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Identity Conceptualisation in Social Media and the Implications for Online Marketing Communications

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Abstract

Purpose: To determine which, why and how social media tools are used by young adults to conceptualise identity/identities online, the extent of such activity and the implications for online marketing communications.

Literature review: New internet technologies have altered the way brands and consumers interact with power shifting from organisations to consumers'. Social media allows users the possibility of creating and maintaining multiple identities making the task of locating them increasingly difficult for marketers. In reality we adopt several aspects of self but the extent of this behaviour online is little researched. For marketers to understand and successfully target their audience it is necessary to also understand individual uses and gratifications of online interaction.

Methodology: The research undertakes a qualitative data collection. Primarily a pilot study was undertaken. Thereafter primary data for the main study was collected through in-depth interviews and secondary data was collected from academic literature and reports.

Findings: The social media tools adopted are motivated by respondents private and career interests. Self representation is apparent and differs between sites regarding what part of their identity to disclose and conceal. Status, empowerment and reputation are important motivators for the respondents' social media interaction, through which we also discover their central uses and gratifications of social media. In terms of brand interaction we discover various ways in which two-way online communication between both users and brands is greatly appreciated.

Conclusion: Through social media tools, young adults choose to disclose different parts of their self depending on the uses and gratifications of the site. Both communication among peers and direct brand communication are important when adopting brands. Although they are individualistic, peer-group support does play a role in their online interactions. Motivations for young adults online are immediacy, empowerment and the creation and management of identity. For marketers the challenge lies in regaining partial control by motivating consumer interaction.

Keywords: Social media • Online marketing • Identity conceptualisation • Extended self • Individual empowerment • Brand interaction • Uses and gratification

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1. Introduction

Technological developments have completely altered the way we communicate with the internet revolutionising nearly every aspect of our private and working lives (Mangold & Faulds, 2009; Qualman, 2009). Qualman (2009) suggests we are amidst another revolution, one that is people driven facilitated by social media, whereby everyday people post the news, recommendations, new software and the likes using the tools of social media. On a day to day basis we are able to keep in touch with friends around the globe and carry out business meetings from the comfort of our own homes. With the rise of the internet and now Web 2.0; the new interactive technologies arising in new media, our media consumption patterns are also shifting. Chamberlain (1994) put forth the idea that our era is one of demassification allowing individuals to pick and choose among a large amount of media, permitting tailored messages for every need. It has further been suggested that traditional media such as newspapers and magazines are in decline as the main source of information for young adults (Palmer & Koenig-Lewis, 2009). The power of social media lies in its ability to quickly and cheaply share information to the masses and individuals are fully adopting it as it allows for interactive communication between unlimited parties whilst also limiting their intake to what truly interests them.

1.1 Background

The growth of the internet is powered much by its ability to generate revenue, drawing immense interest from organisations. On May 25, 2010 the world had 1,802,330,457 internet users, implying more than a quarter of the world's population (26,6%) has access to and is adopting digital media (Internet World Stats, 2010). In our post-modernist society viewing brands as corporately controlled stories and consumers as a passive audience is obsolete (Salzer-Mörling & Strannegård, 2004). The ability of consumers to freely communicate with one another across the web limits the control companies have over the information and their brand. For them it is no longer possible to offer products and services that lack deeper value and meaning, since consumers to a lesser extent rely on advertising to make their decisions and increasingly on what their friends, colleagues and social networking contacts recommend; Nielsen reports that 90 percent of respondents trust the opinions of their peer's (Nielsen Wire, 2009). In addition, consumers are creating the values and expressions that brands entail through constant interaction and dialogue. The global survey "Young Adults Revealed" carried out by Microsoft Advertising and Synovate (2008) found that over 28 percent of respondents had discussed a brand in an online forum and 19 percent had brand related content on their social networking pages. The conclusion was that young adults are willing to add brand contents to their pages, but the challenge lies in motivating them to do so with your brand.

When discussing social networking sites (SNS's) it is necessary to understand what they are, these tools allow individuals to create personal profiles which allow them to interact between friends, family and strangers online (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). The profiles content is completely dictated and managed by the individual where an array of demographic and personal information can be shared. Furthermore, profiles can be personalised by adding an assortment of external applications such as brand content through so called Fan Pages or Groups which are communities within the

social networking site as well as games, video clips and music. These sites are not only used by individuals but increasingly by brands and for marketing research purposes (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010).

If treated right, social media can open up opportunities for effective communication in ways that both synchronously and asynchronously communicate with a business´ target audience. Marketing through social media is a low-cost alternative reaching out to thousands of consumers, although its effectivity is not easily measurable (Palmer & Koenig-Lewis, 2009). It is further suggested that marketing success may be found if companies and their marketers listen, watch and act on the online activities of their consumers, who are communicating directly, providing positive and negative feedback about the brand. Neisser (2006) proposes that this shift is democratising brand ownership by putting it in the hands of the consumers. Safko and Brake (2009:4) suggest that for businesses it is about enabling conversations that were never before possible and prompting, promoting and monetising on these. Consumers are seeking two-way communication with their brands and selectively processing their information of choice emphasising a need for companies to create a triadic relationship between them, the consumer and the network the consumer communicates through (Palmer & Koenig-Lewis, 2009). Ruggiero (2000) insists that the vast media choices presented by new technology emphasises the significance of understanding motivation and satisfaction of the audience. Thus it is important that organisations understand the needs, desires and motivations of the consumer and offer communications which help create and maintain a relationship.

It all sounds fairly straight forward, but it is not. Research has proven that the internet not only facilitates the flow of information but also unique behaviours which would not occur in real life as well as the creation of multiple identities across several networks (Dicken-Garcia, 1998; Jensen Schau & Gilly, 2003), consequently resulting in an increasingly complex task for companies to find and engage with their target audience. Singer (1998:10) views the internet as "a medium with the capability to empower the individual in terms of both the information he or she seeks and the information he or she creates", it is fair to suggest that the *I* in *internet*, not only stands for interconnection but also for individualism and identity.

1.2 Problem Area

The internet has thus not only facilitated communication (Castells, 2009; Dickens-Garcia, 1998), empowered individuals (Palmer & Koenig-Lewis, 2009; Singer, 1998) and democratised brands (Neisser, 2006) but also allowed an extent of multiple identities not previously possible (Edson Escalas & Bettman, 2005; Tian & Wu, 2007). Individuals can adopt a fantasy persona, an ideal public identity or a private one depending on preference, motivation and chosen network. The internet can also persuade individuals to reinforce their true identity or manipulate their current one by creating and maintaining a reputation (Palmer & Koenig-Lewis, 2009).

However, the research area of conceptualising and managing identity online is relatively new. Studies touching on social media and self have focused on aspects such as connecting with friends (Boyd and Ellison, 2008), conspicuous forms of consumer self-presentation using WebPages (Jensen

Schau & Gilly, 2003) and young people's participation and usage of social networking sites (SNS) (Dunne, Lawlor & Rowley, 2010). Tian and Wu (2007) examined the construction of virtual community identities among Chinese internet users on the site *Qiangguo Luntan*, they suggest that any interaction involves portraying a mask of one's identity and that this becomes more apparent when interacting online as it is possible to emphasise or deemphasise certain beliefs or aspects of oneself (Edson Escalas & Bettman, 2005). Agreeably, Aguado (2006) states that media operates as the primary source of identity in modern societies, implying the technological and economic changes of modern society have not only altered social processes such as politics and education but also the circumstances for the materialisation of the individual as a social actor. This is further supported by Castells (2009) who suggests that the development of Web 2.0 has allowed the emergence of mass self-communication, which he says is the possibility of new communication reaching a global audience, for instance through YouTube or blog entries, hence communicating to the masses, while also being self-communication since the message source, channel and receiver is self-generated, self-selected and self-directed.

When discussing social media it is necessary to highlight the notion of anonymity, which has become an issue for online communication. In an online setting Gabber *et* al (1997:4) define anonymity as when the identity of the user is withheld, meaning websites or users cannot verify the true identity of the user based on the alias or through other parts of the connection. According to Pissarra and Jesuino (2005) the anonymity of the internet can encourage interaction because there are lesser threats due to the environment in which one is communicating, also reducing inhibition and encourages users to share unconventional or unusual ideas. There is also an understanding that individuals may not be as anonymous online as they intend due to several factors. For instance, it has been said that reusing usernames and passwords across various sites can allow partnering sites to track and study users online habits, therefore users who value their confidentiality will need to maintain several usernames and invent them so that they are unrelated to their true identity (Gabber *et al,* 2007). This becomes an increasingly difficult task when considering the growth of both social media tools as well as internet users. Furthermore, Facebook (FB) has caused much controversy surrounding privacy issues, since users find themselves less anonymous then they believed to be whereby potential employees have had access to the individuals' profile (Smith & Kidder, 2010) or Facebook has offered new settings which has made information posted on the site visible to all (Hoadley *et al*, 2010). In order to maintain a degree of anonymity it is necessary to understand the privacy settings of each individual site or individuals you thought were blocked from your profile may find access through a friend of a friend and so forth, it is further suggested that the FB profile be used carefully, limiting potentially damaging information and photos (Smith & Kidder, 2010). In addition, a study of internet users (specifically members of a Multi Users Dungeon Group, MUDs) found that although users took on roles and created identities online they did feel a sense of community by finding a context in which to communicate self-expression (Turkle, 1995). Therefore depending on ones desires anonymity can be adopted due to several reasons, such as security, reduced inhibition or seeking self-expression, citing Turkle (1995:267) "Virtual communities offer a dramatic new context in which to think about human identity in the age of the internet". However, many studies regarding anonymity on the internet tend to focus on crime and security issues (Armstrong & Forde, 2003; Gabber *et al*, 1997; Puzis *et al*, 2009) rather than identity formation.

Although the anonymity of the internet does provide new ways of communicating we do not seek to explore these with our study since we are of the understanding that anonymity will not play an important role in identity conceptualisation. This, because identity refers to the aspect of the self which is known to others, implying identity conceptualisation is a public process by which it is placed in a context by the individual and endorsed by peers (Altheide, 2000; Simmons, 2008). As previously stated multiple identities can be created and maintained online to a greater extent than in real life, but not purely due to anonymity except because identity management is facilitated by the digital environment (Jensen Schau & Gilly, 2003) and the tools of social media allow for several identities to be put forward simultaneously rather than individually as in face-to-face encounters. Goffman (1959) asserted that self-presentation is contextual by being grounded in a specific context and to an expected audience. However, as Jensen Schau and Gilly (2003:387) asserted the social media sphere allows individuals "to self-present 24/7 beyond regional setting to a virtual world", by which they are free to express their multiple identities with digital association rather than through tangible possessions. Thus we seek to explore which of the mass of tools that are adopted in order to construct simultaneous and boundary-free selves and do not focus on the role of anonymity in this process.

By combining research based on internet user demographics and identity seeking theory we have defined our research subjects as young adults, between 20 – 35 years old in accordance with Statistics Sweden (2005). Although Swedish society is generally individualistic (Hofstede, 2010) and even more so the younger generation (Parment, 2008), it is suggested that we not merely exist as individuals but also on a collective base (Belk, 1988). However, Simmons (2008) argues that the self in postmodern culture is in actual fact decentred, liberating individuals from conformity by focusing on multiple images constructed through consumption. In agreement, Edson Escalas and Bettman (2005) cite that western societies are more inclined to focus on the personal self, in terms of distinctive personal traits and attributes while deemphasising others, known as independent self-construal, motivated by independence and differentiation. The extent to which these notions apply to young Swedish adults online remains to be explored.

Since consumers' ability to take ownership of brands has become easier than previously possible (Neisser, 2006), it is forcing companies to monitor and understand the discussions surrounding their brands in order to successfully act on such information and communicate to the consumers' needs (Safko & Brake, 2009; Qualman, 2009). Safko and Brake (2009) suggest companies must promote and influence conversations rather than trying to control them. Moreover, the necessity to observe and understand ones target audience is vital in order to choose the appropriate social media tool for building relationships with their consumers (Scott, 2008). Finally, there is a need to fully integrate social media activities with traditional marketing activities, since to the customer they are both part of the same – the corporate image (Safko & Brake, 2009:65).

1.3 Purpose

The main purpose of the thesis is to determine which, why and how social media tools are used by young Swedish adults to conceptualise identity online, the extent of such activity and the implications for online marketing communications.

1.4 Problem Discussion

As with possessions, is it possible for various social media tools to bear numerous meanings and levels of importance to our self and be used to define our individual, group or community aspect of self? Instead of adopting shared tangible symbols of consumption to identify group belonging, is it today possible to join online groups, forums, Fan Pages and the like to portray parts of one's identity? If this is the case, being aware of which tools are adopted for different purposes will be vital to the success of online marketing communication efforts. It has further been suggested that young adults undergo an identity crisis and during this period seek their identity through obtaining and collecting various objects of consumption (Belk, 1988). We intend to apply this notion to the social media sphere by suggesting that young adults online are highly interactive across various tools which are used for different means of self-construal.

1.4.1 Pilot Study

Since identity conceptualisation within social media is a fairly unexplored research area a pilot study was undertaken with the purpose of clarifying and discovering research themes. Four respondents in the ages 25-26 (1 female, 3 males) were interviewed.

It was found that social networking sites such as Facebook (FB) and various online communities were joined with the aim of keeping in touch with friends, sharing likeminded individual's knowledge and information about certain subjects, as a fun pastime and for sharing and receiving news about products or services, hence it becomes apparent that there are several motivations and dimensions of interactivity. Certain sites, such as YouTube required an account in order to have access to all content and were therefore joined.

Self representation was to some extent taken into consideration when interacting on FB, where personal restrictions were put on the photos shared as well as on the Fan Pages joined, suggesting an ideal identity portrayal (Smith & Wood, 2001). One respondent felt he could be more private, or "more himself", on FB whereas MySpace required a professional stance since he used the profile to communicate his brand and music, in a sense adopting multiple identities across the different sites as suggested by Edson Escalas and Bettman (2005). Although when interacting in communities where the members were anonymous or did not require a friend base no regard was taken to how one acted. Another respondent believed FB created a stronger version of herself because of the need to express oneself in text which forced a stance between what she liked and disliked, she said, "You become an opinion machine!". It was also stated that identity could be reinforced by joining groups, for instance, political groups on Facebook allowed the individual to take a public stance and defend ones interests, these statements offer implications towards individual empowerment as suggested by Palmer and Koenig-Lewis (2009). Furthermore, if friends joined groups that fit the respondents' values the respect for them grew whereas if friends joined pointless groups with no real purpose (an example was a group called "I like blueberry pie") those individuals lost the respondents' respect, which suggests that social networking sites (SNS's) have some influence on identity conceptualisation. One respondent also mentioned portraying a more accepted identity at times but interacting in a way that was more "normal" rather than actually being true to himself, further supporting the notion of an ideal self online as well as some sort of "masked identity" as has

been found in previous research (Tian & Wu, 2007). It was further suggested that many SNS's lack substantial meaning except for sites with a particular purpose such as job site LinkedIn. Two respondents stated a need for active participation from their contacts on FB, such as posting and commenting on their photos or status updates, without the gratification of the interaction SNS's felt useless, thus reciprocity fuelled much of the interaction. Furthermore, profile restrictions were put in place by two respondents, in order to avoid prospective employers from seeing a side they do not wish to portray to them. Others' perception of the respondents online was said not to be very important, however, due to certain restrictions they applied and interactions undertaken, which were mentioned above, there appears to be some contradiction.

There was also more emphasis on independent self-construal motivated by independence and differentiation, which one respondent said was motivated by the dislike of the Swedish mentality regarding the so called, *Jantelagen*[1]. Two of the respondents never commented on online communities or blogs but sometimes on Facebook, suggesting a preference for discussing with friends whereas merely browsing and obtaining information from other sites.

Online brand interaction and adoption was not common among three of the respondents, however one respondent mentioned adding Fan Pages that he liked, such as football teams, artists and music groups, to his profile to show support for that brand and also hoping to influence others to join, the action was not primarily as an identity marker however he was aware that the interaction could influence others' perception of him. Brand discussions among other consumers did occur to some extent and consumer to consumer (C2C) interaction was valued higher than business (brand) to consumer (B2C) interaction since it was perceived as more trustworthy and there was more possibility of being critical, which can indicate increased consumer empowerment through the internet. Among the four respondents, traditional word-of-mouth was still most influential since they discussed purchases with friends and family more than online, although the respondents had on several occasions searched for user generated product and brand information online before making a purchase. The male respondents had not adopted two-way communications with brands since it was seen as "pointless" and also "time consuming"; there was a feeling that brands could not be influenced and if the communication regarded a question about a product or service it would be quicker to call the company directly, which we feel may be an implication for future marketing communications online and seek to explore further. However, the female respondent clearly expressed her appreciation for two-way communication with brands and especially if there is a possibility to chat with an employee. This she feels is better than traditional marketing, as they answer the consumer's questions at once and the consumer can also provide direct feedback. Three respondents cited that if brands were more open and there was a possibility for users to influence them then they would more likely interact. Finally, marketing communications that were perceived as individually tailored were highly valued and often led to purchase in comparison with traditional marketing which was said to be filtered out almost completely.

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[1] *Jantelagen* consists of 10 satirical commandments devised by the Danish author Aksel Sandemose in his novel "En flykting korsar sitt spår" in 1933 [A fugitive crosses his tracks]. These depict a group behaviour pattern of jealousy within a community who criticise achievement and success as inappropriate, failing to acknowledge individual success, since no one should think he/she is better than anyone else (Nationalencyclopedin, 2010). Similar to the "tall poppy syndrome" found in the UK.

The findings of the pilot study indicate identity conceptualisation online to some extent, there are also slight differences between the motivations for using a site and the way identity is managed. Several dimensions of interactivity were also touched on as well as the gratifications of these. From this small pilot sample brand interaction was less prominent in male respondents which may be an indication of gender differences. The individual interviews proved to be a good method for investigating behaviours and patterns within this emerging area of research.

1.5 Research Questions

In light of the discussion and pilot study findings above four research questions have been formulated in order to successfully carry out the purpose of our research. The questions are as follows:

i.   Which social media tools are used to conceptualise identity online and are brands adopted in the process?

ii. What are the motivations and gratifications obtained through social media interaction?

iii. Do young adult consumers perceive social media to have facilitated brand ownership?

iv. What are the motivations and gratifications obtained through direct online brand interaction and the preferences for this interaction?

1.6 Expected Research Contribution

As social media is still a reasonably new and unexplored area we seek to provide a better understanding of how individual identities are conceptualised online by examining their tools, motivations and gratifications. The study then seeks to discuss the implications this may have on marketing communications and the extent of online brand communication interaction and adoption by individuals. From a research perspective the study therefore fills a void and provides a solid starting point for future research. In practice the results will offer organisations new insight and knowledge surrounding consumers' social media activities and the value of marketing to these online. Since ROI[2] (return-on-investment) still remains a concern when marketing departments discuss social media integration we hope to enable well informed marketing decisions surrounding such investments by supplying knowledge surrounding consumers' identity conceptualisation and their preferences regarding online brand interaction.

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[2] Return-on-investment is a ratio measure of the profit output of the business as a percentage of financial investment inputs (Simons, 2000:98).

1.7 Delimitations and Perspectives

Due to the scope of the study certain delimitations were imposed. Social media and Web 2.0 encompass a vast amount of tools, however we felt we could not limit the tools we explored since it was unknown which were adopted by the target sample, we therefore let the sample dictate the social media tools incorporated into the study. Also due to the unexplored nature of this field we adopted a multidisciplinary theoretical background, though limiting it to identity conceptualisation, consumer brand interaction, users and gratifications theory and empowerment.

1.8 Definitions

The following list presents important definitions found throughout our thesis which we felt necessary to explain.

Blogs are the earliest type of social media and are most often text based personal websites that present entries in a reverse chronological sequence. They are generally managed by one individual but offer interaction through comments (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010:63).

Brand Communities are specialised, non-geographically bound communities, based on a structured set of social relationships among users of a brand (Muñiz & O'Guinn, 2001:412).

Extended Self is our main theoretical framework for identity conceptualisation and is defined as the self created by the external objects with which one surrounds oneself (Solomon *et al,* 2006:650).

Fan Pages and Groups are much like brand communities and member forums but are applications within the social networking site Facebook, rather than alone. They are now known as **Likes and Interests** but since our study sample was acquainted with the previous name we found it clearer to use it.

Identity is the who or what a person or thing is, meaning the characteristics determining this (Identity n", 2008).

Online communities are made up of groups of people with common interests who communicate and exchange information about products, brands and services through forums, chats and other computer mediated tools (Wook Kim *et al,* 2008).

RSS stands for *Really Simple Syndication* and is a free internet service which allows for suitable updates on favoured websites once users have subscribed to the service (Simmons, 2008).

Social media refer to the online activities and behaviours among a group of people who gather in order to create and exchange user generated content (information, knowledge, opinions) using web-based media or applications (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010:61; Safko & Brake, 2009:6).

Social networking sites (SNS) are Web 2.0 applications allowing users to build personal web sites accessible to other users for the exchange of personal content and communication (Palmer & Koenig-Lewis, 2009), such sites include Facebook, MySpace, Twitter, ASmallworld and LinkedIn etc.

Tools and **Applications** are used interchangeably by some researchers, however we adopt the notion that **Tools** of social media are the actual sites used, for example Facebook, Wikipedia, YouTube and so forth (Safko & Brake, 2009) and **Applications** are external party services such as Fan Pages. However, since both tools and applications are adopted by our respondents we have, in order to simplify understanding, decided to use **Tools** as our generic term.

Web 2.0 is often used instead of social media, but it actually implies the new inventive technologies that are arising in new media, whose key aim is to enable online interaction and conversation among communities of people by using the interactive dialogic features (Grunig, 2009:7; Safko & Brake, 2009:7).

2. Literature review

2.1 From Offline to Online Communication – An Overview

According to Castells (2000) the information technology revolution has restructured the material basis of society. The new communication systems offer a universal digital language and have globally integrated words and images of our cultures as well as customised them to individuals needs. It is suggested that new types and channels of communication are being created through the growth of interactive digital networks, which in turn are both structuring and being structured by life. Castells (2001:382) further states that the internet with its millions of networks around the globe "covers the whole spectrum of human communication, from politics and religion to sex and research", also facilitating groupings which have become a mesh of individualised, interactive communication.

One may ask if the internet is creating communities and bringing people together or actually increasing personal isolation. Rheingold (1993) argues that it brings people together around shared interests and values creating new virtual communities, which in turn could result in real life meetings and friendships. A virtual community does not have to be used instead of a physical community and vice versa, they are merely different and can offer different communicatory contexts (Castells, 2000). However, a clear difference between offline and online communication and interaction is that the internet offers a greater amount of weak social connections, Castells (2001) argues that this is a cost efficient way to provide information and find new opportunities. Just as in offline situations weak social connections allow an expansion of one's sociality with those of different social character, the internet can thus provide a greater expansion of social bonds (Castells, 2001). In agreement Wellman and Gulia (1999) found that the greater the internet use, the greater amount of social connections resulted, including physical ones. Hence, online communication does not sit in isolation from all other communications and with this it appears possible that the future of offline and online communication will maintain a give-and-take relationship, both providing individual characteristics which fulfil our needs.

2.1.1 The New Marketing Communications

The growth of the internet has truly altered our ways of gathering, seeking and communicating information. Qualman (2009) cites us living in a people driven economy; with the rise of social media there is now a paradigm shift from organisations and brands controlling the flow of information to people being in control. For instance by using RSS feeds consumers can choose what they want to be updated about and have it sent to them electronically, providing selectivity and removing marketing noise (Simmons, 2008). Although organisations are beginning to adopt these new communication tools, many are still at a loss as how to effectively do so. A recent study found that 50 percent of internet users said they had sought out advice from a blog before making a purchase (Qualman, 2009:17), implying that the consumer decision making process is being altered by social media, thus the huge influence these internet based messages have on consumer behaviour cannot be ignored. The importance of social media lies in the interactions between the users and the

community, which, according to Palmer and Koenig-Lewis (2009:165) facilitates "asynchronous, immediate interactive, low-cost communications". These networks further permit the creation of public or semi-public profiles which allows for communication with friends, acquaintances and those who share the same interests. The success of social media can, according to Kaplan and Haenlein (2010:61), be accounted to social presence theory, which states that media vary in the degree of "social presence" which in turn is the "acoustic, visual and physical contact" that is achieved between two communicators, thus the intimacy and immediacy of the medium influences the social presence. Social media allow for collaborative development of information and content resulting in immense amounts of user-generated content.

2.2 Social Media and Identity Conceptualisation

In order to understand identity conceptualisation in social media we first present identity formation theory and its relevance to our research area followed by consumer theory regarding the extended self.

2.2.1 Identity Formation – An Overview

Identity has been conceived in different ways in varying fields, although much theory has been developed based on Erikson (1982). Erikson puts forward self-development as a continuous process that optimises a person's functioning in a social environment. However he suggests a critical role in this process was that of adolescence, when the main task is to create a sense of identity (Erikson, 1968; in Kaplan & Flum, 2010). Identity is not merely self-concept or social identity but the process within the core of the individual and the core of his group culture, meaning a sense of individual uniqueness while maintaining agreement with group ideals (Kaplan & Flum, 2010).

Kaplan and Flum (2010) cite that Western culture allows adolescents to experiment with social roles, values and goals before committing to those that become the foundation for a sense of who the person is. The experimentation is a reciprocal interaction between the individual and the social environment and implies taking on roles and joining societal groupings. Marcia (1966, 1980; in Kaplan & Flum, 2010:56) suggests two aspects of identity formation. The first is collecting information, questioning and critically reflecting over ones identifications, beliefs and roles, known as *exploration*. The second is *commitment* which refers to selecting and integrating personal goals and values towards certain ideas. It is these commitments which become central to an individual's identity. It is further suggested that individuals who undergo such exploration and self-construction of their identity are better adjusted than those who have not, which according to Kaplan and Flum (2010) strongly supports a centrally constructive role of exploration in identity formation.

Identity formation can adapt and change overtime and it is argued that context holds an important role in young individuals' identity formation which argues different identity aspects may manifest in different contexts (Kaplan & Flum, 2010).

Berzonsky (1988, 1990) presented three identity-orientated styles (Kaplan & Flum, 2010:59):

- *Informational*: The private self in terms of personal characteristics and attributes is the primary concern and deals with identity issues through self-exploration and information seeking. This style is linked with openness for new ideas and views.
- *Normative:* The collective self in terms of perceived standards and values of the reference group is the primary concern and deals with self-evaluation in reaching these normative standards. This style is linked with defensive attitudes towards ideas and views that threaten the normative standards.
- *Diffuse/avoidant:* The public self in terms of the situated impression one makes on others and their approval is the primary concern and deals with identity issues through avoidance and negative processing of self-related information. This style is linked with a lack of core personal beliefs and deference to the social principles of the situation.

Supposedly individuals within the different styles are distinguished from each other. However, it is also suggested that late adolescents utilize all three styles but will tend to rely on one more than the other (Kaplan & Flum, 2010). Thus, identity formation in adolescence concerns the process in which they reach an understanding of who they are. Although each of the various identity frames can be modified to specific situations they are all primarily associated with self-transformation and growth which demands exploration. The individuals' primary choice of identity-processing style will be used in situations that are central to their self-definition whereas the others may manifest when confronted with challenges. Since our study seeks to explore identity conceptualisation in social media from a consumer perspective we have focused on identity theory concerning the extended self which will be presented below.

2.2.2 Extended Self

People seek, express, confirm and ascertain a sense of being through what they have.

(Belk, 1988:146)

Belk (1988:139) introduced the notion of the extended self, suggesting that "we are what we have" is the basic idea to understanding consumer behaviour as we consciously or subconsciously consider our possessions to be part of ourselves. To construct a satisfactory representation of the self-concept one can adopt an array of brands and products in order to maintain various identities for different situations (Belk, 1988; Simmons, 2008). Elliot (1998) states that multiple identities are constructed through the adoption of symbolic interpretations created during socialisation processes between the individual and others in order to create both individual and shared symbolic meanings. The belief that we construct ourselves around objects and brands is quite apparent in modern society whereby consumption is implied to be strongly rooted in the quest for our identity. Ames (1984:30, in Belk, 1988:145) points out how the acquisition of certain objects not only heightens the sense of self but also provides increased approval, status and respect from others. More recently Smith and Wood (2001) agreeably suggest that people construct identity online because they seek approval by others and can achieve it by selecting what to disclose and to what extent, subsequently the person behind the screen has control over the identity portrayed.

For the purpose of our study we argue that - just as Belk (1988) suggests objects such as weapons and tools allow us to carry out acts which otherwise would be impossible - by adopting social media and interacting online with peers, these tools become a part of our extended self permitting users to portray a desired meaning resulting in multiple selves which would not be possible in other contexts. It has previously been argued that we can impose our identity on belongings or that they can impose their identity on us, such as can be seen with strong brands (Belk, 1988:141). Hence the more we feel something is ours the more it becomes part of our self; what is mine is also me. Doyle McCarthy (1984) suggests that since possessions confirm our identity it is possible for ones identity to reside in the possessions more than in the individuals. This view is further supported by recent research in the area of virtual reality where identities and life online are becoming indistinguishable from life in the real world (Adrian, 2008).

Sartre (1990) argued that we only desire things in order to heighten our sense of self and that we only find our true self by studying what we actually have, therefore citing Belk (1988:148) "having and being are distinct but inseparable". Marx (2007) criticises the notion of having and being, who sees doing as central to our self and existence, implying that only through work and contributions is it possible to find ourselves rather than through consumption. However, from a social media perspective we put forward the idea that the views of Sartre and Marx are perhaps no longer so dissimilar since the online interaction plays various roles and requires a considerable effort from the user, suggesting that the extended self available online is not possible through merely obtaining brand symbols but through contributions, maintenance and peer-group support (Wook Kim *et al,* 2008). Furthermore Belk (1988:158) denotes that the greater an object is seen as part of the extended self the greater care and attention it demands, again arguing for the significance of the extended self when exploring online self-construal. His work acknowledges that the acquisition of brands and products create and maintain our extended self on an individual and group basis.

According to Simmons (2008) post-modern consumers seek to reinvent themselves continuously through consumption. However, although they seek an individual identity he suggests that they do not wish to stand completely alone instead seeking self-exhibition in front of likeminded individuals, in an attempt to satisfy the need for individualisation but also communalism. Since we adopt the notion that young Swedish adults belong to a society that holds a highly individualistic concept of self, as put forward by previous research (Hofstede, 2010; Parment, 2008), we believe that particularly three levels of self presented by Belk (1988) will be the focus of our study; individual, community and group. Just as objects and brands are able to help define our individual identity, shared symbols can define group belonging and the group self. In terms of social media, consumption symbols are not the main indicator of self, instead we argue that the title, purpose and actions of the groups you join will define your group self. Additionally, communities can be found online, in so called brand communities, where consumers can initiate brand discussions and vigilante marketing (Muñiz & Jensen Schau, 2007). Belk (1988) further cites that group and community identity is not merely portrayed using individual objects but can also be landmarks, places or people, based on this assumption we imply an individual's online group and community self can be symbolised by the actual social media in which they interact.

2.3 Social Media and Individual Empowerment

Castells (2009:54) defines communication as "the sharing of meaning through the exchange of information". The communicatory process is defined by the technology used, the senders and receivers' characteristics and the extent of the discourse. Traditional one-way mass communication is sent from one to many while the growth of the internet has allowed for interactivity and increased the extent of two-way symmetrical and asymmetrical communication (Ashcroft & Hoey, 2001; Castells, 2009). Furthermore traditional mass communication is now also internet-based which is apparent in the development of web-TV and online editions of magazines and newspapers.

Castells (2009) notion of power proposes that power is exercised either through intimidation and/or by the creation of meaning through the actions and dialogues of actors; the notion of actor is applicable to various subjects such as individuals, organisations and networks. In addition, such meaning is only understood if observed within the social context in which it is created, further emphasising the need for organisations to monitor and interact with their audience online. When discussing the interactivity of individuals using social media it is necessary to understand why they willingly share information and knowledge with one another. Ohtsuki, Iwasa and Nowak (2009:79) suggest that indirect reciprocity is the key to human cooperation and that our behaviours towards others are not only influenced by what they have done to us but also what they have done to others. Our societies are constructed around altruistic, cooperative interactions which help individuals establish their reputation (Nowak & Sigmund, 2005). Additionally, the opportunities for one-off interactions and exchanges between strangers are becoming more frequent in contemporary society, replacing the traditional give and take exchanges between family, friends and acquaintances.

Many online services such as e-auctions and forums are built on the notions of trust and reputation. It is also put forward that individuals can wield great support and power if they prove themselves to be collaborative and altruistic acting as an incentive for others to join group efforts (Nowak & Sigmund, 2005). Concurrently, Palmer and Koenig-Lewis (2009:169) suggest a distinguishing feature of internet sites is the eagerness and capability of individuals to share their thoughts, knowledge and recommendations with others, including complete strangers. This voluntary provision of information is grounded in reciprocity, suggesting that return-to-self calculations are the motivation (meaning that the sharing of information by an individual is undertaken after an assessment of what personal gains can result). From a social media perspective this could be acquiring and maintaining a reputation of being the one to ask about specific areas, a "know-all", providing the individual with a feeling of influential power when his or her comments are taken seriously (Palmer & Koenig-Lewis, 2009). Castells (2009) proposes that such reciprocity is based on two-way asymmetrical communication implying a power relation since one party wields greater influence than the other.

The primarily homogenous mass communication industry has transformed into diverse media and along with it the passive audience which marketers previously targeted is no more. As cited by Castells (2009:57):

> *Social actors and individual citizens around the world are using the*
> *new capacity of communication networking to advance their projects*
> *to defend their interests and to assert their values.*

Through mass self-communication consumers have become producers providing an abundance of user-generated communications. Therefore social media provides increased opportunities for empowerment of individuals, interest groups and brands. Previous research has presented notions of peer-group and emotional support, keeping in touch with friends and the importance of having a social identity as strong motivations for online interactivity (Burnett, 2000; Dunne, Lawlor & Rowley, 2010; Raacke & Bonds-Raacke, 2008). The reliance on user-generated content for the success of social media allows the creation of self-proclaimed experts and the possibility of influencing a vast amount of individuals. However, the extent of reciprocity, individual self-gain and identity as motivations has yet to be explored.

2.4 Social Media and Brand Interaction

The brand is conceptualised as the organisations most fundamental asset as business success can be achieved through the successful creation of brands, according to Salzer-Mörling and Strannegård (2004). The marketplace has become the producer of signs where brands are no longer the transmitters of product information but rather visual expressions of the actual product consumed. Previously consumers have been regarded as passive receivers of marketing efforts but along with the growth of the internet this perception has shifted drastically whereby personalised interactions are sought (Salzer-Mörling & Strannegård, 2004). The post-modern culture tends to decentre the self by emphasising multiple selves through consumption of various brands. Simmons (2008) argues that consumption has become a liberating tool allowing individuals to create images suitable for different social contexts. It is also known that strong brands allow consumers to perceive and understand one another merely through observation since they create impressions rather than meaning (Bengtsson & Östberg, 2006; Ligas & Cotte, 1999; Salzer-Mörling & Strannegård, 2004). They further argue that brands do not carry meaning until consumer interaction occurs resulting in the creation of identification markers through brand value and meaning. Simmons (2008) implies that post-modern consumers are seeking meaningful interaction with brands which is possible through connective and creative internet marketing. Agreeably, Willis (1990) suggests that young adults brand interaction takes on an active role adapting the symbolic emotions that the advertisement portrays, which in turn provides an understanding of the advertisement. Consumers are able to create and adapt meaning according to their own preferences, which are a combination of interpretation and dialogue adopted in order to link the brand and social context with themselves (Ligas & Cotte, 1999). By adopting brands consumers build their identity controlling how they are perceived and hence who they are.

It has however been argued that if consumers online brand interactions are personalised then each consumer is unknowing of the image others have of them since these personalised interactions become private, resulting in the entire activity of consumption with the means of portraying an identity is lost (Simmons, 2008). It is therefore suggested that to achieve individuality it is necessary to interact with peers and share attitudes, expectations and sense of identity with one another. Ligas and Cotte (1999:610) present a framework for brand negotiation involving three environments in which brand meaning is developed (fig.2.1); marketing, individual and social. These are not top down or linear hence the meaning in one environment may not transfer to or impact another. The marketing environment is the brand meaning created by marketers through marketing activities;

the individual environment is the brand meaning created by the individual consumers, often by adopting the marketed meaning and adapting it to their own goals and history; the social environment touches on the notion of symbolic interactionism and that individual brand meanings are brought to the social environment where through discourse a unified meaning within a particular group is created.
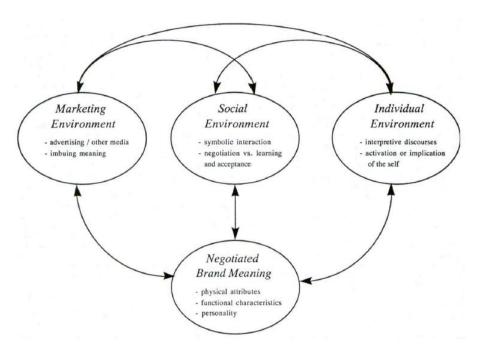

Figure 2.1: A Framework for the Brand Negotiation Process (Ligas & Cotte, 1999:611)

The framework suggests a holistic creation of brand meaning between the three environments; implying a level of agreement between individuals is necessary. Adopting this from a social media perspective the social, marketed and individual environments are greater linked than ever before. Research has found that online communities help to add further value to a brand through the creation of brand awareness and image and by engaging the voice of brand advocates (Wook Kim *et al,* 2008). These communities allow members to communicate their shared values and thus develop relationships with each other and possibly the brand, which was also found in a study by Buttle (1991) where advertisements initiated peer group communication allowing impact on brand interaction and thereby consumer's identity. Based on this discussion we propose that brand interaction is publicly undertaken online through community membership. Furthermore Wook Kim *et al* (2008) suggest that the sharing of information between community members heightens their sense of influence.

2.5 Social Media Uses and Gratifications

Uses and gratification theory (U&G) explores how individuals use media, the perspective suggests that active audiences select different media to satisfy needs, the media selection and usage is influenced by social and psychological factors (Papacharissi, 2002). Both Ruggiero (2000) and Rubin (2000) put forward U&G as a revived theory due to the emergence of new media on the internet. Dunne, Lawlor and Rowley (2010) suggest that U&G theory is particularly good for studying the

interactive nature of the internet as a mass medium since U&G researchers use the audience as their starting point (Ruggiero, 2000).

Web users do not share information with others merely out of interest but also as an attempt to create a virtual territory (Papacharissi, 2002). Social media users have total control over their profiles; deciding what to share, the tools they adopt and often choosing to portray themselves in an ideal light – an ideal self. Furthermore, the motivation to use a mass medium is affected by the individual's trust in that specific medium and the satisfaction it entails. The interactive aspect of social media is its key component and also key to the U&G notion of active user, which is "the degree to which participants in the communication process have control over and can exchange roles in their mutual discourse" (Williams, Rice & Rogers, 1988:10).

In their study Ha and James (1998) cited five dimensions of interactivity:

- *Playfulness*: a voluntary behaviour often as a break from work.
- *Choice*: refers to the unrestricted surfing of the web and the satisfaction it entails, often resulting in a feeling of empowerment for the individual.
- *Connectedness*: the linking through hypertexts to the world, enriching and broadening ones experience.
- *Information collection*: implies gathering audience data for the communicator and the audience's compliance in providing information for recording.
- *Reciprocal communication*: the communication and feedback between consumer and organisation, or different users of social media, if communication continues it is known as collaborative communication, implying it satisfies the needs of both parties.

Ha and James (1998) imply that audience-orientated communications such as play or choice offer more value to the audiences self-communication rather than benefit the organisation directly. Source-orientated communications on the other hand, such as information and reciprocal collection, imply greater interactivity and greatly benefit the source, i.e. the organisation (sender), than the audience.

Thus the advantages of interactivity is not merely to access information quickly or shop online, but to develop new communication means and increase user generated activity and contents (Ruggiero, 2000). Moreover, Ruggiero (2000) cites two questions that all U&G researchers seek to answer; why do users interact in a specific type of mediated communication? What gratifications are obtained from such interaction? Therefore U&G theory will support our study in exploring how the gratifications obtained through internet usage affect the conceptualisation of self online, as well as uncovering the implications for organisations marketing communications.

With U&G theory we seek to explore the extent of Ha and James (1998) five dimensions of interactivity to the conceptualisation of self. We suggest that information collection and reciprocal communication are the two dimensions that can greatest influence the conceptualisation of self online and will therefore be our main focus. *Information Collection* is first and foremost a need of the communicator, it is suggested that companies seeking to create consumer databases emphasise data gathering. This data gathering relies on the audiences' eagerness to supply such information, in the study by Ha and James (1998) this dimension was used to measure the presence of monitoring

devices on WebPages. However, from our perspective we suggest that information collection can be adopted by individual communicators seeking information about a topic or when exploring people's preferences within ones various social media sites, if this interactivity is apparent it may provide implications for how marketers can successfully motivate their audience to share valuable information with them, offering marketers the opportunity to monitor and collect it for marketing purposes. *Reciprocal Communication* refers to two-way communication which is enabled by social media's interactive nature. It is possible to involve the users in activities and users are able to engage in a triadic discourse between themselves, the brand and the other users. The role of source and receiver can alternate between the parties but in order for companies to engage consumers and receive feedback it is necessary to offer something of value (Ha & James, 1998). Although, Manafy (2010) suggests that merely by responding to consumer feedback and being transparent can provide a sincere brand identity for consumers and automatically engage them.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Philosophy

Interpretivism is an epistemology which provides deeper insight to the researcher's role in understanding the differences between humans in our role as social actors (Saunders *et al*, 2007:106). The epistemology focuses on how we behave, are perceived and how we perceive others in their roles, in line with our research since we have investigated *which*, *why* and *how* social media tools are used by young Swedish adults to conceptualise identity online. Other research philosophies such as positivism are better adopted from a natural science perspective where the knowledge is viewed as free from assumptions and takes the stance of an objective analyst (Saunders *et al*, 2003; Sinha, 1963). Considering the complex world of our research field it would not be possible to achieve accurate insight from a positivistic stance as this philosophy believes in generalising the outcome (Sinha, 1963).

Conducting interpretivist research the writers work back and forth in order to relate the literature to the whole and the data analysis of the respondents must support the thematic interpretation (Goulding, 1999). This is apparent in our research whereby we formed a pilot study, primarily interviewing four respondents. We then returned to our literature review to see if the small sample of data collection could represent our research and help undertake the study. After a few alterations we felt that it was possible to research our purpose using the main interview guide.

Amaratunga and Baldry (2001) further argue that within interpretivism it is important to understand the social actions and motivations behind the way people act in order to see the holistic reality and the social context it is constructed in. Agreeably, Saunders *et al* (2003) cite that people interpret situations differently and through interaction with others they seek to make sense of the situation. Since we are exploring the motivations for and uses of social media tools in conceptualising identity online and how interactions with peers may assist in this process, we argue that interpretivism is the correct approach. As Saunders *et al* (2003) further discusses, it is important for researchers from a interpretivist perspective to understand the context of the subject researched about in order to make out what motivates them to action and what their intentions are. Through our literature review we used a framework on which we based our interviews and through these formed an understanding of the context in which our respondents use social media tools to form their identity online.

3.2 Research Strategy

Saunders *et al* (2003) argue that within business and management research it is not unusual to see a mix of two approaches since researchers should be open to a 'realistic' research approach in order to meet the purpose of the study. For this study we have combined two approaches and will in the next section present the stance of abduction; a middle ground for induction used in interpretivism and deduction used in positivism.

Induction	Deduction
Inductive reasoning is a theory building process, starting with **observations of a specific context**, and seeking to establish generalisations about the phenomenon under investigation (Hyde, 2002:2).	Deductive reasoning is a theory testing process which commences with an established theory or generalisation, and **seeks to see if the theory applies to specific instances** (Hyde, 2002:2).
In this approach the researcher explores the data and develops theories, and by doing so the researcher will subsequently relate to the literature. **The research has a clear and define purpose with research questions and objectives**, but does not start with any predetermined theories or conceptual framework (Saunders *et al*,2007:57).	**The researcher uses the literature to help identify theoretical framework and ideas that will be tested using data** (Saunders *et al*,2007:57).
In this philosophical style of research the investigator the investigator employs a doctrine of curiosity to **gather data relevant to a predetermined subjective area, analyses it**, and, on the basis of that analysis, postulates one or more theoretical conclusion (Brett Davies,2007:238).	In this philosophical style of research the investigator begins from **a theoretical position and sets out to test it by gathering and analysing data**. It is sometimes called the hypothetic-deductive method because, in experimental research, the research normally outlines a hypothesis based on the theory, and then uses empirical methods for confirmation (Brett Davies,2007:235).

Figure 3.1: A Presentation of Inductive and Deductive Strategies

The highlighted sections in figure 3.1 present the parts we have used from both the inductive and deductive approach. As Hyde (2002) suggests, we have through induction observed the specific context of social media and the tools used to determine which, why and how these are used within identity conceptualisation online. On the other hand, we have also sought to see if our literature review could be applied to the results we gathered from data analysis. In line with Saunders *et al* (2007) we have a clear and define purpose which is to determine which, why and how social media tools are used by young Swedish adults to conceptualise identity online, the extent of such activity and the implications for online marketing communications. This purpose was determined on the basis of the theoretical framework in agreement with deduction (Saunders *et al*, 2007). When gathering our data we chose respondents who were active within social media and following interviews we analysed their responses, which is according to Brett Davies (2007) part of induction. However, we also departed from a theoretical point of view and through our pilot study explored if the data collected could be analysed with our theoretical framework, before continuing with the main study which was also analysed using theory; as is found in a deductive approach (Brett Davies, 2007).

Taking a closer look at both reasonings there is not much difference between them. Both approaches are based on primary data which is analysed whereby the results are interpreted; defining how accurate the analysis is compared to the literature (Remenyi, 2002). Therefore we have chosen to ground our theory on a third stance called abduction. Fann (1970) discusses in *Peirce´s theory of abduction* that abduction proposes hypotheses. Our research is a frame which forms a good basis for hypotheses as it has undertaken both an inductive and deductive stance providing the reader with a deeper insight than would be possible with merely induction or deduction.

3.3 Research Method

Exploratory research is determined by the use of primary or secondary data and a formal or informal analysis of it. It is used in studies where the purpose is to see what the problems are and not provide a specific root to take for these problems (Hair *et al*, 2006). As seen in our purpose we have sought to determine *which*, *why* and *how* social media tools are used by young adults to conceptualise identity/identities online, clearly indicating an exploratory study. A descriptive study aims to show an accurate outline of a situation (Saunders *et al*, 2007:134) and can be based on an exploratory study since it is important to primarily have an accurate and clear picture of the research field. This is apparent in our study by using the findings of the pilot study (see appendix 1: p I) as the foundation for the main data collection (see appendix 2: p II). Furthermore these findings may not have been as accurate without the exploratory pilot study which provided us with a deeper understanding of the phenomenon.

3.4 Data Collection

3.4.1 Primary and Secondary Data

There are two forms of data when conducting research, primary and secondary. Primary data is collected by the researcher through for instance interviews, focus groups and questionnaires, where we have adopted in-depth interviews. The interview questions were semi-structured which allowed us to collect the data and provided small alterations of the questions with regard to the respondents attitudes, believes and emotions (Hair *et al*, 2006). Secondary data is documents which are collected and published by other writers, as well as visual materials (Given, 2008). As this is a multidisciplinary study we have used academic literature within different frameworks such as advertising, marketing, consumer behaviour, consumer research, computer-mediated communications, business and industrial marketing and business strategy among others.

3.4.2 Sampling

Our research sample is young adults in Sweden between 20 – 30 years old. As language becomes the primary source of information (Goulding, 2005) we have conducted purposive sampling which implies that our participants are those who have lived and experienced the subject under study, as stated by Brett Davies (2007). Moreover we adopted snowball sampling, which initially relies on personal contacts that we then let identify other respondents who meet the research criteria, i.e. young adults active within social media, continuing this process until the desired sample size was achieved (Saunders *et al*, 2007). Hence, once we found that no more new information and themes were being discovered we settled for twelve interviews. Our sample for this research consisted of twelve participants of which seven male and five female interviewees participated. Four individuals were used in the pilot study and eight were interviewed for the main study, however all 12 respondents were used in the results and analysis.

3.4.3 Primary Data Gathering

As stated above we conducted snowball sampling which provided us with our primary data. The five women we interviewed were between 20 and 26 years old and the seven men between 23 and 30 years old, resulting in an average age of 25.5 years. This we argue is an adequate representation of young adults in Sweden, based on young adults being defined as between 20 – 34 by Statistics Sweden (2005). Furthermore the respondents worked in various industries or were university students at undergraduate or post-graduate level, again providing a representative sample of young adults.

The interviews were semi-structured and performed in a face-to-face setting at the respondents' home or in a private room at the library, each taking between 30 and 35 minutes. Using a semi-structured interview guide allowed for a free flowing discussion yet gave the interviewer control so all themes were covered. Furthermore having the guide facilitated comparisons between the interviewees during results and analysis. In order to gather sufficient data we also employed probing questions or probe words when necessary, a technique used to gather further information about a question (Hair *et al*, 2006). Hair *et al* (2006) states that the reason for performing the interviews in a private setting, such as the respondents' home, is to make sure they are comfortable and maintain focus. When interviewing our respondents we recorded the conversation on a traditional or digital recorder and took notes in order to achieve the most accurate transcription.

3.4.4 Data Analysis

When conducting interviews within a qualitative approach, transcription of these interviews is required. When transcribing audio-recorded interviews every word must be written down and the tone that it was said in (Saunders *et al*, 2007). The researcher must take into consideration in what context a phrase was uttered, the non-verbal communication and the underlying meaning of it. While transcribing a text the researcher can tag different pieces of it which will be coded into a specific theme in the interview (Maclaran & Catterall, 2002). These codes can then be related to the research questions and will make it clearer for the researcher to analyse. By using the literature review as a foundation we colour-coded the transcriptions into themes in order to find the underlying meaning. When retrieving the colour-coded text in order to analyse the data there are different ways to go about. For one, the researcher can collect all of the same colour-coded text and read them through in order to find the core of the code (Gibbs, 2007) . By doing this it is also possible to find how the different codes affect one another, and it is sometimes not one specific code for each theme. This was evident in our analysis as individual empowerment and uses and gratifications were very much intertwined.

3.5 Credibility of Research Findings

3.5.1 Validity

There are two forms of validity, internal and external. Internal validity questions if the theoretical framework is relevant with the qualitative data and if they are relevant to each other. Creswell and Plano Clark (2007) and Amaratunga *et al* (2002) imply qualitative validity concerns assessing the accuracy of the collected data. Therefore member checking was applied, whereby copies of transcripts and themes were offered to participants in order to assess whether the interpretation was an accurate reflection of their words. Furthermore the use of theoretical frameworks in the data analysis is suggested by Saunders *et al* (2007; Amaratunga *et al*, 2002) as appropriate, by doing so the researcher has sought to portray significant and accurate conclusions. Since our area of research is new and fairly unexplored we needed to conduct an exploratory study and could not find previous studies to replicate or compare with. However, we have combined many theories creating a multi-disciplinary approach that has supported previous research within various fields which we suggest increases validity. Thus it is argued that the researchers have done what is necessary to raise validity.

3.5.2 Reliability

The concept of reliability within qualitative research is associated with the described detail towards the methods employed and the contextual settings (Brett Davies, 2007). Qualitative researchers consider their background, specific skills and perform their study from a subjective point of view (Given, 2008). However, it is important within a qualitative study that the results are unbiased and errors minimal. By adopting a interpretivist approach we have throughout the study considered our role as researchers; when necessary, we took a step back and conducted the interviews with an open mind as is necessary for an exploratory study. The sampling, data collection and analytical methods used for this study have been described thoroughly in order to allow the reader to accurately assess the reliability.

3.5.3 Generalisability

The aim of the study is to explore the ways young Swedish adults conceptualise their identity/identities online, and does not claim to generalise the phenomenon to other environments beyond Swedish borders. Due to the interpretive nature of the research it is fair to argue that the approach allows for the consideration that generalisation through the results may not be of utmost importance due to the constant changes in our environment (Saunders *et al*, 2007), meaning, what applies at present may not be applicable in the future. However, social media is a worldwide phenomenon and we speculate that researching the same field again might be possible if the country it is conducted in has similar cultural dimensions (proposed by Hofstede, 2010) to Sweden.

4. Results

In this chapter we present the results of our data collection providing a clear ground for the analysis. The chapter follows a logical structure applying the same headings as in the literature review in order to present in a clear and concise manner. We begin with the figure below which presents our respondent demographics in terms of gender, age and occupation.

No	Gender	Age	Occupation
1	Female (F1)	20	Undergraduate
2	Female (F2)	22	Equestrian
3	Female (F3)	25	Air stewardess
4	Female (F4)	26	Postgraduate
5	Female (F5)	26	Marketing assistant
6	Male (M1)	23	Bartender
7	Male (M2)	23	Assistant nurse
8	Male (M3)	25	Postgraduate
9	Male (M4)	26	Financial sales
10	Male (M5)	26	Truck driver
11	Male (M6)	27	IT consultant
12	Male (M7)	30	Automotive sales

Figure 4. 1: Sample demographics

4.1 Social Media and Identity Conceptualisation

Through our interviews we found that SNS's which the respondents visited were linked to their interests, involving both business related sites and private interests like Facebook. One respondent (F4) clearly stated that she used different sites for different purposes which in turn increased her identity in different ways. She mostly used LinkedIn, Facebook and Match and was very particular about how she presented herself on these sites. With LinkedIn she portrayed a professional side of herself and thought about what information she displayed and what language she used. Regarding Match she expressed that she "obviously" thought about how she portrayed herself since it is an online dating site and the other person can only form an opinion about you through what you choose to display. Facebook was used for the purpose of keeping herself updated on what her friends were doing; this understanding was shared among all of the respondents regarding Facebook. Furthermore, F4 and M6 considered approval and how they portrayed themselves when engaging on LinkedIn but not other sites, since this was the only site where they had to prove themselves professionally and show other people what they had done in their professional career. One respondent (F5) thought she became a stronger and clearer version of herself since she was forced to always express herself in written text which clearly stated her likes and dislikes more openly so since Facebook made it easy to dictate how others would perceive her. Along with this, approval was one of her concerns. She did not see the point of being active on Facebook if no one

commented on what she wrote on her "wall", "*Even when you comment on someone's status it is because someone should read it and "like" it or comment on it, or else it feels unnecessary to post anything at all*". Spotify was another site which was adopted (M1), this is a music site were members can share playlists with friends and subscribe to other peoples playlist. The respondent shared the music of his choice and if others subscribed to his list it reinforced appreciation of his music.

A way to feel represented on Facebook is by joining different so called Fan Pages which in turn expresses your point of view about certain topics, an extended self. Some respondents were not members of such pages but those who where expressed that they considered how they represented themselves through this page as their friends could see their membership. A male respondent (M2) stated that he was careful not to display too much information about himself as he did not know who would have access to the information. Furthermore many of the respondents chose to be more private and carefully selected which pictures to show and not to show on Facebook, along with other information, M1 felt that he could act more relaxed within a group of 40 people on World of Warcraft as they know each other better than on Facebook where many of the friends there he did not know that well, so in that perspective he showed different sides of himself online. "... *I could be more open and myself, loosen up a bit*". M7 pointed out that he did not think he had different identities but he considered how he presented himself in a business role, manager and personal role. The main thing that differed between these roles was that he used different language depending on the situation. In his line of work he presented himself professionally on the web sites which were business related and approval was also an important part as well as respect. It was important for him that there was mutual respect and that his reputation was upheld in a positive light. M2 considered himself to be the same person online as he was offline but he later admitted being braver in regard to telling someone off if something posted online was wrong, compared to in real life. He was very much involved in car sites but even here he chose to display as little information about himself as possible. Despite considering himself to be fairly new to car sites where people communicated about their cars, how to rebuild them and other information about cars, he actively engaged in conversations by asking questions and sharing knowledge online. He did not do this in the sense that he sought out to build himself a reputation, but on the other hand he had built himself a reputation considering cars among his friends in real life.

4.2 Social Media and Individual Empowerment

From the interviews several patterns surrounding individual empowerment emerged. It was found that status, reputation and empowerment were most important to respondents within online communities and forums regarding subjects of personal interest. One respondent (M1) stated that online gaming was most successful if everyone on the team had the same understanding of the gaming strategy and tactics which required discussions and sharing of information. Another respondent (M6) cited due to his interaction on an IT-community "*when I have a problem I tend to get help a lot quicker because I am generally active and help others*" further supporting a give and take relationship. Respondent M1 also put forward reputation building as a motivation since the greater his reputation the greater influence he had on other players gaming styles, thus by sharing his

knowledge in a friendly and helpful manner it would motivate players to contact him privately about gaming problems leading to a sense of personal empowerment within World of Warcraft (WoW)[3]. The same respondent also adopted Spotify the online digital music service because through this media he was able to share playlists with friends and other users. He stated *"it's fun to share between each other and of course if someone subscribes to my playlist I can influence their taste and support music I like"* again touching on the notion of individual empowerment between the users. Sharing information on the IT-community was said to reinforce another respondent's (M6) identity among the users on the site as well as providing increased status and empowerment since users could rank each other's comments and advice. Due to his interactivity online and increased status many users had begun to contact him directly instead of through a forum. The same was stated by a female respondent (F1) saying that each member of her forum (belonging to a political party) had their own beloved topic of debate and felt the need to show others what she knew and enjoyed getting response about how knowledgeable she was within that specific field, her engagement further motivated other members to contact her regarding the topic area. Forums allowed users to state questions and quickly receive answers that enabled them to gain knowledge of a particular subject or task and in that way also saved them money since they could do the job themselves, like one respondent said:

> *Instead of calling the company who specialises in my problem who I*
> *think will lie to me and say I have to leave the car with them and it*
> *will cost so and so much, I can actually do it by myself in 2 minutes.*
> *So through the forums I get truthful answers and they won't tell you*
> *to go somewhere when you do not have to.*

(M2)

It is apparent that other than empowerment in terms of individual self-gain, reciprocity and identity, consumer empowerment was also cited to be greater due to the internet and social media. It was suggested that impartial comparison sites, such as Pricerunner, allow consumers to comment and rate products and brands, offer greater consumer influence over what products are available, increases the information offered and locates the best price for each particular product (M4). It was perceived that this in turn empowered consumers to take greater control over their shopping experience and was perceived as putting pressure on companies to keep up with user generated content such as comments, criticism, price comparisons and so forth. Furthermore, not clicking or interacting with banners and other online marketing activities signalled defiance which was recognised as empowerment not previously possible using traditional media, also through the increased media channels online the respondent (F1) felt that she could increasingly portray her own image of a brand or product more often to a greater amount of people.

From the results above it has become apparent that social media empowers individuals in various ways and for varying reasons which will be analysed in chapter five.

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[3] World of Warcraft (WoW) is one of the world's largest online multiplayer games which involves creating a avatar and playing either individually or in teams conquering levels within the ever expanding game environment. The WoW players also have access to virtual communities and forums (World of Warcraft, 2010).

4.3 Social Media and Brand Interaction

Several views were put forward concerning brand interaction with online stores and specific brand WebPages online. The respondents perceived the immediacy of the internet and simplified information gathering regarding brands as a positive attribute, but they felt as if the personal contact which is obtained when shopping in a store was lost. One respondent (F1) described a situation where she ordered an item online but before she could receive the item it got lost in the post. She called the company to sort out the situation and now every time she orders a new item the company contacts her to make sure she has received the order, an action she highly appreciates. One respondent (F3) related her brand interaction with good information about the brand (online store), good offers, being able to collect points and then trading the points for money; the more she bought the more she got back from the brand and this attribute made her return to the brand interaction. Considering feedback the respondent believed that if other consumer's feedback is visible on the brand site it increased her credibility for the brand. Another (F4) respondent considered two-way communications as a way for the consumer to select the marketing communication he or she wish to take part of and by this the consumer shows what they prefer compared to traditional marketing where consumers were equal to all advertisement. A majority of the respondents thought that today's marketing was more personal than before; *"Many sites you can see who is working there and a picture of who is answering your questions, it is important to make it personal. That is what makes me go back"* (M2).

The respondents considered artists as brands and through MySpace their interaction with a particular artist had increased. M2 thought that this interaction had altered his opinion about the artist for the better and could also translate into brand communication with other products. Fan Pages were adopted as an extended self and by this the pages became a representation of one's identity. The majority of the respondents considered which pages they became a fan of as it could have implications on the identity they wish to display. One respondent (F1) on the other hand become a member of a page of a political party which is seen as politically incorrect for the purpose of provoking other members on Facebook; "*I knew that I would provoke tons of people ... but it was just a statement*". Another reason found for becoming a member of a Fan Page was for supporting the brand and making the brand visible for other prospective consumers. But it was important for the respondents not only to like the brand and the product but also appreciate and have the same values as them. When discussed if others brand interaction alters or reinforces their perception of the brand the majority of the respondents answered no. They would interact with the brand for their own purpose and not for someone else's. On the other hand some respondents (M1, M2, M3 and M4) noticed if any of their friends were members of a brand which was not linked with their identity and could alter their perception of them. The majority of the respondents thought that they were more likely to interact with a brand which they could influence, but they did not feel as if there were any brands with this quality. One respondent (F5) was influenced by blogs and which brands they chose to put forward and through this she interacted with the brand in question; "*through a blog something can become very hyped and everyone wants it. I guess this is related to that you rather get a recommendation from a private person than an advert from a company*". On the other hand, she did not feel as if she had personal power, she could merely choose what to buy or not. Another respondent (M5) thought that he had more consumer empowerment now since many brands had questionnaires on their web site on how to improve their interaction with consumers.

Furthermore, keeping oneself updated with the brand was an aspiration to maintain brand interaction. Opinions were viewed that marketing communications from the brands needed to interact and engage people and through this preferences for what communications tools are of interest could be put forward. However, negative feedback was left to the company in order to improve the product and in some sense influence it, even though the respondent would not purchase the product again; *"if I am very angry then I leave feedback for other people because then I do not care about the company and never want to have to do with them again, if I am not that angry it is just to leave feedback for them so they get to know what a customer thinks. I believe it is good"* (M2).

The majority of respondents appreciated two-way communication with the brand since they themselves could now choose what marketing communications to be exposed to and it was easier to interact with the brand through the Internet by sending an email concerning an inquiry they have. In turn, this allows the brand to become more personal but it must not be mistaken for trust as several of the respondents felt more trust from fellow consumers than the brand itself. This was due to the fact that the majority of the respondents did not consider the brands to be more transparent today compared to marketing before the internet. The remaining respondents had not thought about companies being more transparent now than before.

4.4 Social Media Uses and Gratifications

The reasons for using social media varied among users, however all were in agreement that Facebook was necessary in order to keep in touch with friends, be updated about friends without direct interaction and often because everyone else had it. It was also stated that individuals who attempted to stay away from Facebook when most others they knew had joined ended up missing out on events because all the information was posted there and not in emails or by phone as previously and so eventually they also joined (F4). Forums were said to be used due to *"interest and to learn something new and exchange ideas"* (F1) with likeminded people around the globe, thus information seeking was another important use in order to satisfy the need of timely and cost efficient knowledge. Furthermore social media was used to find inspiration for various aspects of life such as interior design, fashion and cooking (recipes) which allowed respondents to become better within those areas. In addition, forums and Facebook were used to vent and defend their interests by engaging in certain groups or Fan Pages. Play was another reason and gratification could manifest as a way to spend time by surfing pages or by discussing and interacting with others online, which was not only undertaken as reputation building but also said to be fun. However, it was indicated that certain sites such as online stores were adopted merely because of discount codes available at that point in time and YouTube because the full experience of the site could only be accessed if one possessed an account. Identity gratifications also became apparent since there were more ways of portraying ones identity and towards individuals one would not have contact with other than through the internet.

Brand interaction was mentioned when discussing uses and gratifications of social media. Online forums and Facebook were used to seek out information about brands and products and to share personal experiences; this consumer generated brand information was perceived as impartial and truthful, being adopted instead of information directly from the brand. As one respondent cited:

> *With other impartial consumers one is able to get a good picture*
> *of [the brand or product], it's not angled to the brands benefit.*
> *So the interaction with other consumers is most beneficial.*

<div align="right">(M3)</div>

Although a majority of the respondents (N:10) found consumer information about brands and products was most beneficial it was not relied on completely, since the abundance of information online provides an array of different views about the product - positive and negative simultaneously - it was also said to be difficult to fully buy into the comments since there was no way of understanding the other consumers motivation underlying their comments. Hence, both consumer and direct brand information was used in order to create their own understanding. *"Both of these are needed in today's society. One can always be more critical with other consumers but the real core is found with the brand itself"* (M4), he felt it was difficult to only discuss brands with consumers alone and that the brand still belonged to itself and not the consumers.

They also found that the internet greatly facilitated personal marketing communications which were more appreciated in comparison to traditional marketing communications. By interacting with brands online either through discussion boards, customer service chat rooms or by joining brand communities (Fan Pages) they could control the amount of information that reached them, as well as from who and when; filtering out most irrelevant marketing attempts. However, certain newsletters that respondents had prescribed to arrived several times a week that resulted in defying the actual site. Respondent M1 stated *"I receive emails from [various fashion brands] and used to visit their sites but now I get these emails all the time so it has kind of become bloody annoying so I never visit the actual page anymore"* instead he felt brand interaction should be even more personalised:

> *The communication needs to interest people and engage and impress us, we also*
> *need to be able to add preferences for what communications we want from the brands.*
> *For instance I only want to receive sales emails from the brands since I can't afford the*
> *clothing at normal prices ... there just isn't enough time to go over all the emails one*
> *receives and instead none of them get read".*

As can be seen from above the uses and gratifications support the previous theoretical areas, i.e. identity conceptualisation, empowerment and brand interaction. They have also presented several implications for marketing communications which will be clearly presented in the following chapters.

5. Analysis

Following the same heading structure of chapters two and four we will now analyse the results from a theoretical perspective, identifying not only the extent of identity conceptualisation online but also the implications for online marketing communications.

5.1 Social Media and Identity Conceptualisation

As Belk (1988) and Simmons (2008) put forward, one can adopt multiple brands and products in order to maintain various identities in different situations. This is apparent in our respondents as they clearly state that they present themselves differently depending on which site they are interacting. Several of our respondents stated that there was a distinction of what they chose to disclose depending on if they represented themselves professionally, for example on LinkedIn, or personally on Facebook where they interacted with friends. As text is the most common way for the respondents to communicate they became what they wrote and through this it became apparent of what they stood for. Furthermore, they did not think that they portrayed different identities all together, but their language was a clear indication of which identity they chose to portray and for which purpose, professional or private. As Elliot (1998) suggests this is a socialisation process whereby consumers develop their own interpretation of symbolic meanings, which in turn allows them to convey multiple selves (Belk, 1988). This is further supported and portrayed in Figure 2.1 (p13) by Ligas and Cotte (1999) as they discuss the importance of a holistic creation when adopting brand meaning between the individual, social and marketing environment. These three environments are closely linked together and help create brand value.

Facebook is a site where many members chose to view their opinions and disclose parts of their private life. Our respondents were careful with what they chose to display and what information was on their profile. A lot of thought was put into which Fan Pages they became a member of since it was a clear indication of their opinions. These Fan Pages were a digital associations of their values and beliefs which one could compare to tangible possessions offline (Jensen Schau & Gilly,2003). It became apparent that approval from other members online was a concern for what they chose to display on different social networking sites. As Smith and Wood (2001) discuss, people choose what to disclose and to what extent, based on approval seeking from others, this in turn constructs their online identity. One of the reasons for respondents to be active on Facebook was because they received approval from their fellow friends in forms of comments and response to pictures they displayed or statements they wrote. The pictures they chose to display were pictures the respondents thought would be interesting for other people to see and not directly a need for them to show for their own concern.

> *… I would not display random pictures from a night out for example but if I went travelling or did something I feel it is a good way to share with people, because I think they appreciate these types of pictures and it is fun to see where other people have travelled.*

(F4)

This example is in agreement with the discussion Erikson (1968) and Kaplan and Flum (2010) put forward, that as part of the identity formation process the feeling of being a unique individual is important but equally important is the sense of belonging within groups ideals. LinkedIn is a networking site were members make business connections all over the world. Since members CV become the tool with which they portray themselves and establish contacts, approval from these connections is important for their self-esteem. It becomes apparent that they do not portray themselves the same as on Facebook. Along with approval from fellow business connections respect was another concern. It was important for the respondents to gain mutual respect based on their knowledge about a specific area and this in turn became a sign of approval for their professional selves. Seeking respect and approval is an indication of questioning oneself and collecting information from different contexts in order to find the self-esteem needed by the individual, known as exploratory identity formation. Through these thoughts personal goals and values will become clearer and this commitment is another important aspect of identity formation (Marcia,1966, 1980; in Kaplan & Flum, 2010:56).

World of Warcraft is an online gaming site where members not only participate in the games but also build a relationship with each other. As one respondent stated, he felt more comfortable to be himself among forty of his gaming friends than on Facebook since they were a tightly knit group, therefore he chose to disclose different information on the two sites. This argues for the belief that our identity is formed around objects and tools, in this case a gaming sphere through personal actions and communication with online peers (Simmons, 2008). The same was shown on Spotify where another member liking the respondent's music list reinforced the music he liked among his peers but also strengthened his individual self since the music said something directly about him. Through these interactions discussed above it becomes evident that the respondents are not completely individualistic but appreciate peer-group support which helps preserve the extended self and obtain approval through SNS's (Wook Kim *et al*, 2008). These findings suggest that the extended self defines and upholds both the individual actions and group support. Simmons (2008) puts forward this idea as he suggests that an individual does not wish to stand alone but seek likeminded people. As a respondent (F4) replied, she did not seek status from peers but rather saw herself as an individual and wanting to differentiate herself but despite this she chose to become a member of the Facebook community in order not to miss out on information and keep herself updated on her friends activities. This interaction symbolises different meanings, the outward construction where brands have a social-symbolic message and inward dialogue with the self as this interaction helps to construct identity (Elliot, 1997; in Elliot, 1998). Furthermore, as the respondent (F4) sought to differentiate herself and not seek status from group belonging it suggests a normative identity-oriented style as she shows defensiveness toward the normative standard (Berzonsky,1988, 1990) in this case joining Facebook. On the other hand, she also showed informational identity-orientation (Berzonsky,1988, 1990) in the sense that she was information seeking through Facebook and showed some kind of openness and private attributes on Facebook. Therefore, we argue that approval and respect from peers is necessary in order to maintain the extended self. Just as activities on certain sites can define individual identity, the adoption of other tools can define group belonging and the group self. In accordance with previous research (Belk, 1988; Simmons, 2008) it becomes apparent that group belonging plays an important part in finding

our individual identity. Diffuse identity-oriented style is linked to approval from peers as an important reason for activity online, and not wishing to share much information about the self (Berzonsky,1988, 1990). This can also be connected with a lack of self-esteem which is needed when constructing the extended-self. Based on this discussion we believe marketers need to understand the usage of these tools, how to take advantage of peer group interaction and what the brands role is in this online communication as put forward by Elliot (1998).

5.2 Social Media and Individual Empowerment

In agreement with Castells (2009) notion of power, power was exercised online by the individuals through action and dialogue which created meaning within their specific setting, in most cases these were within online communities. This interaction appeared to be somewhat fuelled by indirect reciprocity, as suggested by Ohtsuki, Iwasa and Nowak (2009), since the sharing of information and participating in online discussions were perceived positively by the community members even if the discussion had not been directed at each specific member, it also heightened the individuals sense of self and empowerment within their chosen communities. As Ohtsuki, Iwasa and Nowak (2009) imply, human cooperation is not merely built around the behaviours others direct at us but also how they are towards others. Our study discovered the presence of altruistic interactions online, as proposed by Nowak and Sigmund (2005), which in turn established reputation, such as the respondent (M6) who said he did not primarily help others because of reputation but because "it's fun", his positive reputation within the community was a beneficial consequence of his interactivity and helpful nature, but not his first intention. It became apparent that the more collaborative an individual was, the greater others were in return, helping to explain the success of online communities. However as Palmer and Koenig-Lewis (2009) state, even though there is a willingness and ability to share knowledge and the like with others, it is not purely altruistic. Reciprocity appeared as the main motivator for online interactivity with the establishment of reputations and individual empowerment among their peers. Citing one respondent (M1):

> *...if someone didn't play the way I did it would be difficult to succeed*
> *[in the game] so I would share the knowledge I had and try and influence*
> *their playing style...*

His motivation was to succeed within the gaming sphere and to do so he felt the need to empower himself in order to dictate the gaming style. Clearly indicating the motive for being helpful was not grounded in altruism. Online communities and social networking sites could also be used to defend ones interests and by doing so return-to-self calculations involved the feeling of empowerment within that area by proving to others that one was knowledgeable, creating the reputation needed to be taken seriously (Palmer & Koenig-Lewis, 2009).

Castells (2009) suggests that the internet is allowing consumers to become producers, in agreement Neisser (2006) implies brand ownership is shifting to the consumers. However, our research does not fully support these notions. When individuals adopted comparison sites it was perceived as making it possible to dictate product offerings and drive down prices. Furthermore the defiant action of deliberately avoiding interaction with marketing communications was also felt as

empowering. It was stated, *"I can be a fan of something that I identify myself with, but if I or the brand changes and that feeling of identity disappears I will no longer be a fan and remove it from my page"* (F1), although this statement is nothing new it does indicate the immediacy the internet provides, at the click of a button or through a few negative words a brand can lose value with its audience. These discoveries provide a solid implication for companies to overcome such defiance and empowerment by embracing and opening up for a dialogue with their audience, although they do not support consumer empowerment to the level argued by the literature hence suggesting there is still opportunities for brands to dictate their offerings. Certain respondents implied a need of personal brand preferences so that individually created marketing communications could target them and by doing so avoid unwanted marketing messages (Salzer-Mörling & Strannegård, 2004), further supporting a preference for two-way communications as put forward by Castells (2009).

5.3 Social Media and Brand Interaction

It is argued that brand interaction creates impressions rather than meaning (Bengtsson & Östberg, 2006; Ligas & Cotte, 1999; Salzer-Mörling & Strannegård, 2004) which alters consumers' perception of peers. This was present within the concept of Fan Pages. As these were used on Facebook by the respondents, they became a representation of the extended self. Supported by Belk (1988) it is when interaction occurs that the brand conducts meaning for the consumers' identity. Interaction between peers is needed because it enhances the brands attitude and increases the sense of identity, since this cannot be achieved through individuality alone (Simmons, 2008). This was apparent as the respondents relied a great deal on other consumer's feedback concerning a brand in turn altering their image of the brand rather than the image that the brand wishes to portray. To gain valid insight about a company unknown to them the respondents would often primarily turn to fellow consumers rather than approaching the brand directly, hence increasing their sense of identity, brand attitude and shared values of the brand. Buttle (1991) found advertisements to initiate peer group communication allowing impact on brand interaction and thereby consumer's identity.

Along with the internet, marketing communications have shifted from maintaining a one-way communication with the masses to personalising messages to fit consumers' specific needs (Salzer-Mörling & Strannegård, 2004). However, the respondents did not feel as if the brands were more transparent now than previously and put much of their trust in peer evaluation rather than brand marketing as they felt that the response would be more truthful. Furthermore, views were put forward that the respondents were more likely to interact with a brand they felt that they could influence, but they did not feel as if the companies had this attribute available for the consumer and therefore brand interaction failed. As presented in the results one respondent received personal brand interaction once she first lost an item ordered from the online store and due to this established direct and personal contact with the store. However, we argue that this interaction should be present without items needing to be lost first. Together with the gratification of the immediacy of online interaction this also adds a personal significance which can be lost when there is no face-to-face interaction. Simmons (2008) suggests that consumers' now seek connective internet marketing which involves a certain amount of personal meaning.

One respondent was motivated to brand interaction through blogs as they became a marketing channel for brands, but still carried out a consumer feedback review. A motivation for brand interaction was consumer discount on online purchase, the ability to collect points for each purchase and then later trade these for money, information seeking about the brand and 'the more you buy the more you get back' principle. We believe this offers brands an opportunity to interact by providing the consumer something of significance. Willis (1990) proposed that young adults appreciate the active role demanded of them in order to understand new advertising, but for this to be achieved he suggests brands must create something aesthetically pleasing that transcends the product presented and not merely assume that consumers will show interest in advertising:

> *The communication needs to interest people and engage and impress us,*
> *we also need to be able to add preferences for what communications we*
> *want from the brand.*

(M1)

On the other hand, another consumer felt that brands were more engaged in consumer feedback since he had noticed how brands are trying to improve interaction by distributing questionnaires when entering their site:

> *I often think that you receive forms with questions about how they*
> *[companies] can improve brand interaction and I often have inquires*
> *on my mail.*

(M5)

As Manafy (2010) discusses, online consumers are very much influenced by others in terms of reviews, brands that do not respond to feedback could ultimately lose brand purchases. We found that this give and take relationship between brands and their consumers was important in creating transparency and providing security, "*You can have a look at a certain item then see the comments about that item, it feels safe*" (F3).

Other respondents stated that companies which did not try to engage consumers to provide feedback lost out on influential brand interaction. Manafy (2010) further states that brands worry about negative feedback being displayed on their site; but through our research we instead argue that it should be viewed as constructive feedback since the company receives insight regarding what needs to be improved. There is an expectation from consumers that companies today should be transparent, but according to our research the respondents did not believe this to be so even in comparison to traditional marketing. Despite the fact that modern marketing communications are assumed to be more open, non-deceptive and honest, our research found that several respondents had not even reflected over the transparency in online marketing activities, which we regard as an indication towards less change in this area than has previously been suggested.

5.4 Social Media Uses and Gratifications

Papacharissi (2002) cites that various media are adopted by active individuals in order to satisfy different needs which in turn are influenced by both social and psychological factors. Through our study we found this to be correct, the respondents selected various social media tools for various reasons. For instance, respondents were in agreement that Facebook was adopted because *"everyone has it"* (M3) which allowed users to keep in touch with people around the globe and *"to keep an eye on what everyone is up to"* (F2). As presented above individual empowerment is made possible through social media, allowing the individuals to create what Papacharissi (2002) calls a virtual territory. We suggest that the young adults within our study have indicated such virtual territories by managing identities, adopting brands and joining groups, through the social media tools they adopt and through the information, knowledge and photos that they share. By managing this virtual territory the possibilities for identity conceptualisation are endless but the majority of respondents only took on two or three aspects of themselves in order to function accordingly within the particular sphere. As can be seen below, online communities were only used for a specific purpose and extensive personal information was excluded from the interaction, the site was also used by the individuals to defend their interests and strengthen their positions within certain topics, suggesting identity management was crucial:

> *I would say that I am more open on [Facebook] more than the other*
> *[online community], I don't share unnecessary information that they*
> *do not need on that page.*

(F1)

When considering the amount of social media tools available to the users only a few were actually adopted. Therefore we argue that trust in the various media was apparent as it was found that the individuals rely greatly on the knowledge shared by others within carefully picked media in order to find what they are seeking, in accordance with the notion of trust cited by Paparacharissi (2002). The overall gratifications of social media were many including; immediacy, connectivity, increased knowledge, information exchange, reputation building and play (Ha & James, 1998). As suggested by Williams, Rice and Rogers (1988) our respondents are what can be called active users, since they have control over their communication and can exchange roles across the various sites, for instance friend – stranger, sender – receiver, influencer – influenced, brand advocate – brand opponent.

Connectedness was the only one of the five dimensions of interactivity presented by Ha and James (1998) not present in our discussions with the respondents. This is because we regarded the notion of connectedness to differ between that of Ha and James (1998) and that of the respondents, whereby their notion merely regarding hyperlinks connecting the web whereas when our respondents spoke of keeping in touch and staying connected it was in regard to easily accessible information. *Playfulness* was mentioned by all due to gaming, interacting on forums, sharing playlists on Spotify and visiting Facebook. Although *choice* was not mentioned outright, by analysing the dialogues we perceive choice to have empowered the individuals by allowing them to engage in the communications of their choice and interact with brands at their own time and leisure; *"one can choose what one wants to see and not"* (F2). *Information collection* was possible through all social media tools, but varied depending on the information that was sought. Since information

sharing and collecting was a clear gratification of social media interaction the possibilities for marketers to gather audience data is vast, we argue that if they were to locate and monitor the dialogue it could offer valuable information regarding brand image, products and pricing as well as the opportunity to provide information which the consumers would value. As previously presented reciprocal communication is a main motivator for social media use and identity conceptualisation. Ha and James (1998) implied that reciprocal communication involves feedback between two or more parties, moreover if such communication is continuous, collaborative communication arises satisfying the needs of both parties. The results of our study support this dimension of interactivity, identifying collaborative communication as a necessary part of our respondents' interaction online; they shared and received in an ongoing process. It was also found that direct communication with brands was gratifying since the individual received instantaneous and knowledgeable assistance directly from the brand:

> *The ultimate solution is when a site provides the possibility to chat directly with*
> *them about their products... you can receive answers to your questions instantly*
> *and also provide feedback. One-way communication feels passé since you don't*
> *get any true feedback from your consumers. Today we generally expect*
> *[collaborative] communication, not just to get fed messages.*

(F5)

This statement provides an understanding of how such activities are perceived, providing obvious support for two-way communications. However, this communication should as much as possible be on the consumers' terms or there is a risk of alienating ones audience, as another respondent stated:

> *I think [marketing communications online] are all too positive all the time,*
> *if they hide the negatives then it isn't reality, nothing is perfect but somehow*
> *brands appear to think it's a good idea to hide it all, that's got to be the worst*
> *mistake. That's also why I choose not to interact with brands directly... I hate*
> *in your face things, brands need to find a way to offer tailored solutions for*
> *my interaction.*

(M1)

It is apparent from the research that there is a need for both user generated content and marketing communications in order for the individual to create a complete brand understanding. We propose transparent marketing communications, as believed by Manafy (2010) merely by responding to feedback a more sincere brand identity is provided resulting in direct engagement with the consumer. We believe that by having the four dimensions of interactivity in mind it can be possible to create marketing opportunities that provide substantial uses and gratifications, thus increasing direct brand interaction.

6. Conclusions and Managerial Implications

The following chapter is structured as previous chapters in order to provide clear and logical conclusions. Based on the findings and analysis of our study we have drawn the following conclusions and managerial implications, as well as suggestions for future research.

6.1 Conclusions

Social Media and Identity Conceptualisation

Our research argues that young adults disclose different features of themselves depending on the social media they used, in turn putting forward consumers multiple identities through socialisation processes where symbols and tools adopt different meanings for the consumer. Interactivity and identity conceptualisation were in many ways based on respect and approval seeking as the main motivation for constructing an ideal self. Which became apparent in what they disclosed and chose to conceal within the social media sphere since some information was stated as being inappropriate for different sites. Approval was reinforced through peer-group interaction providing the support needed for the extended self. The study found the tools to be adopted by our respondents in their identity conceptualisation are Facebook, Spotify, gaming sites, LinkedIn, MySpace, online communities (forums), Price runner, YouTube and various brand communities. Based on our findings these tools present young adults with an opportunity to conceptualise their online identity and receive reinforcement through peer-group interaction which was not previously possible.

Social Media and Individual Empowerment

It was found that young adults where empowered through online action and dialogue, since the individual was perceived to be in total control of their virtual territory consisting of online activities as well as their identity conceptualisation and management. Furthermore, individuals that were highly interactive were able to construct a reputation, often resulting in a two-way asymmetrical relationship which provided an opportunity for influencing others. This interaction also increased the sense of self, suggesting a continuous process. Empowerment among friends on Facebook was not important since the motivation for participating on that site was mainly to keep in touch with people one knew. However, online communities which allowed the sharing of knowledge did empower the individual among the community members and was also found to be the main area of empowerment online. Since reciprocal communication and information collection were discovered to be the two most apparent dimensions of interactivity among our young adult sample we believe that these are the areas to be adopted for marketing communications.

While consumer empowerment was present it was not to the extent that we had anticipated and from our respondents it appears that brand ownership still lies with the company to a greater extent than is proposed by the literature. The research identified an appreciation for direct brand communication motivated by immediate and timely assistance, which we argue supports the adoption of two-way online marketing activities. However, since defiant acts towards marketing communications were also found to empower individuals it is necessary to tailor these communications in order to avoid unwanted marketed messages.

Social Media and Brand Interaction

Fan Pages were found to be easily accessible brand information that was adopted as a representation of the individuals extended self. Interaction among peers enhances brand attitude creating a peer-group impression rather than meaning surrounding the interaction. Consumer feedback was important to the respondents but not absolute since information which the brand presented on their web site was also held in high regard. Transparency emerged as an issue which companies need to address in order to provide an increasingly truthful image, since these consumers are no longer satisfied with merely being fed biased messages. There is also a need for marketers to understand that certain distrust towards marketing communications is apparent and consumers base much of their brand interaction on peer-group communication. Despite this, our study indicates that social media does increase brand interaction since consumers can more easily reach out to both brands and fellow consumers who in turn assist them in identity conceptualisation and motivate increased brand interaction.

Social Media Uses and Gratifications

The study found that young adults online are motivated and gratified through reciprocity, individual self-gain and the creation and management of identity. The connection between them is clear whereby each aspect demands interdependence in order to succeed. The main use of social media was motivated by the immediacy the tools offered; being able to keep in touch with friends, discuss with strangers and seek information on their terms. Further motivations for interactivity included sharing knowledge and defending interests which resulted in a gratifying influential position online. The virtual territories they created were limited to a few social media sites rather than a mass as would be expected, which we believe is due to selectivity and the importance of trust. Finally the four dimensions of interactivity which were present in our study provide a complete picture of the various uses and gratifications the young adults had and also provide a good starting point for successful online marketing communications.

6.2 Managerial Implications and Contributions

One of the most decisive points in young adults social media interaction is immediacy, thus companies wishing to produce successful campaigns online will need to invest resources into quick and valid responses to consumers' queries and feedback. Since our study has indicated an existing preference for online marketing communications and the need of personalisation we argue that investing in social media can open up a world to in-depth dialogue with engaged consumers.

Since individuals feel empowered and willingly share information through social media we propose that marketers use this to acquire freely accessible consumer data. There is a willingness to share information with brands and personalised marketing communications are sought which in turn relies on consumer interaction. By undertaking collaborative communication companies should be able to offer products and services that are in demand and consumers could feel that they are increasingly able to influence the marketplace. Perhaps there is a possibility to find brand engaged individuals with a strong reputation, for instance prominent bloggers or active online community users, who can openly advocate for your brands, our study has indicated that there are many out there. Since

discount codes, sales and loyalty points are evident motivators for brand interaction these are recommended, seeking to strengthen brand loyalty among consumers that are as interchangeable as the weather.

Since the findings indicate multiple identities within various social media the task of locating, monitoring and engaging the target audience becomes increasingly more complex for marketers. On the other hand, consumers still place trust in brand communication alongside peer recommendations and when engaging with brands that they are previously acquainted with they choose to visit the brands WebPage directly. However, it was found that only certain online stores offered interactive features and direct brand communication whereas most brand WebPages failed to engage and interact with their visitors and lacked timely and knowledgeable information. The future challenge for marketers is therefore to decide the extent brand communications should be available on social networking sites and how social media aspects can be incorporated into their own WebPages and by doing so draw the consumers back to them, possibly regaining partial control. We argue that if brand WebPages contained online chats with brand representatives, a membership forum, an online store and other brand related content, social media can be used to strengthen already existing and new relationships by offering direct brand communication and trustworthy consumer recommendations simultaneously. The task is then less about locating ones target audience online, but rather to monitor, manage and motivate their interaction and fulfil their needs.

To conclude, our study has provided new insight and knowledge surrounding identity conceptualisation within social media and by doing so confirmed that there is value to be had from marketing to these individuals online. If companies understand the motivations and gratifications of their audiences' interactivity they have an immense opportunity for creating lasting and meaningful relationships with their consumers.

6.3 Suggestions for Future Research

Future research could seek to test our findings on a larger sample population through a quantitative research study. With a new generation of teens having grown up surrounded by new technology there may also be gender and age differences in terms of identity conceptualisation online which are yet to be explored. We further suggest that the findings of our study can be cross-examined alongside in-depth interviews with marketers in order to determine any divergences among them and consumers. Also since the study takes place in a Swedish context it is interesting to explore if the results are the same in other countries, including those with diverse cultural dimensions. Finally, it could be interesting to explore developments concerning the use of offline and online communication, if one grows to be more important than the other, and if the communication differs between the two spheres, which may shed light on further implications for marketing communications.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 - Pilot Study Interview Guide

1. Gender/Age/Occupation

2. How many hours per day do you spend on the internet?

3. Which social media sites do you visit?

4. How many are you a member of?
    a. What attracts you to the site?

5. Do you consider how you present yourself online?
    a. Do you use different sites for different purposes/identities?

6. Do you think your activities on these sites increase your sense of identity?

7. Do you consider approval, status and respect from others when engaging in social media?
    a. If not do you seek to be individual and differentiate yourself?

8. Do you share information and knowledge online?
    a. If yes, what are your motives?
       [probes: reputation, influential, empowerment, defend interests]

9. Do you read blogs?

10. Do you comment on them?
    a. Do you sign with your real name, pseudonym or anonymous?
    b. If you comment, why do you do so? [reputation, reciprocity, knowledge]

11. Do you interact with brands online?
    a. Do you consider how you are perceived by others through this interaction?

12. Do others brand interaction alter or reinforce your perception of them?

13. Are you a member of a brand community?

14. Have you visited a brand community?

15. Do you appreciate two-way online communication with the brand?

      a.   More than traditional marketing communication? Why?

         [Brand promoted and influenced conversations vs. Brand controlled conversations]

16. Do you discuss brands with your friends and online acquaintances?

17. What do you consider more beneficial, interaction with companies (brands) online or interaction between other consumers?

18. Are you more likely to adopt and interact with a brand you feel you can influence?

19. Do you think online marketing communications are transparent?

Appendix 2 - Main Study Interview Guide

1. Gender/Age/Occupation

2. How many hours per day do you spend on the internet?

3. Which social media sites do you visit?

4. How many are you a member of?
   a. What attracts you to the site?

5. Do you consider how you present yourself online?
   a. Do you use different sites for different purposes/identities?

6. Do you think your activities on these sites increase your sense of self?

7. Do you consider approval, status and respect from others when engaging in social media?
   a. Do you seek to be individual and differentiate yourself?

8. Do you share information and knowledge online?
   a. If yes, what are your motives?
   b. [probes: reputation, influential, empowerment, defend interests]

9. Do you read blogs
   a. Do you comment on them? If yes, with your real name, pseudonym or anonymous.
   b. If you comment, why do you do so?

10. Do you interact with brands online?
    a. Do you consider how you are perceived by others through this interaction?
    b. Does others brand interaction alter or reinforce your perception of them?
    c. *[E.g. Imagine one of your friends adding a brand to their FB profile, does this brand match or diverge from the way you think about them in everyday life]*

11. Have you visited a brand community?
    a. Are you a member of a brand community?

12. Do you feel that you have greater consumer empowerment due to the internet?
    a. If yes, why and in what way?
    b. If no, why not?

13. Do you appreciate two-way online communication with brands?
14. [Direct communication with instantaneous or delayed feedback between you and a brand/company]
    a. More than traditional marketing, such as advertising? Why?

15. What do you consider most beneficial, interaction with companies (brands) online or online interaction between other consumers?

16. Are you more likely to adopt and interact with a brand you feel you can influence?

17. Do you think online marketing communications are transparent?