iPhone related topics.

*Social value* is the second value that was found in both *everythingiCafe* and *weiphone.com*. Members interacted online with each other beyond the products, sharing their personal lives, experiences and emotions. Findings in this study supported Sicilia and Palazon’s (2008) results, showing that social values could be reflected in postings regarding “friendship, emotional support, self-esteem, social status, social enhancement” (Sicilia and Palazon, 2008, p. 259). Gordon (2010) termed online community connection experience as “interactive engagement” including “participation, socializing, and community experiences.” In both *everythingiCafe* and *weiphone.com*, this kind of interaction stimulated social values contributing to stronger social ties among community members and enhanced brand loyalty.

Corroborating with Seraj’s (2012) results, online interactions of experience sharing through story-telling were considered crucial in the creation of social values. In *everythingiCafe* and *weiphone.com*, themes could be seen not only relating to philosophical and general lifestyle, but also concerning iPhone consumption lifestyle. This kind of interactivity in both forums prepared the basis for the establishment of social values. Members came to the forums for their functional values, and then generated social values through interactions around and beyond the products.
The third value reflected in both *everythingiCafe* and *weiphone.com* is *entertainment value*. Community members acquire entertainment values through game-related content in both forums, asking and answering game-related problems, as well as sharing and discussing iPhone games. Presently, smartphones such as iPhones are used not only as communication tools, but also devices for leisure and relaxation. Consumers use iPhones to surf online or even to play online games. Supporting findings by Sicilia and Palazon (2008), online brand communities provide game-related contents or even platforms for online games, stimulating entertainment values with “fun relaxation and otherwise interaction” (Sicilia and Palazon, 2008, p. 259) for their members.

Traditionally, online brand communities create advertisements to serve as entertaining messages. For instance, *weiphone.com* has lots of built-in game-related ads on its web pages. However, as stated by Sicilia and Palazon (2008), this kind of entertainment value is “short-lived.” In order to make entertainment values “long-lived,” both *everythingiCafe* and *weiphone.com* have game-related sub-forums providing such values for members while surfing through the site. In this case, both forums have similar entertainment values with the themes such as fun games sharing as well as feeling and attitudes about iPhone games.

*Cultural value* is also a crucial value found in *everythingiCafe* and *weiphone.com*. In both forums, cultural values were generated through co-creation and interaction among community members as a consequence of deepening and maturing social values (Seraj, 2012). This study supported results in Seraj (2012) in demonstrating that cultural values were mainly reflected in the realms of *self-governed culture*, *inclusive cultural context* and *exclusive cultural context*. 

99
Furthermore, this study extended previous research by showing that despite the differences in local consumption cultural contexts, online brand communities in the United States and China possessed similar cultural values. This could also be inferred to a worth mentioning assumption that cultural values could exist in every online brand community, being reflected in the themes of *self-governed culture* and *inclusive-exclusive nature*. In every online brand community with its own rules and regulations, moderators and community members share the same consciousness of kind and acknowledge that their online brand community is distinguished from others. However, each online brand community could also perform differently across different consumption cultures. This will be discussed later in the following sub-section.

To sum up, corroborating with previous studies, this study demonstrated that there are four values reflected in both *everythingiCafe* and *weiphone.com* iPhone forums. There are no clear boundaries among the values – any postings in the forums could reflect multiple values overlapping together. Cultural value is a typical one that could exist simultaneous with other values in every online brand community, while performing in different patterns of manifestation.

### 5.1.3 Discussion – Impacts of Localization in Value Creation

Apple is a globalized brand, and the iPhone is one of the most popular smartphones used by people all around the world. The next goal of this study was to see whether the values reflected in *everythingiCafe* and *weiphone.com* are different due to the impacts of localization factors. By doing a comparative study, this study extended previous studies by offering evidence of differences under different local consumption contexts as well as giving insights on value-guided forum content and activities.
Through netnography in *weiphone.com*, this study discovered the importance of *online messaging medium in China* that reflects on value creation activities. As stated by Parsons (2013), social media is currently changing peoples’ communication with each other and is also “changing where and how consumers spend their time.” Consumers are utilizing social media not only on their desktops and laptops, but also through mobile devices, such as iPhones. QQ for iPhone, developed by Tencent Co. China, is a customized and quite popular online messaging medium used by huge amounts of iPhone consumers. Postings concerning incompatibility issues between the new IOS system and QQ provided unique examples existing under the consumption context in China. Due to the convenient nature of QQ for iPhone, consumers in China are using this app for communication and to build stronger relationships with each other.

Also, attributed to the local marketplace elements in China, a unique theme of *extreme caution regarding iPhone features* existed in *weiphone.com*, reflecting localized functional values. Agreeing with Lv (2012), iPhone is new to consumers in China and is perceived not only as a functional product but also as a luxury product. It seems that sensitive iPhone features, such as home buttons, lock buttons, and touch IDs have caused consumers to excessively worry about the fragility of iPhones. Different types of warranty programs in China that offer less protection to consumers than those in the USA (Apple Inc., 2014a, 2014b) have also resulted in consumers being extremely protective of their products. Findings in this study extended previous research by demonstrating the unique functional value of high-tech products within the Chinese consumption context.
In terms of social values found in both *everythingiCafe* and *weiphone.com*, themes of Chinese traditions and Chinese lifestyles can be seen in *weiphone.com* postings. Many studies have used cultural elements to explain online brand community performances or differences in different consumption contexts. For instance, in a comparative study of online basketball communities, Jawecki et al. (2011) described cultural differences in creative processes and innovation creation. Similarly, Ahn et al. (2010) used Hofstede’s (1980) cultural dimensions to explain the differences between American and Korean online brand communities. Correspondingly, findings in the current study revealed that community members in *weiphone.com* emphasize “in group” perspectives and goals rather than their own perspectives and goals in their interactions. Most of the Chinese traditional festivals are family-oriented and value reunion; hence typical sense of belonging reflecting the social value of collectivism (Hofstede, 1980) existed in *weiphone.com*.

Besides cultural elements, findings in this study indicated different iPhone marketplaces between North America and China that lead to differences in social values. Interactions concerning purchasing and retailing experiences associated with fake iPhones or fraud issues were typically seen in *weiphone.com*. As stated by Lv (2012), American consumers could get discounted or even free devices through smartphone plans because of the mature relationships between smartphone companies and communication and media companies. In China, the iPhone market is younger and less regulated and thus fake or refurbished smartphones commonly exist in the market, causing fraud issues. However, some researchers believe that the number of fake mobiles in China’s marketplace will decline due to the development of more local brands of smartphones in China (Kwong, 2011).
Typically, social values developed from online to offline in weiphone.com, fitting the previous observations that connections online sometimes produce close ties among members and result in offline affiliations (Cova and Cova, 2002). Forum members in weiphone.com organize events in different cities in order to meet each other and to have fellowship activities. Corroborating with Seraj’s (2012) findings, these offline meet and greet events could be the result of the close ties among community members, and in return, this formation of strong ties reinforce members’ commitment to the online brand community as well as the brand loyalty to iPhone and Apple. Furthermore, according to Ahn et al. (2010), community members in higher uncertainty avoidance cultures may prefer to have more ways of communicating with each other, rather than only through the websites. In this case, social values evolved from online to offline in the weiphone.com iPhone forum.

Both everythingiCafe and weiphone.com have game-related content reflecting entertainment value. Specifically, weiphone.com has a WEIP Resource Group developing and maintaining Feng Games and the Game Centre in it, providing a professional platform for game information and guidance, as well as for online game playing for community members. In a viciously competitive marketplace with lots of poor quality online games in China, weiphone.com develops its own online games and leads a standard platform of online games for Chinese consumers (Gao, 2006). Thus, comparatively speaking, weiphone.com provides more of a leisure environment for Chinese consumers with entertainment value for life.

In addition, most iPhone users are young people with a passion for high-tech products, and are known for their fondness for computer games (Sicilia and Palazon, 2008). According to Yang’s
(2013) examination of young Chinese consumers’ social media use and product recommendation behavior, young Chinese consumers’ eWOM are motivated by their perceived pleasure from online surfing. The Game Centre in weiphone.com offered online game playing and stimulated member engagement as well as eWOM. This entertainment value thereby further reinforces social interaction within this forum and also strengthens consumers’ loyalty to weiphone.com and iPhone.

Minor differences exist between everythingiCafe and weiphone.com in terms of cultural values. These two forums perform differently across different consumption cultures. For example, when comparing iPhone with other brands of phones, members in weiphone.com have stronger negative emotional expression of competing brands than members in everythingiCafe. Unlike the smartphone market in the United States with fewer varieties of phones to choose from, the smartphone market in China is huge and massive. There are a lot of small domestic brands in China, providing many options for consumers, and many have appealingly lower prices than iPhones. Under this more complicated consumption context, the competition among different brands in China is fiercer than in the United States, as well the disagreements among different consumers are stronger.

To sum up, findings in this study supported and extended previous research via comparisons of two high-tech forums in two consumption contexts. Through netnography, values reflected in both everythingiCafe and weiphone.com were found to be different due to factors such as the differences in local marketplaces, the different natures of how consumers utilize social media reflecting different cultures, and the different ways of consuming high-tech products.
5.2 CONTRIBUTIONS

In this section, the conceptual and managerial contributions of this study are discussed.

5.2.1 Conceptual Contributions

Value creation in online brand communities is a crucial area that needs further study. The exploration of the differences in value creation under different consumption contexts in this study offers deeper conceptual understanding of online brand communities. Through netnography in two high-tech product online forums, this study offers insights on globalization and localization impacts on value creation in online brand communities.

First of all, this study provided findings corroborating and also refining the results from Sicilia and Palazon’s (2008) and Seraj’s (2012) studies. In Sicilia and Palazon’s (2008) study of a Spanish online brand community of a convenience product (Coco-Cola), functional, social, and experiential values were found and discussed. Through exploration, the researchers emphasized that this online brand community was valuable not only because of the functional value, but also because of the social and experiential values associated with it. Seraj (2012) investigated an online aviation community and found intellectual, social, and cultural values, pointing out that these three values should exist simultaneously in order to make a successful online brand community.

By exploring everythingiCafe and weiphone.com, functional, social, entertainment, and cultural values were detected and discussed. Functional value was the fundamental value reflected in both forums, and was the main prerequisite for consumer participation. Next, social value was
reflected through interactions that went beyond the products, and was the key element linking community members closely together. Further contributing to closer relationships among community members, entertainment value played an important role in both online forums as well. Helping with a deeper understanding of value creation in online brand community, this study found that cultural values could exist simultaneously with other values in any online brand community, and played a vital role in the formation of community atmosphere and situation.

Secondly, this study extended previous understanding of online brand communities in the realm of value creation as well as impacts of localization, offering insights on future transnational online brand communities. Previous studies detecting value creation in online brand communities have ignored localization impacts, often working within only a single consumption culture (i.e., Spanish Coco-Cola online brand community and an English online aviation community) and ignoring impacts from local consumption cultures. According to McCracken (1986), cultural meanings can move continuously from a culturally constituted world to consumer goods, and then transfer to individual consumers. With the existence of different consumption cultures, the investigation of online brand communities should take localization impacts into consideration, especially for the transnational online brand communities of globalization brands.

This current study was conducted under the local consumption culture level, giving insights that local consumption cultures should not be minimized in terms of global brands. According to Cova et al. (2007), consumers from different consumption cultures reinterpret brands’ meanings in different ways. This study extended such previous research by examining the values created within forums in different local consumption cultures. Although Holt (2005) asserted that it is
more crucial to emphasize cultural branding (e.g., from the angle of localization impacts), results in this study also showed that both globalization and localization have critical impacts on value creation in online brand communities. Thus, it is of vital importance to take both into consideration when conducting online brand community research.

Lastly, this study further contributed to the information on localization impacts in online brand communities by doing a comparative study. Through netnography in both everythingICafe and weiphone.com, this study provides insights into how the impacts of localization on these values could affect the value-guided content and activities of the online brand communities.

Few comparative studies have been done concerning value creation under different consumption contexts. Cova et al. (2007) did a comparative study of two offline global brand communities across borders (the Warhammer case) and investigated how the meanings of global brands were shaped by different cultures. The researchers discussed that marketplace differences should be taken into account by global markets. The current study not only indicated that both everythingICafe and weiphone.com had similar themes demonstrating the four values, regardless of the local consumption culture differences, but also determined that differences could also exist under the impacts of localization. This kind of comparative study offers a broad view and understanding of global brands in a wide range, and also provides insights on diverse local consumption cultures.
5.2.2 Managerial Contributions

This study generated managerial implications for companies and managers with respect to how to devise globalization and localization strategies in order to better promote products. Specifically, this study provided insights regarding the management of online brand communities with respect to collaborating with communities across different cultures, especially in the case of globalized high-tech products. On one hand, because online brand communities are freed from all geographic constraints (Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001), globalized approaches should be organized in order to appeal to all community members across the world. On the other hand, because localization impacts exist due to different consumption cultures, different localized strategies should also be implemented.

For companies and marketers, it is of great value to know how their marketing strategies operate by investigating and understanding different values created by users in their online brand communities. An online brand community will be more successful if it offers an environment for all functional, social, entertainment, and cultural values to develop, and consequently generates connections among community members. In this study, both everythingiCafe and weiphone.com had similarities and differences in value creation, affecting forum content and activities. In this case, exploring main characteristics of an online brand community that can deliver value to its consumers, stimulate consumer participation and trigger positive eWOM, has crucial business implications.

For consumer-generated online brand communities, community administrators and moderators play an important role in maintaining a positive environment for better communication among
members. Active participation of administrators and moderators can stimulate discussion and set a desired tone for discussion. In this study, each of the two forums examined represent successful online brand communities, and generate similar values as reflected in the postings. In *everythingiCafe*, moderators play an active role and have many communications with the members. This iPhone forum has high quality threads and postings due to the participation of the administrators and moderators. In *weiphone.com*, moderators are more focused on monitoring, and rarely serve the additional role of actively generating and directing discussion. In this case, administrators and moderators in this forum should participate more actively in order to understand and influence community behavior, which would likely lead to a higher overall quality of posting. Further, from a practical perspective, typical departments in companies (i.e., Apple Inc. in this study) can get more involved in the online brand communities, as moderators or business representatives, for the purpose of knowing their consumers better.

In addition, it is crucial for online brand communities to have appropriate content organizations in order to provide the right platforms for member communication. For example, functional value is the primary element for website traffic and brand loyalty, and proper sub-forums such as *iPhone 5S* and *iPhone 5C* offered in both *everythingiCafe* and *weiphone.com* provided members with relevant platforms upon which to communicate product-related information. Meanwhile, it is also important for online brand communities to be proactive in terms of product information. For instance, the iPhone 6 sub-forum in *everythingiCafe* offered a typical place for members’ discussion before this model of iPhone was even released. Therefore, *weiphone.com* should not only focus on current iPhone products, but should also be more proactive, providing sub-forums for the up-coming models of iPhones. Further, from a managerial point of view, companies and
marketers can co-operate with the forum administrators and moderators, creating or getting involved in such proactive sub-forums. In this way, companies can understand consumers’ demands and expectations for the next model of iPhone better. This is also helpful for Apple’s new iPhone development, providing more accurate information about consumers’ needs and wishes.

Moreover, once members get product information they want or resolve technical issues, it is crucial for online brand communities to maintain a lively and interesting environment in order to retain members’ participation. Both everythingiCafe and weiphone.com were liberated from talking only about functional-related information, social and entertainment content could also be sources of insight. For example, everythingiCafe could provide downloading options and online game playing like weiphone.com, thereby creating long-term entertainment value for its members. As stated by Sicilia and Palazon (2008, p. 267), entertainment value has “a powerful influence in creating memorable experiences that can positively influence consumer attitudes towards the site, as well as towards the brand.” In this case, such high-tech forums offering not just iPhone game information or guidance but also features such as online game playing would be more attractive to community members, and would build stronger ties between the brand and the consumers.

Lastly, since differences in value creation were found due to localization impacts between everythingiCafe and weiphone.com, findings in this study provided Apple with managerial implications for globalization and localization strategies. For example, as the headquarter company, Apple US should not only concentrate on sending advanced products out into the
world and promoting its innovation philosophy, but also focus on establishing specialist teams within local regions for the purpose of better knowing local consumption contexts. Furthermore, Apple China can develop long-term relationships with Chinese communication and media companies, providing consumers in China with less expensive access to iPhones and thereby reducing the chances of consumers getting over-charged smuggled or even fake iPhones. Also, Apple China can address consumers’ extreme caution regarding iPhone features by modifying its warranty plans in order to give more protection to consumers, ultimately increasing product satisfaction and brand loyalty.

5.3 CONCLUSIONS

This section discusses this study’s limitations, as well as future research directions.

5.3.1 Limitations

Limitations exist in this study. Firstly, due to the fast pace of the Internet, online brand communities have been changing over time, which complicates this area of research. In addition, massive data in both everythingiCafe and weiphone.com created a huge challenge for data collection. Since data in this study were collected from threads and postings during only the first four months following the release of iPhone 5S and 5C, the accountability and reliability of the data were restricted.

Secondly, another limitation is that this study was conducted under two typical consumption cultures, and compared only two online forums (everythingiCafe and weiphone.com). Also, this study relied on analysis associated with a limited product category (high-tech product). In this
case, the results in this study may not be generalizable to other products or categories of products.

5.3.2 Future Research Directions

Further research is required in order to reach more generalizable and quantifiable conclusions. Firstly, collecting data over a longer time period can help to ensure accountability in data analysis. Also, investigating other consumption cultures can help to broaden the research context and to provide more generalizable insights regarding cultural effects, providing better understanding of the differences in value creation across countries. Moreover, further research in other product/service categories can also provide deeper understanding of localization impacts on online brand communities. Lastly, it would be interesting to conduct quantitative studies by asking community members about the degree to which their value needs are satisfied, consequently helping the management of online brand communities and giving insights on companies’ marketing strategies.
REFERENCES


Seraj, M. (2012). We create, we connect, we respect, therefore we are: intellectual, social, and cultural value in online communities. *Journal of Interactive Marketing, 26*(4), 209-222.


APPENDICES

Appendix A: everythingiCafe homepage

(Screenshot taken on Sep. 16, 2013)
Appendix B: *everythingiCafe* forum page

(Screenshot taken on Sep. 16, 2013)
Appendix C: *everythingiCafe* iPhone forum page

(Screenshot taken on Sep. 16, 2013)
Appendix D: *iPhone 5* sub-forum and threads in there

(Screenshot taken on Mar. 04, 2014)
Appendix E: Screenshot of a thread and postings in there

(Screenshot taken on Mar. 04, 2014)
Appendix F: weiphone.com homepage

(Screenshot taken on Sep. 20, 2013)
Appendix G: weiphone.com forum page

(Screenshot taken on Sep. 20, 2013)
Appendix H: weiphone.com iPhone forum page

(Screenshot taken on Sep. 20, 2013)
Appendix I: iPhone 5S sub-forum and threads in there

(Screenshot taken on Mar. 04, 2014)
Appendix J: Screenshot of a thread and postings in there

(Screenshot taken on Mar. 04, 2014)