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**EXPLORING STRATEGIES UTILISED FOR MANAGING AND SUSTAINING
ONLINE COMMUNITIES IN A RETAIL BUSINESS ENVIRONMENT**

MASTER'S DEGREE IN COMMERCE (INFORMATION SYSTEMS)

(FACULTY OF COMMERCE)

Rhodes University

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DECLARATION OF ORIGINALITY

I, Gcinamina Humphrey Mqadi, do hereby declare that the thesis prepared by me and entitled "Exploring strategies utilised for managing and sustaining online communities in a retail business environment" contains original research work done by the undersigned candidate. Whenever necessary, I have acknowledged the sources from which I have derived the ideas or extracts. I further affirm that the thesis has not been submitted anywhere else for publication.

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ABSTRACT

The rise of ever-digital spaces has resulted in vibrant online communities, which business organisations utilise for different reasons. However, management of online communities by business organisations has remained a grey area for some time. This study investigated the management of online communities among three retail businesses in South Africa. The study adopted the qualitative approach guided by interpretivism. Data was collected from a purposive sample of nine participants from three retail businesses, also purposively selected. Semi-structured interviews were used to solicit data from the participants. The data was analysed using a thematic data analysis method, resulting in recognisable themes that were coded from interviews. Data was generated using semi-structured interviews with the online tool Google Meet and analysed using Nvivo. The study found that online communities play a critical role in shaping purchasing behaviour, fostering brand loyalty, and encouraging peer-to-peer product recommendations. The study also highlights that when businesses actively engage in discussions and value-added content sparks sustainability in vibrant online communities. The management of online communities remains a complex process; retail businesses are increasingly identifying effective ways to leverage these platforms to strengthen customer relationships and support business growth. The strategies that emerged from this study included the use of implementing and enforcing clear community guidelines, as well as the use of AI-driven moderation tools for online engagement. These strategies form part of an envisaged norm for all businesses that use online communities. The study concluded that retail businesses should gamify the content to improve user interactions, and the use of competitions adds value to user retention. The study's limitations included the scarcity of existing literature on online community management within the South African retail sector. Most prior studies have been conducted in developed countries, which limits the availability of contextualised theoretical and empirical evidence to support local analysis. It was recommended that the extended research should be applied across industry contexts, such as hardware retail in South Africa, and examine the implications of emerging AI-driven tools for online community management.

Keywords: Online Communities, Social Media, Retail Stores, Digital Platforms, Retail Businesses

DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to Juddy Mqadi, whose unwavering support, encouragement, and love have been the foundation of my journey.

To my family, for their patience, understanding, and constant belief in my dreams.

To my supervisor, who inspired me to persevere even in challenging moments.

And finally, to Mr Price, Checkers, and Woolworths for granting permission to collect data from their employees.

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LIST OF ACRONYMS

ACRONYM

AI

CRM

ERP

IS

LMS

OCLC

ROI

TAM

MEANING

Artificial Intelligence

Customer Relationship Management

Enterprise Resources Planning

Information Systems

Learning Management Systems

Online Community Life Cycle

Return on Investment

Technology Acceptance Model

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION AND PROJECT OVERVIEW

1.1 Background of the study

Digital spaces have been evolving from simple to complex interactive ones where business organisations now use to do business with their customers. Online communities, on social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and X (formerly Twitter), are among these digital spaces organisations use to enhance customer interaction and engagement (Szewczykowska & Løyche, 2021). According to Li (2021), an online community is a digital environment on the Internet where people can connect, communicate, and work together based on common interests, objectives, or ideals. These communities can offer digital spaces for clients to exchange information, share advice, discuss the latest trends, review products, and provide direct feedback to the company.

Vibrant online communities have been found to have high potential to foster a sense of belonging around certain brands, promote customer loyalty, and support meaningful, two-way communication between the company and its customers (Jones, 2023; Wong & Chung, 2023). This development of online communities has resulted in an increase in business organisations migrating their businesses to the cloud, resulting in transactions being conducted online (Huang et al., 2020). This phenomenon was accelerated during the COVID-19 pandemic when business operations across sectors, including travel and tourism, retail businesses, events, and restaurants, were severely disrupted by lockdowns and social distancing measures, forcing people to stay indoors to curb the spread of the virus (Kuckertz et al., 2020).

The growth of online communities accelerated as business organisations expanded their digital reach, allowing them to engage directly with people at home (Dover & Kelman, 2018). Increased internet accessibility further supported this expansion, enabling organisations to reach broader audiences, especially during the COVID-19 era, when in-person interactions were limited (Nausheen, Rehman & Murtaza, 2023). Businesses leveraged social media and other online platforms to foster community, strengthen consumer engagement, and build customer loyalty (Smith, 2023a). According to Lockett (2018), some organisations use online communities to increase their revenues by obtaining important insights into the needs and preferences of their

customers by monitoring the conversations and allowing feedback within the community.

The role played by online communities in fostering connections and facilitating knowledge sharing among members is crucial, underscoring the necessity for their effective management to ensure their success. Effective online community management involves balancing short-term operational tasks with long-term sustainability strategies to promote ongoing engagement and value for members. Managing an online community focuses on immediate tasks and daily operations necessary for smooth functioning, while sustaining the community emphasizes ensuring its long-term survival, fostering resilience, and encouraging continuous engagement (Ripamonti, Cindio & Benassi, 2005; Homburg, Ehm & Artz, 2015).

1.2 The problem statement

Globally, retail organisations are increasingly using online communities to increase their business operations, such as marketing of products or services resulting in successful sales by engaging with customers in diverse demographics. While the utilisation of inline communities seems to be a novel strategy that offers a significant competitive advantage, it also introduces complicated and undesirable challenges in the management of these communities. The ineffective management of conflicts among online community members can present a huge risk to brand reputation and customer loyalty in the retail sector.

(Markey, Josang & Pham, 2019; Smith & Johnson, 2022). Literature suggests that retail organisations in developed countries have formally integrated online communities into their organisational marketing strategies, using more sophisticated management tools combined with proactive governance models to manage digital spaces effectively (Barsha & Munshi, 2024). In contrast, in South Africa, a developing country where digital adoption is on the rise, there is a lack of understanding concerning how major retailer organisations manage their communities, particularly in dealing with internal conflicts. This explores the strategies used to manage online communities by retail businesses.

1.3 Rationale of the study

The digital era has pushed retail businesses to be reliant on social media platforms to boost marketing, branding, and customer engagement strategies. Retail businesses incorporate online communities to remain competitive and engaged with their potential customers and followers because neglected online presence results in missed opportunities and reduced market reach (Thani, 2024). Online communities are not only used to promote retail businesses but are also used to maintain the spirit of Ubuntu – a South African philosophy centred on community, shared humanity, and mutual support (Thani, 2024). The Covid-19 pandemic ushered in the need for digital spaces to be more interactive, and this encouraged online communities, as an essential part of small businesses, local entrepreneurs, and struggling households, to connect, share resources, and sustain livelihoods (Shawky *et al.*, 2020). However, managing and sustaining these online communities effectively remains a challenge for many retail businesses, as they must navigate issues such as customer retention, content relevance, and engagement consistency (Shawky *et al.*, 2020). Therefore, this study is necessary to explore the strategies that retail businesses employ to maintain vibrant and long-lasting online communities. By identifying best practices for challenges, the research aimed to provide insights that would assist retail businesses in optimising their social media engagement and sustaining customer interest in an ever-evolving digital marketplace.

1.4 Research aim and objectives

This study aimed to explore the strategies utilised in managing and sustaining online communities in a retail business context.

1.4.1 Research objectives

The objectives of this study are stated as follows:

- a. To identify the current benefits of online communities to the retail businesses in South Africa.
- b. To determine the emerging challenges faced by retail businesses in managing online communities.
- c. To analyse the underlying causes of the challenges being faced by retail businesses in managing online communities.

- d. To critically examine the strategies used by retail businesses to manage challenges arising from online communities.
- e. To suggest improvements to existing strategies to enhance the management of online communities by retail businesses.

1.5 Research questions

The research questions of this study were designed to explore strategies utilised for managing and sustaining online communities in a retail business environment.

- a. What are the benefits of utilising online communities for retail businesses in South Africa?
- b. What emerging challenges have retail businesses faced when managing online communities?
- c. What are the underlying causes of the challenges faced by retail businesses in managing online communities?
- d. What strategies do retail businesses use to address challenges associated with online communities?
- e. How can existing strategies be improved to enhance the management of online communities in retail businesses?

1.6 Significance of the study

This study will contribute to the existing body of knowledge by providing a critical overview of the current strategies used and creating a comprehensive exploration manual of the strategies businesses can use to manage and sustain online communities in a retail business environment (Bowden & Mirzaei, 2021). Most research studies have focused on social media marketing and customer engagement; limited studies have explored the long-term sustainability of online communities in retail (Liu, Shin & Burns, 2021). By exploring effective management strategies, engagement techniques, and the challenges retail businesses face, this study offers valuable insights into how retail businesses can foster thriving online communities and offer a know-how manual of online communities. These findings enhance digital marketing strategies, helping businesses build stronger customer relationships, improve brand loyalty, and increase sales through sustained online engagement.

Readers, including business owners, marketers, and researchers, can benefit from this study by gaining practical strategies for managing online communities and how to sustain them. Retail businesses can learn how to implement engagement techniques that keep their online communities active, while marketing professionals can use the findings to refine their social media strategies. Additionally, researchers studying digital marketing and e-commerce can gain new perspectives on the role of online community management in retail success. By offering a structured approach to sustaining online communities, this study provides actionable recommendations that retail businesses can utilize to strengthen their online presence and enhance customer interactions in the digital age (Ao *et al.*, 2023).

Another significant gap in the literature is the lack of research on localised content and the accessibility of online community resources for members from rural areas. Most studies on online community engagement assume consistent digital infrastructure and internet access, overlooking the challenges faced by individuals in underdeveloped regions with limited connectivity and digital literacy. There is minimal research on how businesses can create inclusive online communities that accommodate diverse linguistic, cultural, and technological contexts (Chohan & Hu, 2022; Tay, Tai, & Tan, 2022). Additionally, strategies for engaging users who have limited access to high-speed internet or advanced digital devices remain underexplored. Without addressing these barriers, many online communities risk excluding a significant portion of potential users, limiting their reach and long-term sustainability. Bridging this gap would require exploring innovative solutions such as offline content accessibility, mobile-friendly community platforms, and localized engagement strategies tailored to rural and underserved populations (Ye & Yang, 2020).

1.7 Theoretical Framework

Understanding effective ways to manage online communities is becoming more important in promoting positive, constructive interactions in digital spaces (Smith, 2023b). This study used the Online Community Life Cycle Model (OCLCM) by Iriberry and Leroy (2009) as a theory because it offers insights into community building, engagement, and sustainability. The OCLCM comprises four stages: inception, establishment, maturity, and mitosis (Fu & Oh, 2022). In the inception stage, an online community for a retail store such as Spar might form around sharing promotions and

product information, attracting initial enthusiastic customers (Torres, 2022). During the establishment phase, more customers join, engaging in discussions about shopping experiences and sharing tips. As the community reaches maturity, it becomes self-sustaining, with members actively contributing and supporting each other, creating a vibrant space for exchanging ideas and feedback (Syerov, Trach, & Fedushko, 2018). Finally, in the mitosis stage, the community may evolve into specialised subgroups, such as a section for eco-conscious shoppers discussing sustainable products or local groups focusing on regional promotions, fostering deeper connections among members (Palmer, 2021). The model guided the analysis of community dynamics at each development stage, from inception to maturity, enabling an understanding of how engagement levels evolve. It assisted in identifying specific challenges retail businesses face in sustaining member participation and activity during different phases, allowing the researcher to suggest solutions for each stage (Jiang *et al.*, 2020). Lastly, by applying the OCLCM, the study evaluated the success factors and management strategies essential for sustaining vibrant, self-sufficient online communities in the retail sector (Park *et al.*, 2019). Research questions were developed based on the Online Community Life Cycle framework, ensuring that each question addresses a specific stage in the development and sustainability of online communities within the retail sector

1.8 Research methodology

As regards the research methodology, this study was guided by the Research Onion Model developed by Saunders *et al.* (2019), which outlines essential steps for researchers in selecting appropriate methodologies for empirical research (Melnikovas, 2018). The interpretive philosophy and qualitative design were used to enable the researcher to explore the depth and complexity of individual perspectives on challenges faced in managing online communities. This qualitative design emphasises understanding the meanings that participants ascribe to their actions and interactions, which is crucial for grasping nuanced phenomena within a specific context (Mason, 2002; Schwandt, 1994; Creswell, 2013). By focusing on participants' interpretations, this study aimed to provide richer insights into the research subject, fostering a comprehensive understanding of strategies for managing online communities and the challenges faced. The inductive approach was employed to

explore strategies for managing and sustaining online communities within retail businesses, as well as the challenges faced (Hendricks & Louw-Potgieter, 2012). This approach, characterised as a bottom-up methodology, allows for the development of new solutions or the adaptation of existing ones based on observations and patterns that emerge from the data, rather than testing a pre-established hypothesis (Thomas, 2006). By focusing on data-driven insights, the inductive approach facilitated a deeper understanding of the complexities involved in managing online communities, ultimately leading to more effective strategies tailored to the unique challenges of the retail sector.

The units of the study were three retail business sites in South Africa, namely: Shoprite, Mr Price, Woolworths, selected because they use online communities extensively (Mafini & Dhurup, 2015). These retail business organisations recognise the importance of online communities in fostering customer loyalty and enhancing the overall shopping experience; therefore, they should have strategies for managing the communities (Izogo & Jayawardhena, 2018). Furthermore, all three selected retail business organisations are large, well-known brands with significant market presence and influence in the retail industry, each with a large customer base and well-established online communities on Facebook (Kollmann, Stockmann & Kuckertz, 2019). The target population of the study comprised managers, social media account managers, and administrators who oversee the operations and management of online communities. The study intended to use a small sample size appropriate for a qualitative study because it allows for in-depth exploration of complex issues to achieve saturation of information (Boddy, 2016). A judgmental purposive sample was used to allow the researcher to collect data from the participants who are knowledgeable about online communities (Campbell *et al.*, 2020). The sample size of this study will be determined by data saturation during data collection (Trotter II, 2012). Theoretically, the sample size could be between ten and fifteen participants, as guided by the principle of data saturation (Francis *et al.*, 2010).

This study employed a descriptive design to collect and analyse the stories and experiences of individuals involved in managing online communities within the retail sector (Benson, 2014). This approach has the potential to yield rich insights into the strategies employed by retail businesses to navigate the complexities of online

community management, as well as the challenges they face (Zhong & Craig, 2020). Clandinin and Connelly (2000) emphasise that narrative inquiry highlights contextualised personal experiences, perceptions, practices, and beliefs concerning social phenomena. By utilising this strategy, the researcher aims to gather data that is rich in meaning, facilitating a comprehensive understanding of the challenges, sustainability, and management of online communities in a retail context (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). Data collection involved one-on-one semi-structured interviews, conducted through Google Meet. The semi-structured nature of these interviews allows for flexibility, enabling participants to share their insights while the researcher guides the conversation to cover essential topics (Kallio *et al.*, 2016). This format also permits the researcher to probe interviewees for clarification on significant issues, enhancing the depth of the data collected. To ensure consistency and facilitate thorough analysis, all interview sessions were recorded (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021). Interviews were designed to accommodate the Online Community Life Cycle Model, allowing for to capture of information on each stage of the community lifecycle, specifically inquiring about the unique issues and activities that businesses encounter at each phase (Yao *et al.*, 2021).

1.8.1 Data analysis

For analysing the data collected from the interviews, thematic analysis was employed. This method allowed for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within the data, providing insights into the participants' experiences and perspectives on online community management (Terry *et al.*, 2017). The NVivo qualitative data analysis programme (NVivo, 2025) was exceptionally helpful in analysing the interview transcripts. The software is suitable for handling large volumes of qualitative data, such as interview transcripts, and allows for the in-depth analysis of complex themes and patterns. Its ability to manage text, audio, and visual data, along with powerful coding and visualisation tools, assisted the researcher in deriving meaningful insights that can guide the development of strategies for managing online communities (Azeem, Salfi & Dogar, 2012). The findings generated using the NVivo tool were used to suggest strategies by identifying common challenges, highlighting best practices, and proposing evidence-based recommendations. The data was analysed by organising the insights according to each stage of the Online Community Life Cycle

Model, enabling the researcher to identify effective management strategies and recognise common challenges associated with each phase (Begin, Devillers & Roche, 2018). A longitudinal time frame is suitable because it facilitated a deeper understanding of how community members interacted with one another and engaged with the community over time (Balmer *et al.*, 2021).

1.8.2 Trustworthiness

In a qualitative study, trustworthiness ensures the credibility of the study. This study utilised four criteria outlined by Lincoln and Guba (1985), which are credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, to strengthen the quality of findings. Credibility ensures participant checking, while Transferability was supported through detailed descriptions of the retail environment, participants, and online community structures, enabling readers to judge the applicability of the findings to similar contexts. Dependability was enhanced by keeping an audit trail documenting data collection, coding decisions, and analytical procedures. Confirmability was addressed by maintaining reflexive notes and grounding interpretations in direct evidence from participants' responses. Together, these criteria reinforce the overall integrity and rigour of the study.

1.8.3 Ethical considerations

Informed consent ensured that the research participants were fully aware of the study's purpose, procedures, and voluntary involvement. Informed consent was obtained before the interviews, and the responses were collected anonymously without identifying information. An ethics application was submitted with a low-risk rating (Resnik, 2020). Participants were also informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without any consequences.

1.9 Study outline

This dissertation follows a structured format to ensure a clear and logical flow of information. Chapter 1 introduces the study by providing the background information, stating the problem, defining objectives and research questions, and explaining the significance and scope of the study. Chapter 2 presents a literature review, discussing key concepts, theoretical underpinnings, and previous studies related to online

community management in retail businesses. Chapter 3 outlines the research methodology, detailing the research design, data collection methods, sampling techniques, and ethical considerations. Chapter 4 focuses on data presentation and analysis, providing a detailed interpretation of the findings using charts and tables. Chapter 5 discusses the findings, comparing them with existing literature and highlighting their implications for businesses. Finally, Chapter 6 concludes the study, summarising the key insights, making recommendations for businesses, and suggesting areas for future research.

1.10 Definition of terms

Below are the terms utilised in this study:

Online communities - Online communities refer to socially constructed networks of individuals who interact through computer-mediated communication (CMC) technologies, primarily via the Internet, around a shared purpose, interest, or goal.

Social Media - Social media refers to Internet-based platforms and applications that enable users to create, share, and exchange content within interactive networks. These platforms are built on Web 2.0 technologies and support user-generated content, social networking, collaboration, and real-time communication. In organisational contexts, social media functions as an infrastructure that enables the formation, management, and growth of online communities by facilitating engagement, participation, and digital interaction.

Digital space - A digital space is a virtual environment enabled by digital technologies where individuals and organisations interact, communicate, and exchange information. Unlike a mere replication of physical environments, a digital space is a dynamic socio-technical environment that supports computer-mediated communication, collaboration, and content creation. In the context of this study, digital space provides the structural and technological foundation within which online communities are formed, managed, and sustained.

1.11 Summary

This chapter has presented a detailed background of the study, the problem statement, the rationale of the study, the research aims and objectives, research questions, significance of the study, theoretical underpinnings, research methodology, and the study outline. Chapter 2 discusses the literature review, including the

theoretical underpinnings of the study. This study will suggest that effective management of online communities for South African retailers requires stage-specific techniques, as conceptualized by the OCLCM, to negotiate unique local issues such as diverse digital literacy.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

The study was aimed at exploring the strategies utilised in managing and sustaining online communities in a retail business. Chapter 1 covered the background information, the problem statement, objectives, and research questions, the significance and scope of the study, as well as the theoretical framework. Chapter 2 presents the relevant literature review on online community management, engagement strategies, and sustainability models in retail businesses. This Chapter 2 will unpack literature related to online community management, engagement strategies, and sustainability models in retail businesses, thus providing the foundation as well as outlining the gap in research. This chapter will be detailing literature starting with the history of retail business environments, the origin and development of online communities, pre- & post-Covid-19 effect/influence of online communities, the benefits of online communities for retail businesses, challenges faced by retail businesses in managing online communities, the causes of challenges in managing online communities, strategies used by retail businesses to overcome online community challenges, shortfalls of on strategies used, Improving existing strategies for managing online communities in retail. Lastly, we will be looking into the 3 selected theoretical frameworks, including the systems theory, variance theory, and process theory. The ensuing sections (Chapter 2) cover the theoretical underpinnings of this study, in which the Online Community Life Cycle Model (OCLCM) by Iriberry and Leroy (2009) is explained. This is followed by the Systems Theory (Rosen, 1969), the Variance Theory (Sturmborg & Marcum, 2024), and the Process Theory (Recker, 2021).

2.2 The history of retail business environments

This section discusses the history of retail business environments. The review covers developments in retail business environments from the 18th to the 20th century and also from the 21st century.

2.2.1 Retail business environments from the 18th to the 20th century

During ancient civilisations, trade was conducted through barter systems before the introduction of currency that facilitated more structured transactions (Grant, Banomyong & Gibson 2024). Early marketplaces, such as those in Mesopotamia,

Egypt, and Greece, served as hubs for exchanging goods and services. During the Middle Ages, retail evolved with the emergence of merchants and trade routes, leading to the establishment of permanent shops and marketplaces in towns and cities (Abazat, 2006). The Industrial Revolution in the 18th and 19th centuries brought significant changes, with mass production and improved transportation enabling retailers to expand their reach. Department stores and chain stores emerged, offering consumers a wider variety of goods and introducing new retail concepts such as fixed pricing and customer service (Har et al., 2022).

The 20th century saw the rapid growth of retail businesses, driven by advancements in technology, transportation, and consumer demand. The rise of supermarkets, shopping malls, and franchising revolutionized the industry, making shopping more convenient and accessible (Mowery & Rosenberg, 1998). The latter half of the century saw the introduction of credit cards, electronic transactions, and early forms of e-commerce, laying the foundation for digital retail (Williams, 2004). By the late 1990s, the internet had transformed the retail landscape, giving rise to online shopping platforms and global e-commerce giants (Tian & Stewart, 2006). These changes set the stage for the 21st-century retail business environment, characterised by omnichannel retailing, personalized consumer experiences, and data-driven decision-making, shaping how businesses interact with customers in the digital age (Ridings & Gefen, 2006).

2.3.2 Retail business environments from the 21st century

With the advancement of time and technology, business environments have witnessed a change, thus the use of online communities. The proliferation of online communities has significantly transformed the retail business landscape, offering numerous benefits such as enhanced customer engagement, increased brand loyalty, and valuable consumer insights (Rasool, Shah & Islam, 2020). Retail businesses leverage online communities to foster customer relationships, facilitate peer-to-peer support, and drive marketing initiatives (Al-azzam & Al-mizeed, 2021). However, despite their potential, the management of online communities presents several challenges, including moderating user-generated content, ensuring active participation, and addressing negative feedback effectively (Gillespie, 2022). The challenges encountered in managing online communities stem from various factors, such as the

dynamic nature of consumer behaviour, technological limitations, and inadequate community governance structures (Ganesh & Bright, 2020). Retail businesses employ different strategies to mitigate these challenges, including the use of artificial intelligence (AI)-driven moderation, gamification techniques, and influencer collaborations to sustain community engagement (Gillespie, 2020). While these strategies have shown promise, continuous improvements are necessary to address emerging challenges and ensure the long-term sustainability of online communities in retail (Chen *et al.*, 2020).

Although several studies have explored the management of online communities; however, gaps remain in understanding the holistic integration of technology, governance, and user engagement strategies tailored for retail businesses (Shin, Mollah & Choi, 2023).

2.3 Origin and development of online communities

As digital technology has advanced, so too have online communities' beginnings and growth, reflecting changes in how people communicate, exchange information, and form social bonds in virtual environments. This section covers pre-COVID online communities and how COVID-19 influenced online communities.

2.3.1 Pre-COVID online communities

From the early networked systems of the 1970s to the emergence of massive social platforms in the 2010s, pre-COVID online communities laid the groundwork for modern digital engagement. During this time, early bulletin board systems (BBS) and Usenet groups, which were typified by text-based, interest-driven conversations, evolved into more complex, user-centric platforms made possible by the expansion of Web 2.0 (Furman, 2015). According to Hudspeth (1990), peer-to-peer information sharing, identity construction, and collaborative content creation were some of the fundamental principles of digital participation that the communities were created. The ideas subsequently influenced the dynamics and structure of contemporary social networks (Kelley, Roger, Morrell, & Denise, 1999). Understanding how online communities formed their norms, engagement patterns, and governance systems before the revolutionary changes brought forth by the Covid-19 era requires an examination of this historical trajectory. Community involvement patterns became more formalized as

platforms developed into web-based forums, blogs, and early social networking sites (Ortner, Sinner & Jadin, 2018). Users contributed user-generated material, participated in threaded discussions, and formed subgroups around specialised interests (Kolbitsch & Maurer, 2006). Baxter, Upendram, and Lerner (2021) argue that the affordances of each platform, such as anonymity, asynchronous communication, and reputation systems that promoted active engagement, frequently had an impact on these patterns. Community charters, volunteer moderators, and rule-setting procedures that resulted from group agreement were the main community-driven governance tools. In an effort to strike a balance between the right to free speech and the need to handle disputes, false information, and disruptive behaviour, more formalized governance systems were eventually implemented (Lemstra, 2013). These included platform-level policies, automated moderation, and reporting tools. In general, pre-COVID online communities developed naturally, relying on shared norms, collaborative self-regulation, and participatory culture to sustain social order and meaningful connection.

2.3.2 Covid-19 impact on online communities

The Covid-19 pandemic significantly influenced online communities by accelerating digital engagement and reshaping the way individuals interact, communicate, and collaborate. With lockdowns and social distancing measures in place, people turned to online platforms for social connection, professional networking, and knowledge sharing (Sahut & Lissillour, 2023). Businesses, educational institutions, and social groups increasingly relied on virtual communities to sustain operations and maintain engagement (Assefa, 2023). This shift led to the rapid adoption of digital tools, such as video conferencing, social media forums, and collaborative platforms, fostering greater participation and accessibility (Ratten, 2023). As a result, online communities became more essential for emotional support, information exchange, and business continuity during uncertain times (Paczkowska *et al.*, 2023). Moreover, the pandemic highlighted both the strengths and challenges of online communities. On the positive side, digital platforms provided a sense of belonging and support, especially for those facing isolation (Longmuir, 2023). They facilitated innovation and the rapid spread of knowledge, particularly in areas like remote work, telemedicine, and e-learning (Reason, 2023). However, the surge in online activity also brought challenges,

including misinformation, digital fatigue, and disparities in access to technology (Chan, Lee & Chen, 2024). Online communities struggled with moderation issues and maintaining meaningful engagement amid the overwhelming influx of users (Shanghai University *et al.*, 2023). Despite these challenges, Covid-19 reinforced the importance of well-managed online communities, emphasizing their role in fostering resilience and adaptability in an increasingly digital world (Baxter & Hainey, 2023).

The Covid-19 pandemic also significantly impacted online communities in retail businesses, accelerating digital transformation and increasing consumer reliance on virtual interactions (Gupta, Mukherjee & Garg, 2023). With physical store closures and social distancing measures, businesses turned to online platforms to engage customers, provide support, and drive sales. Social media groups, e-commerce forums, and brand communities became essential for customer engagement, offering personalized recommendations, product updates, and peer-to-peer interactions (Verhoef, Noordhoff & Sloot, 2023). Additionally, businesses leveraged these communities for real-time feedback, fostering brand loyalty and trust (Sudarmiatin, Fitriana & Hidayati, 2023). However, challenges such as misinformation, heightened customer expectations, and the need for enhanced cybersecurity also emerged, requiring retailers to adopt effective strategies for managing and sustaining their online communities (Sudarmiatin, Fitriana & Hidayati, 2023).

2.4 The benefits of online communities to retail businesses

Retail businesses today adopt alternative approaches to generating new revenue streams, moving beyond traditional methods (Chan *et al.*, 2014; Cheng, Wu, & Chen, 2020). According to (Martinez-Lopez *et al.*, 2021), the emergence of social networking sites provides a strategic avenue for retailers to establish online communities.

2.4.1 Enhance customer engagement

Improving customer engagement is widely acknowledged as crucial for maintaining vibrant and worthwhile online communities because it fosters continued involvement and enhances consumer-brand relationships. While to Matute, Palau-Saumell, and Occhiocupo (2021), customer engagement is defined as consumers' cognitive, emotional, and behavioural participation in brand interactions, Molinillo, *et al* (2020) argued that the increase in online communities has also been demonstrated to

increase community vibrancy and loyalty when bolstered by interactive content and personalized communication. Research further indicates that increased engagement enables co-creation, where customers actively contribute ideas and feedback that enhance organisational value (Han & Anderson, 2022).

2.4.2 Cultivating brand loyalty

Cultivating brand loyalty has been widely recognised as a central objective in online community management, as loyal customers not only demonstrate repeated purchasing behaviour but also engage in advocacy that strengthens a brand's market position. Scholars argue that brand loyalty emerges from sustained interactions that deepen consumers' emotional and psychological connections with a brand (Loh, Gaur & Sharma, 2021). An example of emotional and psychological brand loyalty in South Africa can be seen in how SA youth connect with brand identity based on their location and affordability. Most SA youth from the townships and rural areas are attached to brands such as All-Star and the VW car brand. Certain brands are aligned with certain lifestyles, offering comfortable and fashionable products at a certain price and which make other customers feel included and valued (Scozzese & Gelli, 2023).

2.4.3 Trends and tailoring of offerings

Retail businesses do monitor consumer trends to tailor their offerings in ways that enhance relevance, engagement, and customer satisfaction. According to Berger-Grabner (2021), trend responsiveness enables companies to align products with evolving preferences, seasonal behaviours, and culturally significant moments, positioning their brands as adaptive and customer-centric (Trachuk *et al.*, 2021). Scholars argue that tailoring offerings based on trend insights strengthens value creation and fosters emotional connection, particularly during peak consumption periods such as holidays (Nitinkrishna, 2025). For example, during Valentine's Day, retailers often introduce curated gift bundles such as personalised couple mugs, matching wristwatches, or "his and hers" fragrance sets to appeal to the heightened demand for symbolic and sentimental products.

2.4.4 Feedback from customers

Feedback from customers is widely recognised as a critical component in evaluating and sustaining online community engagement, as well as improving organisational service delivery. Ozuem *et al.* (2021) argue that customer feedback serves as both a diagnostic and strategic tool, enabling firms to identify service gaps, refine value propositions, and strengthen brand–consumer relationships (Thaichon *et al.*, 2020). Within online communities, feedback also acts as a mechanism through which customers co-create value by sharing expectations, experiences, and suggestions that guide organisational decision-making (Gremyr *et al.*, 2022). For example, Woolworths’ online platforms, such as their social media pages and customer review portals, often receive detailed comments about product quality, delivery efficiency, and in-store experiences.

2.4.5 Increase in sales

The retail sector benefits from online communities by attracting more customers for engagement, which leads to an increase in sales. A study by Wongsansukcharoen (2022) indicates that retail businesses utilise social media platforms to increase sales due to peer recommendations and word-of-mouth marketing. Consumers trust reviews and testimonials from fellow community members, which influences their purchasing decisions (Shaheen *et al.*, 2019). An example of this in South Africa is Woolworths’ use of social media platforms such as Facebook to engage with customers. According to News24 (2024), “as of 2023, the retailer experienced a significant increase in online interactions, with social media mentions rising from 1.6 million in 2022 to 1.8 million in 2023”. When shoppers post positive reviews about Woolworths’ food or fashion products, their friends and followers see these recommendations, influencing their purchasing decisions.

2.4.6 Collaboration with influencers

Collaboration with influencers has emerged as a strategic branding practice within the retail sector industry, enabling brands to leverage the credibility and social capital of influential individuals to enhance brand visibility and consumer engagement. According to Ibanez-Sanchez *et al.* (2022), influencers function as digital opinion leaders whose endorsements can significantly shape community perceptions and purchasing intentions, particularly when their personal brand aligns with the

organisation's value proposition. Influencer partnerships are also found to strengthen parasocial relationships, thereby fostering trust and authenticity in brand communication (Casalo, Flavian & Ibanez-Sanchez, 2020; Jordas, 2023). For example, a potato chip brand (Lays) decided to partner with Lionel Messi, an internationally recognised sports figure, which illustrates how brands use celebrity influence to extend brand reach and stimulate engagement across global online communities.

2.4.7 Brand advocates

Brand advocates are conceptualised as highly engaged customers who voluntarily promote and defend a brand through proactive behaviours such as recommending the brand to others, defending it against criticism, and amplifying positive brand messages (Wong, 2023). The behaviour goes beyond mere word-of-mouth; customers develop a deep psychological connection and self-identification with the brand, rooted in trust and emotional bonding (Choi, Kroff & Kim, 2021; Wilk, Soutar & Harrigan, 2021). Empirical studies further emphasise that brand advocacy is not only an outcome of customer satisfaction but also a mediator of strategic effects; for example, consumers' perceptions of corporate social responsibility bolster brand trust, which in turn encourages advocacy behaviours (Wilk, Soutar & Harrigan, 2019; Bhati & Verma, 2020). Moreover, scholars regard brand advocacy as a key indicator of brand power, since advocates act as credible, consumer-driven marketers whose commitment can enhance reputation and resilience in competitive markets (Park & Jiang, 2023; Wilk, Sadeque & Soutar, 2024).

2.5 Challenges faced by retail businesses in managing online communities

There are many challenges faced by retail businesses in managing online communities. However, one of the most significant challenges is content moderation and reputation management. Online communities generate a vast amount of user-generated content, including reviews, comments, and complaints. Ensuring that discussions remain respectful and brand-positive while balancing freedom of expression is difficult (Paasonen, Jarrett & Light 2019).

2.5.1 Negative comments and misinformation

Negative comments and misinformation turn out to be a very significant challenge in managing online communities. Online communities generate a vast amount of user-generated content, including reviews, negative comments, and misinformation by other online community members (Vehovar & Jontes, 2021). Negative comments and misinformation can spread quickly, potentially harming a brand's reputation when not addressed appropriately (Gkikas *et al.*, 2022). According to Landgren & Lidberg (2021), negative comments can be influenced by misinformation from other users, which can damage the brand value and discourage participation in the online community. Jurisova (2022) argues that toxic interaction among online members can threaten the sustainability of an online community. For example, one member might post false information on Checkers' Facebook page stating that "Checkers is selling expired milk across multiple stores," without any evidence or verification. Such a post might quickly be seen by other members in the community and cause a lot of negative comments and end up damaging the brand value.

2.5.2 Lack of customer engagement

Retail businesses struggle to maintain active engagement in their online communities, and customers may join initially but lose interest over time, leading to declining participation rates (Kumar & Ayodeji, 2021; Mohd-Ramly & Omar, 2017). Scholars argue that when customers do not actively contribute through feedback, content creation, or dialogue, retail businesses tend to struggle to generate meaningful insights that inform decision-making and enhance customer experience (Chi, Harrigan & Xu, 2022). Reduced participation also delays the development of trust, social presence, and a sense of belonging, which is caused by online communities struggling to build key social elements that keep online members involved over time (Wong & Chung, 2023). Lack of engagement limits the network effects that typically strengthen community growth, thereby diminishing the strategic benefits that firms seek when investing in digital communities (Al-Khasawneh *et al.*, 2023). Understanding and addressing the challenges that cause the lack of engagement in the online community is essential for ensuring the vitality and strategic value of online communities.

2.5.3 Poor creation of meaningful interactions

Poor creation of meaningful interactions within online communities has been widely identified as a critical barrier to sustained engagement and community growth. Meaningful interactions refer to exchanges that foster connection, knowledge sharing, and a sense of belonging among online members. However, when communication is poorly facilitated, the community's value proposition diminishes (Trunfio & Rossi, 2021). King (2024) argued that ineffective moderation, unclear communication structures, and a lack of user-centred engagement strategies often lead to fragmented participation and threaten the sustainability of online communities. However, Grant (2020) argued that the lack of gamifying the content in online communities contributes to the lack of interaction among online community members, which negatively affects the longevity and sustainability of online communities.

2.5.4 Incentivizing participation

Online communities attract and keep existing members and attract new ones via the use of incentives. Researchers argue that companies often struggle to incentivise participation within online communities, as members may not consistently perceive sufficient value or motivation to contribute (Ichimiya *et al.*, 2023). Participation is influenced by two factors: enjoyment of utilising the online community and the use of rewards and recognition (Siuki & Webster, 2021; Delkhosh *et al.*, 2023). However, designing incentive mechanisms that sustain long-term engagement remains challenging because rewards and recognition can diminish motivation if poorly implemented, leading to reduced contribution quality or participation fatigue (Jacobsen & Beer, 2021). In addition, a single incentive strategy rarely meets the diverse motivational needs of participants (Walker & Matsa, 2021). As a result, businesses often struggle to formulate balanced and adaptive incentive structures that encourage consistent participation while maintaining the authenticity and value of interactions within their online communities (Rathje, Van Bavel & Van Der Linden, 2021).

2.5.5 Lack of staff members and insufficient training

Lack of staff members and insufficient training are highlighted as one of the challenges affecting the sustainability of online communities. The study argues that when retail companies operate with limited personnel, existing staff often become overextended,

resulting in reduced efficiency, burnout, and inconsistent execution of key tasks (Tso, 2022). In addition, insufficient training becomes an issue when employees are expected to utilize new technology without proper training. Exacerbates these constraints by leaving employees without the necessary competencies to adopt new technologies, engage meaningfully in organisational processes, or respond to emerging operational demands (Jedrzejczyk, 2021). The skills gap not only slows down organisational performance but also limits the potential benefits of innovation, as staff members may resist change or misuse systems due to limited understanding. The literature underscores the need for structured capacity-building programmes and strategic workforce planning to mitigate these challenges and enhance organisational effectiveness (Leidner, Gonzalez & Koch, 2020).

2.5.6 Direct impact of online communities on sales and brand loyalty

Despite the growing recognition of online communities as strategic tools for enhancing sales and fostering brand loyalty, several challenges persist that can hinder their effectiveness. A primary concern is the difficulty in measuring the direct impact of community engagement on actual sales performance, as interactions are often intangible and mediated by multiple external factors (Huang, Wang & Lin, 2022). However, maintaining active and meaningful participation is a constant challenge, as online communities are prone to member attrition, low engagement, or the proliferation of negative user-generated content, which can damage brand perception (Cheng, Wu & Chen, 2020). The alignment between community-driven discussions and the company's marketing objectives is not always straightforward, leading to potential inconsistencies in brand messaging and diminished loyalty outcomes (Kaur *et al.*, 2020). Challenges underscore the complexity of leveraging online communities as reliable drivers of sales growth and sustained brand loyalty, highlighting the need for strategic management and continuous monitoring (Kakalejczyk, Bucko & Danko, 2020).

2.5.7 Reliance on third-party social media platforms

Reliance on third-party social media platforms presents a challenge in the management and sustainability of online communities, as highlighted in the literature. Reviglio and Agosti (2020) argue that when organisations build their communities on external platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, or X (formerly Twitter), they

relinquish substantial control over data ownership, algorithmic visibility, and platform policies, which can unpredictably influence user engagement and community reach (Deley & Dubois, 2020; Duffy & Meisner, 2023). Algorithmic changes may reduce content visibility, while policy shifts or platform disruptions can destabilise established interactions and hinder strategic community management (Rocheft, 2020). In addition, the dependence on third-party platforms compromises long-term sustainability, as communities become vulnerable to commercial priorities and technological changes beyond the organisation's governance (Sorensen, Van Den Bulck & Kosta, 2020).

Retail businesses invest in building communities on platforms such as Facebook, but frequent algorithm changes can reduce organic reach, making it harder to engage audiences without paid promotions (White & Boatwright, 2020). A research study by Sacks and Looi (2020) quoted, stating, "Social media platforms typically apply their own advertising policies that govern the types of advertising permitted on their platform. Major social media platforms, such as Facebook and YouTube, have shown a willingness to restrict the advertising of products that may be harmful to public health, such as tobacco, alcohol, and gambling."

2.5.8 Spams, harassment, and trolls

In the context of online communities, one of the challenges identified in the literature is the prevalence of spam, harassment, and trolling, which can severely undermine user engagement and community sustainability. Spamming – characterised by unsolicited and repetitive content, clutters discussion spaces, diminishes the quality of interactions, and can erode trust among online members (Ortiz, 2020). Harassment, including targeted abuse, offensive language, and cyberbullying, contributes to a hostile environment, often leading to the withdrawal of active members and negatively impacting the sense of belonging and community cohesion (Heller, 2021). Similarly, trolling, defined as the deliberate provocation of members to elicit emotional responses, disrupts constructive communication and can escalate conflicts within the community (Ortiz, 2020). Collectively, such behaviours pose critical challenges for community managers, requiring effective moderation strategies, automated detection mechanisms, and clear community guidelines to preserve the integrity and sustainability of online communities.

2.6 Strategies used by retail businesses to overcome online community challenges

This section reviews the strategies used by retail businesses to overcome online community challenges. These strategies range from controlling harmful behaviour and toxicity to combining effective moderation and community guidelines with artificial intelligence (AI).

2.6.1 Controlling harmful behaviour and toxicity

Retail businesses have adopted several strategies to address negative comments and misinformation within their online communities. First strategy adopted is active moderation, where employees are responsible for monitoring discussions, removing harmful content, and responding to customer concerns to avoid the spread of false information (Mao & Zhang, 2023). Secondly, online communities utilise open communication techniques, including factual updates and explanations to dispel rumours and comfort community members (Munthali *et al.*, 2021). Additionally, online communities also employ social listening techniques to identify new problems early on and interact with customers before unfavourable opinions worsen (Ballestar, Cuerdo-Mir & Freire-Rubio, 2020). Retail companies seek to create online communities where trust and participation can be maintained in the face of difficulties by promoting transparent communication, welcoming constructive criticism, and upholding a consistent brand voice. Online communities also utilise the strategy, which involves filtering harmful and inappropriate content while ensuring constructive discussions (Gillespie, 2018). Retail businesses utilise artificial intelligence (AI) tools, automated filters, and human moderators to enforce community guidelines. Research study by Pavlicek (2024) suggests that AI-powered moderation tools help detect spam, hate speech, and misleading content in real time, reducing the heavy load on human moderators.

2.6.2 Dealing with low engagement

Online communities have adopted several strategies to address the issue of limited customer engagement. Umunna (2021) argues that in order to maintain exposure and encourage user interaction, online communities utilise content-driven engagement

techniques, including uploading interactive material, personalised messages, and targeted promos (Liu *et al.*, 2021). In addition, implementing gamification techniques, including reward systems, badges, and competitions, has been found to increase customer motivation and encourage repeat engagement (Puig *et al.*, 2023). To better understand consumer preferences and provide content that is relevant and engaging, retailers also use data analytics and social listening techniques (Ballestar, Cuerdo-Mir & Freire-Rubio, 2020). Retail companies can successfully reduce low engagement levels and create a livelier and engaged online community by combining personalized communication, interactive features, and data-driven content initiatives.

2.6.3 Creation of meaningful interactions

Retail businesses utilise personalised communication approaches, gamifying the content, and providing fast responses to queries. According to Leung, Gu, and Palmatier (2022), online communities use personalised communication to improve meaningful interactions, using the content that online members tend to relate to. To promote a feeling of community and active participation, retailers also spend more money on social media managers and community moderators who lead conversations, answer questions, and promote user-generated material (Forderer & Burtch, 2025). By making online spaces more dynamic and participative, interactive content forms, including live chats, surveys, Q&A sessions, and narrative, also encourage deeper engagement (Marshalsey & Sclater, 2020). Retail businesses can improve consumer satisfaction and long-term loyalty by applying the above-mentioned strategies into practice and strengthening the quality of interactions within their online communities.

2.6.4 Incentivizing participation

Retail businesses utilising the strategy of designing competitions that will benefit a broader base of participants instead of selecting only a few participants. According to Zhen and Twyman (2025), retailers are making investments to provide inclusive incentives, including participation-based prizes, reward points, and discount codes. However, Retailers can reduce disruptive behaviours and increase positive interactions in their online communities. Additionally, companies are spending more money on digital marketing campaigns to advertise these incentives, guaranteeing increased visibility, a broader audience, and ongoing consumer involvement (Liu *et*

al., 2022). By utilising the above-mentioned strategies, online communities can reach a wider audience with the use of structured paid ads and competition.

2.6.5 Providing staff and necessary training

Online communities are using a strategy of investing in a structured digital skills training to equip employees with the competencies needed to handle customer interactions, moderate discussions, and manage online content effectively (Ferreira *et al.*, 2020). To lessen the workload for their small personnel and guarantee prompt responses to community members, other businesses use automated support technologies like chatbots, AI-driven moderation systems, and scheduling software. (Lalchhanhima, Rajendran & Madhusudanan, 2025). Another popular strategy is to outsource community management duties to specialised organizations, which allows shops to continue constant involvement even in situations where internal capacity is limited (Yang *et al.*, 2023). Retail companies may reduce operational restrictions and maintain vibrant, healthy online communities by combining staff development, technology assistance, and outside expertise.

2.6.6 Building trust and safeguarding security

Customers' trust and purchase intentions rise when they participate favourably in online brand communities, according to research (Nadeem *et al.*, 2020). On the other hand, uncontrolled conflict, false information, or unfavourable interactions can destroy brand credibility and lower sales (Nadeem *et al.*, 2020). To address these risks, retail brands implement proactive moderation, community guidelines, and targeted engagement strategies that encourage constructive participation and reduce disruptive behaviours (Hennessy *et al.*, 2020). Despite community limitations, brands use reward-based loyalty programs, personalized communication, and customer feedback mechanisms to improve long-term loyalty and deepen consumer-brand relationships (Nnenna Ijeoma Okeke *et al.*, 2024).

2.6.7 Reliance on third-party social media platforms

Retail businesses rely on different social media platforms such as Facebook, X, TikTok, and Instagram to communicate with their online communities, and these platforms have their own protocols that suit their own business goals. According to

Rashid and Zaaba (2020), platforms such as Facebook and Instagram use their own protocols, for example, a lack of customisation, algorithm restrictions, and difficulties in managing negative comments. Retailers mitigate some of these rules by applying moderation strategies, utilising platform analytics to monitor engagement patterns, and developing clear community guidelines to reduce misinformation, harassment, and disruptive behaviour (Drivas *et al.*, 2022). However, platforms such as Facebook page offers only limited customisation options compared to a dedicated online community platform. Retailers cannot tailor the interface, features, or interaction tools to suit their specific business needs (Arora, 2022).

2.6.8 Combining effective moderation, community guidelines, and AI

The use of effective moderation, community guidelines, and AI is the main strategy with regard to dealing with spam, harassment, and trolls. Dineva and Breitsohl (2022) argued that Effective moderation is crucial, and businesses are increasingly employing AI-driven detection systems and automated filtering technologies to find and eliminate offensive or dangerous information before it spreads. To shape user expectations and promote polite interactions, retail businesses create explicit community guidelines that specify appropriate behaviour and the repercussions for infractions (Schaffner *et al.*, 2024; Horta Ribeiro *et al.*, 2025). Retail companies also use hybrid moderation methods, which combine human moderators with algorithmic technologies to guarantee content review accuracy and contextual comprehension.

2.7 Shortfalls of the strategies used in managing online communities

According to research, online moderation, community guidelines,, and incentivizing participation are the two common strategies used by retail businesses to manage online communities (Christodoulides, Gerrath & Siamagka, 2021; Wadden *et al.*, 2021). Despite the good performance of these three strategies, online communities still face challenges. Moderation practices are often inconsistently applied or too slow to address the rapid spread of harmful content, while community guidelines may be overlooked, vaguely interpreted, or ignored by users (Christodoulides, Gerrath & Siamagka, 2021; Wadden *et al.*, 2021). Similarly, incentive-based strategies, including competitions and reward programmes, frequently generate only short-term activity and

do not always build sustained commitment or meaningful participation (Ai *et al.*, 2022). As a result, despite the strategic efforts adopted by retail businesses, issues such as misinformation, user conflict, spam, and declining engagement remain prevalent (Santiago, Borges Tiago & Tiago, 2025). These persistent challenges highlight not only the limitations and complexities of managing online communities effectively but also reveal a significant research gap in understanding how existing strategies can be refined or redesigned to achieve more sustainable and meaningful community engagement.

2.8. Literature gaps

In this study, the knowledge gap lies in the limited understanding of how retail businesses in South Africa manage and sustain their online communities over time. While previous research has primarily focused on the role of social media in marketing and customer engagement, fewer studies have explored the strategic processes and long-term management practices that ensure the sustainability of these communities. There is also a lack of empirical evidence on how retailers balance challenges such as limited digital literacy, the presence of trolls, and the need for rapid response times while maintaining meaningful customer relationships.

2.9 The gap emanating from the reviewed literature

Despite the growing body of literature on online community management, significant research gaps remain in understanding the strategies for managing and sustaining online communities in a retail business environment. Most existing studies focus on isolated aspects, such as user engagement, content moderation, or monetization strategies, without integrating these elements into a comprehensive framework that ensures long-term sustainability (Negrutiu, Vasiliu & Enache, 2020). Additionally, while the Online Community Life Cycle (OCLC) model has been widely referenced in general discussions about online communities, its application in retail business environments remains underexplored. There is limited research on how businesses can effectively navigate the different stages of an online community's lifecycle while maintaining engagement and maximizing commercial benefits. Furthermore, many studies emphasize engagement metrics but fail to explore the long-term impact of online communities on business growth, customer loyalty, and revenue generation.

Another significant gap in the literature is the lack of research on localized content and the accessibility of online community resources for members from rural areas. Most studies on online community engagement assume consistent digital infrastructure and internet access, overlooking the challenges faced by individuals in underdeveloped regions with limited connectivity and digital literacy. There is minimal research on how businesses can create inclusive online communities that accommodate diverse linguistic, cultural, and technological contexts (Chohan & Hu, 2022; Tay, Tai, & Tan, 2022). Additionally, strategies for engaging users who have limited access to high-speed internet or advanced digital devices remain underexplored. Without addressing these barriers, many online communities risk excluding a significant portion of potential users, limiting their reach and long-term sustainability. Bridging this gap would require exploring innovative solutions such as offline content accessibility, mobile-friendly community platforms, and localized engagement strategies tailored to rural and underserved populations (Ye & Yang, 2020).

2.10. Theoretical foundations

This section unpacks three different frameworks utilised in Information systems namely system theory, variance theory and process theory. In addition the section highlights how online community life cycle model is aligned with this study and why it was chosen as the framework to be utilised in this study. Systems Theory, Variance Theory, and Process Theory collectively complement the Online Community Life Cycle Model (OCLCM) by strengthening its explanatory depth. While the OCLCM outlines the developmental stages of online communities (inception, growth, maturity, and renewal/decline), Systems Theory conceptualises the online community as a socio-technical system composed of interdependent technological, organisational, and social elements that influence sustainability. Variance Theory supports the examination of causal relationships between management strategies, challenges, and community outcomes, explaining why certain communities progress or decline at different stages. Process Theory, in turn, reinforces the temporal and evolutionary nature of the OCLCM by emphasising how communities change over time through sequences of events and strategic interventions. Together, these theories provide a

multidimensional lens that enhances understanding of how retail businesses in South Africa can effectively manage and sustain online communities across their life cycle.

2.10.1 Systems theory

Systems Theory is a fundamental framework in Information Systems (IS) that views an organisation or technology as an interconnected system with various components working together to achieve a common goal. Originally introduced by Ludwig von Bertalanffy, Systems Theory emphasizes the holistic perspective, where different parts of a system interact and influence each other (Rosen, 1969). In the context of Information Systems, this theory is used to understand how hardware, software, users, data, and processes function collectively to ensure efficiency and effectiveness within an organisation (Hossain *et al.*, 2024).

A key principle of systems theory is that an information system is not merely a collection of independent elements but an integrated whole where changes in one component affect the entire system (Perumal & Aithal, 2024). This perspective is particularly useful in designing, implementing, and managing IS solutions that must adapt to dynamic business environments (Mahmood *et al.*, 2023). For example, in an enterprise resource planning (ERP) system, different modules such as finance, human resources, and supply chain management are interconnected. A change in inventory levels in the supply chain module automatically updates the finance module, ensuring accurate financial reporting and decision-making.

Another real-world example of systems theory in Information Systems is seen in healthcare management systems. In a hospital, an integrated electronic health record (EHR) system connects doctors, nurses, pharmacists, and administrative staff, ensuring seamless patient care (Van Offenbeek, Vos & Boonstra, 2024). When a doctor prescribes medication, the pharmacy system updates in real time, reducing the risk of prescription errors and ensuring patient safety. This interconnected approach enhances efficiency, reduces redundancy, and improves service delivery.

Systems theory is applied through integrated information systems that connect various departments such as admissions, finance, academic affairs, and student services (Aumann *et al.*, 2023). For example, when a student registers for a course, the

academic system updates, which in turn notifies the finance department of tuition fees and adjusts class capacity records. Similarly, library access and learning management systems (LMS) are linked to student databases, ensuring a seamless educational experience. Moreover, universities utilise systems theory to manage data security and institutional efficiency. When one subsystem, such as the student portal, experiences technical issues, it can affect multiple areas, including course enrolment, grading, and communication between faculty and students. This highlights the importance of proper system design and maintenance to ensure continuous service delivery and data integrity.

2.10.2 Variance theory

Variance Theory is a theoretical approach in Information Systems (IS) that focuses on identifying causal relationships between independent and dependent variables to explain system behaviour and outcomes (Sturmborg & Marcum, 2024). Unlike process theory, which emphasizes sequences of events, Variance Theory seeks to quantify how different factors contribute to specific outcomes, making it particularly useful for predictive and explanatory research in IS (Frattini *et al.*, 2024). In the context of a banking site, Variance Theory can be applied to analyse the impact of cybersecurity measures on the reduction of fraudulent transactions. For example, a study may examine how different levels of encryption (independent variable) affect the frequency of data breaches, which is described as a dependent variable (Asad, Mohajerani & Nourseresh, 2016; Kovalev, 2023). By using statistical models, researchers can establish a correlation between stronger security protocols and lower fraud rates, allowing banks to make data-driven decisions to enhance their security infrastructure (Johora *et al.*, 2024). Similarly, in a varsity setting, Variance Theory can be used to assess the effectiveness of an online learning platform in improving student performance. For instance, a university may investigate how the frequency of engagement with an e-learning system (independent variable) influences students' final grades, which represent the dependent variable (Idkhan & Idris, 2023). If data analysis reveals a strong positive correlation, administrators can develop policies to encourage more interactive learning experiences, such as gamification or personalized learning paths, to enhance student success (Halachev, 2024). Another example of variance theory in Information Systems can be seen in the healthcare industry, where hospitals use data analytics to evaluate the efficiency of electronic

health record (EHR) systems (Forde-Johnston, Butcher & Aveyard, 2023). By examining the relationship between the adoption rate of EHR systems (independent variable) and the reduction in medical errors (dependent variable), hospitals can make informed decisions about investing in better digital infrastructure (Knevel & Liao, 2023). If a study finds that increased EHR usage significantly reduces errors, healthcare institutions may mandate more comprehensive digital training for medical staff.

In the retail sector, variance theory can be applied to analyse how customer engagement with a mobile shopping app affects purchasing behaviour. A business may assess how the number of personalized recommendations (independent variable) influences the frequency of completed transactions, which represent the dependent variable (Mir, 2023). If data suggests that targeted recommendations lead to higher sales, retailers can optimize their recommendation algorithms to further enhance user experience and profitability. Overall, variance theory provides a structured approach to understanding cause-and-effect relationships in Information Systems, making it a valuable tool for decision-making and strategic improvements in various domains, including banking and education (Gamil & Abd-Rahman, 2023). Variance theory focuses on explaining relationships between variables by identifying causal links. This theory is commonly used in quantitative IS research to test hypotheses and measure how different factors influence outcomes. It is based on statistical models and is typically used to examine technological adoption, organizational change, and system performance (Maier *et al.*, 2023).

2.10.3 Process theory

Process theory in information systems (IS) is a framework that focuses on understanding how and why changes occur over time within IS-related contexts (Recker, 2021). Unlike variance theory, which examines relationships between independent and dependent variables, process theory seeks to explain the sequences of events, activities, and interactions that lead to specific outcomes (Pappas & Woodside, 2021). This approach is particularly useful for studying dynamic and complex phenomena in information systems, where factors such as organisational culture, user behaviour, and technological evolution play significant roles. One of the key strengths of process theory is its ability to capture the unfolding nature of IS

implementations, transformations, and adaptations (Niederman, 2021). For example, in the adoption of an enterprise resource planning (ERP) system, process theory would not just look at whether implementation leads to improved efficiency but would explore the steps involved in the implementation, the challenges encountered, and the adjustments made along the way. This allows researchers and practitioners to understand how different phases of system integration contribute to overall success or failure.

According to Rainer *et al.* (2020), process theory is particularly useful in studying change management in Information Systems (IS), as it provides a lens through which to examine how organisations evolve in response to technological advancements. For instance, when a company transitions from traditional retail to e-commerce, process theory helps analyse how the organization shifts its operations, marketing strategies, and customer engagement processes over time. This approach enables researchers to identify critical moments that influence success, such as the introduction of a new digital payment system or the training of employees to adapt to online customer service tools (Tam, Loureiro & Oliveira, 2020). Another example of process theory in the study of online communities, where engagement and participation evolve based on interactions and trust-building rather than static variables. A process-oriented study might investigate how online business fosters an active online customer community, tracking the strategies employed over time, such as initiating discussions, responding to feedback, and introducing new features to enhance user experience. By focusing on the sequences of events, process theory provides a deeper understanding of IS dynamics, making it a valuable approach for studying continuous and evolving systems.

2.10.4 The online community life cycle model

The Online Community Life Cycle Model (OCLCM) by Iriberry and Leroy (2009) offers insights into community building, engagement, and sustainability. The OCLCM comprises four stages: inception, establishment, maturity, and mitosis (Fu & Oh, 2022). Figure 2.1 illustrates the stages of an online community life cycle (Young, 2013). In the inception stage, an online community for a retail store such as Spar might form around sharing promotions and product information, attracting initial enthusiastic

customers (Torres, 2022). During the establishment phase, more customers join, engaging in discussions about shopping experiences and sharing tips.

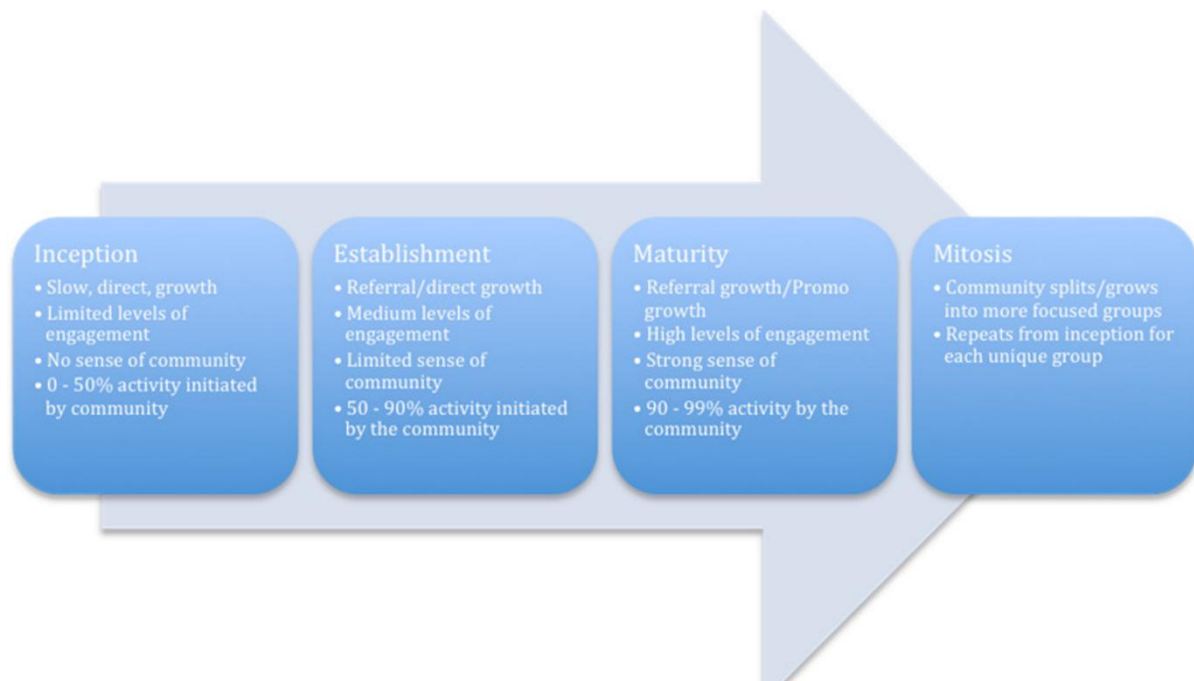


Figure 2.1: Stages of an online community life cycle

As the community reaches maturity, it becomes self-sustaining, with members actively contributing and supporting each other, creating a vibrant space for exchanging ideas and feedback (Syerov, Trach, & Fedushko, 2018). Finally, in the mitosis stage, the community may evolve into specialised subgroups, such as a section for eco-conscious shoppers discussing sustainable products or local groups focusing on regional promotions, fostering deeper connections among members (Palmer, 2021). The model guided the analysis of community dynamics at each development stage, from inception to maturity, enabling an understanding of how engagement levels evolve. It assisted in identifying specific challenges retail businesses face in sustaining member participation and activity during different phases, allowing the researcher to suggest solutions for each stage (Jiang *et al.*, 2020). Lastly, by applying the OCLCM, the study evaluated the success factors and management strategies essential for sustaining vibrant, self-sufficient online communities in the retail sector (Park *et al.*, 2019).

Online community lifecycle was the chosen framework that was utilised as the guiding theoretical framework to analyse how retail businesses manage and sustain their

online communities across different stages of development. By mapping research questions onto the stages of the life cycle, such as inception, growth, and maturity.

2.11 Conclusion

Chapter 2 has provided a comprehensive overview of the history of retail business environments leading to the 21st century, highlighting how technological advancements and digital transformation have reshaped traditional retail operations. The chapter further examined the impact of COVID-19 in accelerating the adoption of online communities, as many businesses turned to digital platforms to maintain customer engagement and continuity during lockdowns. The chapter also discussed the benefits of online communities for retail businesses, including enhanced customer loyalty, increased sales, stronger brand advocacy, and improved two-way communication between businesses and customers. In addition, the chapter reviewed the theoretical underpinnings on which this study is based. Chapter 4 presents research methodology, research philosophy, and research approach,, along with research design, population and sampling of the study,, as well as data collection methods and data analysis techniques

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

Chapter 3 presents a detailed explanation of the research methodology adopted for this study. Research methodology comprises the research design, approach, and data collection methods used to ensure a comprehensive investigation of a study's objectives (McNabb, 2016). The ensuing sections contain research methodology, research philosophy, research approach, research design, population and sampling, data collection methods, data analysis techniques, ethical considerations, and conclusion.

3.2 Research methodology

Research methodology plays a crucial role in achieving the study's objectives by providing a systematic approach to data collection and analysis (McNabb, 2016). The study employed the qualitative research method to gain in-depth insights into a research topic (Thelwall & Nevill, 2021). Thus, the qualitative research method chosen enabled the researcher to gain in-depth insights into how retail businesses engage and sustain their online communities. Additionally, the selection of interpretivism as the underlying research paradigm enables a deeper exploration of the human and social factors influencing online community engagement (Junjie & Yingxin, 2022). A well-defined methodology enhances the credibility and relevance of research (Hazari, 2023). Therefore, the qualitative research method chosen ensured that the findings contribute valuable knowledge and practical strategies for retail businesses looking to strengthen their online presence.

Figure 3.1 shows an outline of the research methods used in this study. As illustrated in Figures 3.1 and 3.2, the research methods adopted in this study stem from the research onion propagated by Saunders *et al.* (2016). Following the research proposal, the goals and the purposes of the the objectives of the study were clearly stated at the outset of the study in Chapter 1. In addition, the significance of the study was explained in the research proposal and also in Chapter 1. The secondary data in the form of literature review used to substantiate the study findings was covered in Chapter 2. In addition, the literature review used to discuss the research methodology is covered in Chapter 3.

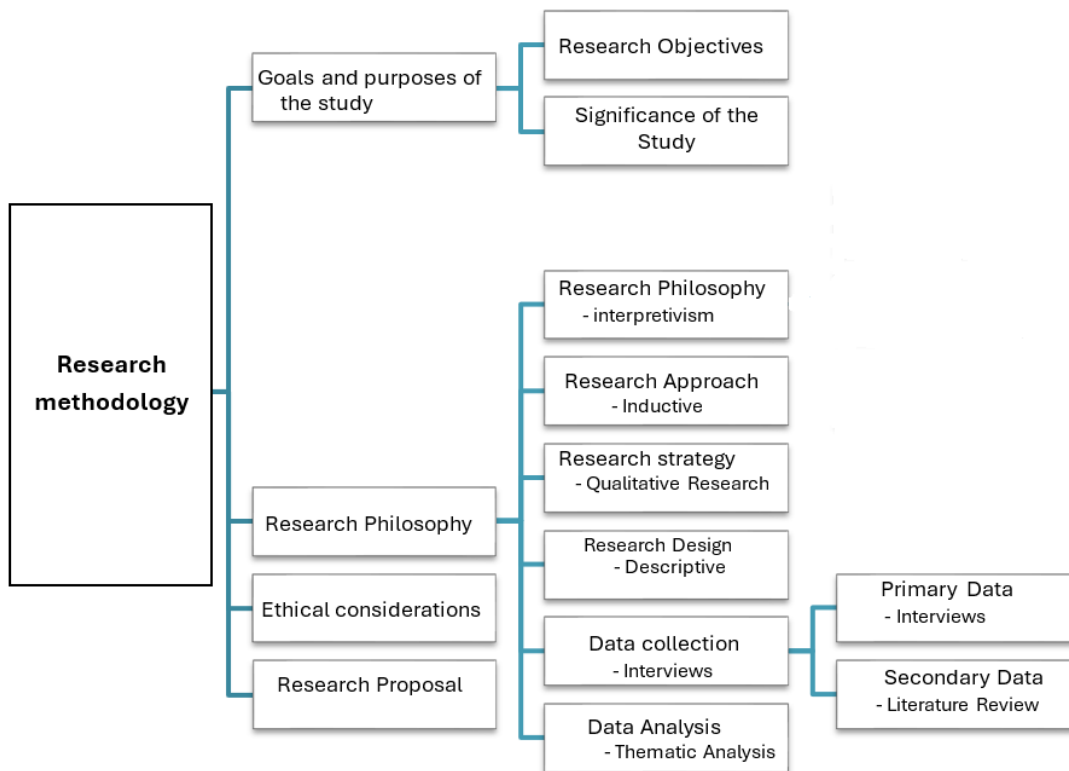


Figure 3.1: Outline of the research methods used in this study

3.3 Research philosophy

Research philosophy is the set of opinions and assumptions that influence a researcher's approach to an investigation, guiding their options about research methods, data analysis, and interpretation (Saunders *et al.*, 2016; MacDonald, 2012; & Crossman, 2017). Research philosophy concerns expressing one's worldview and how one deems knowledge is extended and obtained (Saunders *et al.*, 2016; MacDonald, 2012; & Crossman, 2017). Main philosophies comprise positivism, interpretivism, realism, and pragmatism, each with different outlooks on the characteristics of reality and how it can be studied (Saunders *et al.*, 2016; MacDonald, 2012; & Crossman, 2017). Figure 3.2 is the research onion illustrating the distinct mutually dependent phases of the research process, from selecting a research philosophy at the periphery to specifying the data collection methods deep inside the model (Saunders *et al.*, 2016). In sum, five distinct mutually dependent levels of this model was adopted for this study.

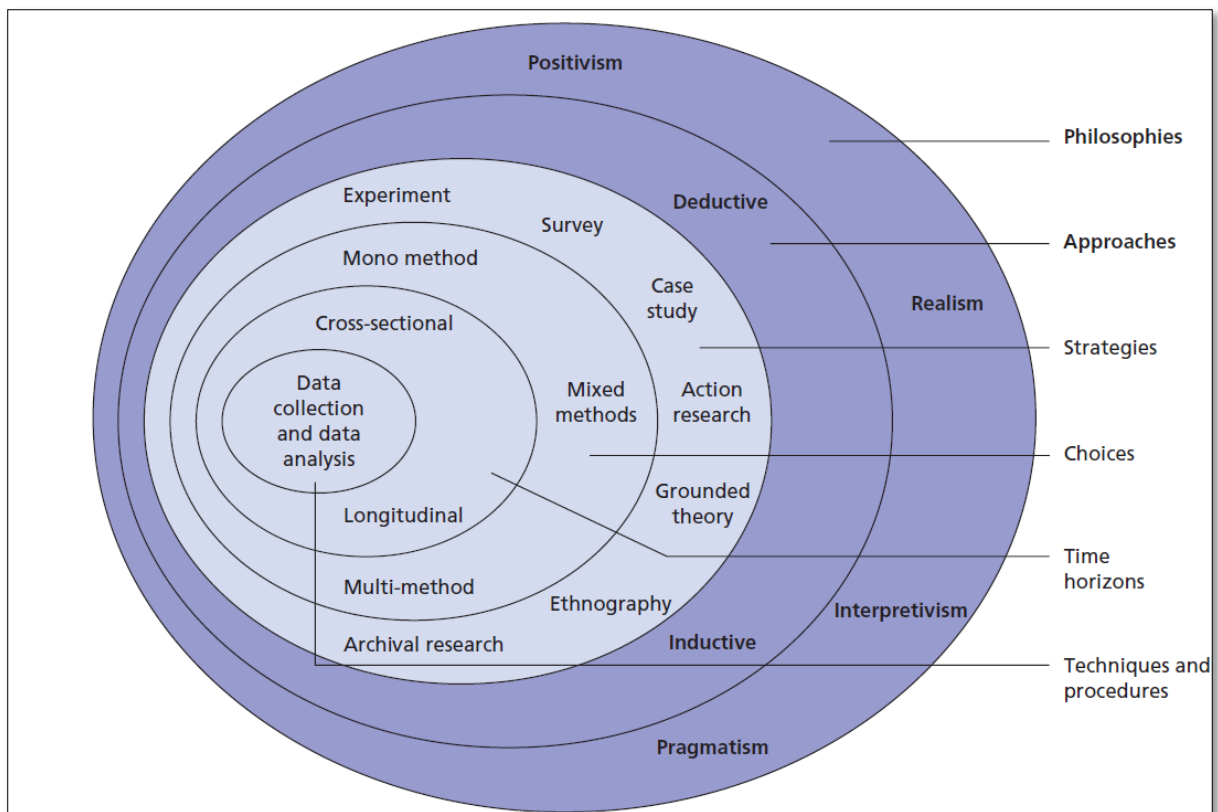


Figure 3.2: The research onion

This study utilised interpretivism as its underlying philosophical approach. Interpretivism is centered on understanding human experiences, social interactions, and the subjective meanings individuals attach to their environments (Scauso, 2020). Interpretivism focuses on what some people think and do, what kind of problems they are confronted with, and how they deal with them (Burns *et al.*, 2022). This paradigm is particularly relevant for studying online communities, as it allows for an in-depth exploration of how individuals engage with retail businesses, how retail businesses foster community participation, and the strategies employed to sustain these online communities. The interpretivist paradigm aligns well with this study’s research problem, which explores strategies for managing and sustaining online communities in a retail business environment. Since online community engagement is shaped by human interactions, digital behaviours, and organizational strategies, a purely quantitative approach would not fully capture the nuances of these dynamics. Interpretivism enables the researcher to explore how retail businesses create meaningful customer relationships, the challenges they face in maintaining online engagement, and the factors that contribute to long-term community sustainability.

Through qualitative methods such as interviews and thematic analysis, this study will provide valuable insights into exploring strategies utilised for managing and sustaining online communities in a retail business environment.

Interpretivism aligns well with the research problem by integrating the Community Life Cycle model as a guiding framework. The Community Life Cycle describes the different stages an online community goes through, from its formation and growth to maturity and possible decline (Iriberry & Leroy,, 2009; Torres, 2020). Since these stages are shaped by human interactions, online engagement strategies, and business decisions, interpretivism provides the flexibility to explore the evolving nature of online communities within a retail business context. This paradigm enables a deeper understanding of the factors that influence community sustainability, including how retail businesses foster engagement, respond to challenges, and adapt their strategies to maintain long-term community success. Interpretivism supports the exploration of how and why certain strategies work within specific contexts rather than relying on rigid, universally applicable models (Scauso, 2020). Since the Community Life Cycle is dynamic and influenced by external factors such as consumer behaviour, technological advancements, and market trends, an interpretivist approach allows for an in-depth examination of these influences. Qualitative methods,, such interviews will provide rich insights into how businesses navigate different life cycle stages, adapt their engagement strategies, and sustain their communities over time. By focusing on real-world experiences and subjective perspectives, this study will contribute valuable knowledge on the practical application of the Community Life Cycle model in managing and sustaining online communities in a retail business environment as part of the interpretivist approach.

3.4 Research approach

This study started with a clear study goal and intentions that provided the basis for creating new perceptions that arose from the data analysis. The inductive research approach was applied to describe important ideas and themes that appeared from the interview data. The goal of an inductive approach was to make sense of unstructured information, as illustrated in Figure 3.3. As explained by Thomas (2006), the inductive approach enables research outcomes to arise from meaningful themes in the raw data. Federay and Muir-Cochrone (2006) clarified that thematic analysis is a procedure

applied to recognise themes or most important beliefs in unstructured qualitative information whilst utilising the inductive research approach.

Consequently, in accordance with Thomas (2006); and Federay and Muir-Cochrone (2006), the researcher proposed to apply the inductive research approach as an information reduction procedure by applying a number of measures and making sense of unstructured information through the formation of themes and classes. Moreover, the induction research approach supports the descriptive research design that is reviewed in the next section.

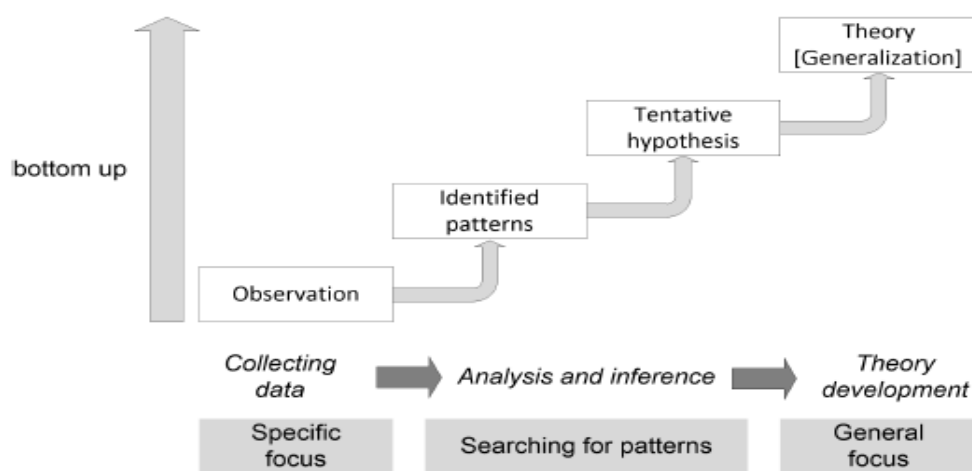


Figure 3.3: A representative flow of inductive approach

3.5 Research design

Adams, Khan, and Raeside (2014) explained that research design is the plan for achieving research goals and answering research questions and also making sure that the data collected is suitable for resolving a challenge. Research design is the blueprint that allows a researcher to conduct the study in a proper, useful, and successful manner (Adams Khan, & Raeside, 2014). Research designs that can be used for addressing research objectives include exploratory, explanatory, and descriptive research designs (Saunders *et al.*, 2016). The descriptive research design permits a researcher to gather data without modifying or influencing the ecosystem (Saunders *et al.*, 2016). Consequently, descriptive research design could bring out perceptions on strategies utilised for managing and sustaining online communities in a retail business environment. The descriptive research design allowed the researcher to gather useful information and successfully run the study and explain the findings.

The interpretivist approach, inductive reasoning, and qualitative methodology support this choice, ensuring a rich contextual analysis. Since online community engagement is shaped by human interactions, business strategies, and digital behaviours, qualitative research allows for a deeper understanding of these complex and context-specific dynamics. Through methods such as interviews, rich descriptive data was collected from key stakeholders such as marketing managers and community engagement specialists who provided firsthand insights into effective practices and challenges. Unlike quantitative methods that focus on numerical data, qualitative research captures the subjective experiences and strategic decision-making processes that contribute to the sustainability of online communities (Ghanad, 2023).

3.6 Population and sampling

A population is a collection of individuals who have a common set of traits (Weiers, 2011). A population is a distinct group of identifiable items, such as humans and animals, for the purpose of the study and data collection (Creswell, 2014). Further, a population is a collection of individuals or items that have at least one general trait (Saunders *et al.*, 2016). A population is a cluster of citizens or objects that have similar attributes (Zikmund, 2010). A sample is a subset of the entire population and it is representative of the population under study (Saunders *et al.*, 2016).

3.6.1 Target population

The target population is the accessible population comprising the identifiable group of persons, items, or happenings that a study aims to analyse (Creswell, 2014). Similar to an entire population, this group is described by common characteristics or measures appropriate to the research objectives, and the outcomes are intended to be generalised to this entire group (Zikmund, 2010). The target population of the study comprised managers, social media account managers and administrators who oversee the operations and management of online communities. The study intended to use a small sample size appropriate for a qualitative study because it allows for in-depth exploration of complex issues to achieve saturation of information.

The possible units of the study were three retail business sites in South Africa namely: Checkers, Mr Price, and Woolworths, selected because they use online communities extensively. These retail business organisations recognise the importance of online communities in fostering customer loyalty and enhancing the overall shopping

experience therefore, they should have strategies for managing the communities. Furthermore, all three selected retail business organisations are large, well-known brands with significant market presence and influence in the retail industry, each with a large customer base and well-established online communities on Facebook.

3.6.2 Sampling technique

A non-probability sampling method was used in this study. According to Lund (2012), non-probability sampling consists of quota sampling, purposive sampling, convenience sampling, snowball sampling and self-selection sampling. The researcher used purposive judgemental sampling. The primary aim of the purposive judgemental sampling was to focus on a particular characteristic of a population that was of interest, which would best address the research questions (Palinkas, 2015). Purposive judgemental sampling allows researchers to intentionally choose individuals or organisations with specific knowledge, experiences, or insights related to the study's focus (Campbell *et al.*, 2020). In this case, researcher gathered data from key stakeholders such as retail business managers, social media account managers and administrators who actively participate in or manage online communities. This approach ensured that the collected data was rich, meaningful, and directly relevant to understanding the challenges and best practices in sustaining online communities. By utilising qualitative methods such as interviews, purposive sampling facilitated in-depth exploration of real-world experiences, leading to valuable insights that contributed to the study's objectives.

3.6.3 Sample size

In contrast to quantitative research that aims to quantify the number of ideas, qualitative research intends to uncover a range of ideas and a variety of opinions so as to obtain useful evidence (Saunders *et al.*, 2016; MacDonald, 2012; & Crossman, 2017). Therefore, the number of participants needed depends on the number required to really answer to the research questions (Patel, 2015). Based on this fact, the researcher employed the concept of saturation (Galser & Strauss, 1967), to determine how many participants were required. To reach saturation, the researcher interviewed the participants up to the point where the next interviewee almost repeated the same information already collected from the last participant. As explained by Galser and

Strauss (1967), the notion of saturation ought to be used to reach a useful sample size in any qualitative research. Saturation happens when no further understanding is obtained from additional conversations. An experimental study has recommended that descriptive saturation happens following 12 to 15 conversations of an identical group questioned on a particular subject (Latham, 2014). To attain descriptive saturation, the researcher interviewed up to 12 research participants and only 9 were recorded, when no further understanding was obtained from additional conversations.

3.7 Data collection methods

Primary data collection was done by means of Google Meet interviews. The aim of an interview is to probe into a person's beliefs, encounters, and opinions on a particular issue (Saunders *et al.*, 2016; MacDonald, 2012; & Crossman, 2017). Interviews are thought to offer a better insight into experiences compared to quantitative information gathering through structured questionnaires. Interview communication permits the interviewer to explore responses resulting in more intricate and helpful answers compared to a structured questionnaire where the respondent can take a neutral stance (Saunders *et al.*, 2016; MacDonald, 2012; & Crossman, 2017). The collection of data through the Google Meet interviews was undertaken in a thorough and respectable manner, and the interviews were directly administered by the researcher. To achieve this, the following steps were followed:

- 1) The researcher identified obvious staff members responsible for online marketing.
- 2) Then the researcher sent messages to these potential research participants asking them to be part of the study. A clearly worded statement of confidentiality (Appendix) was added to each message describing the aim of the study and guaranteeing the privacy of the research participants.
- 3) After an acceptance message was received from any potential research participant, a Google Meet interview was then arranged. The online discussions were normally held at the participant's convenience, and all discussions were finalised in one session.
- 4) The researcher oversaw 12 interviews and recorded them electronically.

3.8 Data analysis techniques

Qualitative data analysis involves recognising themes, issues, patterns and relationships (Saunders et al., 2016; MacDonald, 2012; & Crossman, 2017). This study used thematic data analysis to explore and report themes in the interview data that was collected (Federay & Muir-Cochrone, 2006). This entailed transcribing the recorded information into word document interview transcripts and using a qualitative data analysis programme such as the NVivo programme (NVivo, 2025). As explained by Braun and Clarke (2006), such results need to be interpreted in a detailed report of the study outcomes. To realise this, the following steps were followed:

The researcher used the in-built transcriber on Google Meet to transcribe the interviews into Word document interview transcripts.

The researcher then read through all the interview transcripts broadly and began to recognise valuable themes relating to the concepts. Then the researcher uploaded all the interview transcripts into the NVivo programme (NVivo, 2025).

Next, applying thematic data analysis, the researcher could discover themes that arose naturally through the interviews.

Then the researcher utilised the NVivo programme (NVivo, 2025) to code the interview data into the recognisable themes. The nodes are bins where associated data are put together in the NVivo programme to enable the exploration of ideas and concepts in the data (NVivo, 2025).

This process resulted in emergent themes that provided more insights into the analysis.

3.9 The principles of trustworthiness

The principles of trustworthiness in qualitative research refer to credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability of the findings (Yilmaz, 2013). Credibility refers to whether the study findings are accurate not only from the viewpoint of the researcher but also from that of the participants and the readers of the study, while dependability refers to whether the process of the study is consistent over time and across different researchers, methods, and projects (Yilmaz, 2013). Furthermore, confirmability refers to whether the findings are based on the analysis of the collected data, and when examined through an auditing process, the auditor confirms that the study findings are rooted in the data and inferences based on the data are logical and have clarity, high utility, or explanatory power (Yilmaz, 2013). In addition, transferability

refers to whether the findings of a qualitative study are transferable to other similar settings (Yilmaz, 2013).

Credibility of the study was achieved by ensuring that the data collected and data analysis results were accurate by inviting individuals who interact with online communities daily, comprehensive, and respected the configuration and temporal arrangement of elements in the local context. In addition, research participants' quotes were linked to the relevant literature and theory, and the findings were internally coherent. In addition, the conclusions were considered to be accurate based on the contributions of the study participants.

Dependability of the study was achieved by ensuring that the research questions were clearly defined and aligned with participants' daily tasks, and the features of the study design were in congruence with the research questions. In addition, the basic paradigms and analytic constructs were clearly specified. Furthermore, the researcher's role and status within the research process were explicitly described.

3.10 Ethical Considerations

As explained by Walton (2015), research ethics is unambiguously dependent on the ethical concerns that are exhibited when individuals are engaged as participants in the study. There are three goals to research ethics as established by the Belmont Report: 1) Respect for persons, 2) Beneficence, and 3) Justice (Walton, 2015).

In all situations, the researcher ought to think about the ethical consequences and the emotional concerns of their study on all the participants. Consequently, it is vital that researchers place themselves in the position of the participant and check for imminent dangers to the participant's emotional health, ideals, and decorum (Saunders *et al.*, 2016). To this end, the researcher did not suppress information and/or misinform participants by any means. The researcher also advised all the participants on the goals of the research and granted them the opportunity to withdraw their responses if or when deemed necessary. As explained by Smith (2003), safeguarding individual rights to privacy is an inalienable facet of every research project. This is especially crucial today, given the fast communication media such as the internet. To attain this, the researcher informed the participants on how their information would be utilised before receiving their permission for the interview.

3.11 Conclusion

Chapter 3 has discussed the research methodology that was used to conduct this study. The target population and sampling, data collection methods were discussed. The appropriate sample size for this study has been determined using judgmental purposive sampling to ensure a comprehensive yet manageable scope, considering both the research objectives and available resources. Data Analysis was carried out with the help of the NVivo programme to manage the data more efficiently. The ethical considerations of the researcher were also discussed. Chapter 4 presents the data analysis results of the study.

CHAPTER 4: PRESENTATION OF THE RESULTS

4.1 Introduction

Chapter 4 presents the key findings that emerged from the data collected during the study, with a focus on understanding the strategies, challenges, and practices involved in managing and sustaining online communities in a retail business context. The results are presented relating to the research questions that were stated at the start of the study and are organised into distinct themes, each of which is followed by a detailed analysis and interpretation by the researcher. Data from interviews were analysed using the NVivo qualitative data analysis programme (NVivo, 2025), which facilitated the identification and coding of recurring themes. To visually represent these findings, diagrams generated from the NVivo programme have been included throughout this chapter. The following were the research questions of the study:

- a. What are the benefits of utilising online communities for retail businesses in South Africa?
- b. What emerging challenges have retail businesses faced when managing online communities?
- c. What are the underlying causes of the challenges faced by retail businesses in managing online communities?
- d. What strategies do retail businesses use to address challenges associated with online communities?
- e. How can existing strategies be improved to enhance the management of online communities in retail businesses?

The ensuing sections present the demographic information and interpret the results of the study.

4.2 Demographic information

To contextualise the findings presented in this chapter, it is important to first outline the demographic and professional characteristics of the study participants. Table 4.1, therefore, presents the profile of the 9 participants who took part in the interviews, detailing variables such as gender, age group, job title, and years of experience in managing or engaging with online communities. Presenting this information serves two main purposes. Firstly, it provides transparency regarding the composition of the

sample, which is a key requirement in qualitative research to allow readers to judge the credibility and transferability of the findings. Secondly, the characteristics of the participants may shape their perspectives; for example, more experienced practitioners might emphasise long-term sustainability strategies, while newer entrants may focus on immediate operational challenges. Therefore, understanding the background of participants is essential in appreciating the nuances of the themes and sub-themes that emerged from the data analysis.

Table 4.1: Profile of Participants

Participant	Gender	Educational Qualification	Experience in years	Specialisation
Participant 1	Female	Diploma in Media Studies and Communication	10	Digital marketing
Participant 2	Female	Diploma in Marketing, Digital Marketing	5	Digital marketing
Participant 3	Female	Bachelor of Arts - BA, Strategic Brand Communications	8	Brand Manager, Marketing and Social Media Manager
Participant 4	Male	Diploma in Arts and Diploma in Social Media	7	Social media specialist
Participant 5	Male	Honours in Media Studies	12	Social media and marketing
Participant 6	Female	Diploma in Arts and Diploma in Social Media	4	Campaign analyst and marketing
Participant 7	Female	Diploma in Marketing, Digital Marketing	6	Social media specialist
Participant 8	Male	Diploma in Arts	5	Social Media Administrator
Participant 9	Female	Diploma in Media Studies and Communication	10	Digital marketing

The study comprised nine participants, of whom six were females and three were males. Their educational qualifications ranged from Diplomas to an Honours degree in disciplines such as Media Studies, Marketing, Arts, and Communication. The

participants had between four and twelve years of work experience, with an average of about seven years. Most participants specialised in digital marketing, social media management, brand communication, and campaign analysis. Notably, digital marketing emerged as the most common area of specialisation among those with marketing-related qualifications. Participants with media and communication backgrounds primarily focused on social media and marketing roles. The participant with an Honours degree had the longest professional experience of twelve years and specialised in both social media and marketing. Overall, the participants demonstrated diverse yet complementary expertise in marketing, communication, and social media, with a predominance of female professionals and moderate to extensive work experience.

4.3 Summary of the findings

In order to provide a coherent link between the study’s objectives and the findings that emerged from the data analysis, it is essential to map the research questions to the themes and sub-themes that were generated during the coding process. Table 4.2, therefore, presents the alignment of each research question with the overarching themes and their respective sub-themes. This mapping is useful for two key reasons. Firstly, it demonstrates the transparency and rigour of the analytical process by showing how each research question was systematically addressed through the thematic analysis. Secondly, it allows readers to clearly trace how participant narratives were organised into themes that respond directly to the study’s research questions. This enhances both the clarity and credibility of the findings, while also illustrating the logical flow from data collection, through analysis, to interpretation. In doing so, Table 4.2 serves as a roadmap that guides the reader through the remainder of the findings chapter.

Table 4.2: Research questions mapped to themes and sub-themes

Research Questions	Themes	Subthemes
1) What are the benefits of utilising online communities for retail businesses in South Africa?	1. Benefits of engaging with online communities in retail businesses.	1.1. Customer referrals.
		1.2. Enhanced Brand visibility.
		1.3. Valuable feedback from the community.
		1.4. Increased sales.
	2. Specific examples of how online communities contributed	2.1. Recommendation of products.
		2.2. Improved sales.

Research Questions	Themes	Subthemes
	to the business's growth and success	2.3. Increase in sales via Facebook engagement
2) What challenges do retail businesses face when managing online communities?	3. Most challenges retail businesses encounter when managing online communities	3.1. Spams, harassment, and trolls.
		3.2. Losing valuable members.
		3.3. Limited digital literacy from customers can hinder engagement.
	4. The most significant obstacles encountered while managing community platforms	4.1. Trolls and spam posts have been difficult to control.
		4.2. Misinformation about products
		4.3. Timely responses due to communication delays.
		4.4. Difficulties in managing heated debates with our customers.
3) What are the underlying causes of the challenges faced by retail businesses in managing online communities?	5. Key factors contributing to the challenges of managing online communities.	5.1. Using different platforms
		5.2. Unreliable communication
		5.3. Underestimating the need for digital communication management
		5.4. Rapid pace of social media
	6. Strategies retail business utilizes to manage challenges faced in online communities	6.1. Great interactions with fast responses
		6.2. Clear community policy.
		6.3. Utilising moderation tools
		6.4. Community guidelines with rules against harassment and hate speech.
4) What strategies do retail businesses use to address challenges associated with online communities?	7. The effectiveness of strategies for overcoming challenges faced when managing online communities.	7.1. Tools still have some pending issues.
		7.2. Strategies worked well, especially moderation.
		7.3. Customer queries are solved faster.
5) How can existing strategies be improved to enhance the management of online communities in retail businesses?	8. What improvements can be made to enhance the management of online communities in retail businesses	8.1. It is necessary to update community guidelines.
		8.2. Tools such as Sprout must be improved to be more reliable
		8.3. Advanced AI moderation tools needed
		8.4. Staff capacity
	9. Strategies used to retain existing online members and attract new ones to grow the community.	9.1. Paid Ads for Tech-Savvy audiences
		9.2. Vouchers for members.
		9.3. Quick response times (1-2 hours)
		9.4. Competitions for retention.

The following subsections present and interpret the results with respect to the research questions. To accomplish this, the findings are grouped into themes emanating from the data analysis, and these outcomes are supported by exact quotations from the research participants.

4.4 Presentation and interpretation of the results

4.4.1 What are the benefits of utilising online communities for retail businesses in South Africa?

As illustrated in Table 4.2, two themes are related to the first research question stated above: 1) Benefits of engaging with online communities in retail businesses, and 2) Specific examples of how online communities contributed to businesses' growth and success.

4.4.1.1 Theme 1: Benefits of engaging with online communities in retail businesses

Theme 1, which focuses on the benefits of engaging with online communities, is supported by four subthemes. The first subtheme, Customer referrals, shows how loyal community members often recommend products to friends and family, thereby expanding the customer base at minimal cost. The second subtheme, Enhanced brand visibility, highlights the role of community engagement in increasing awareness and recognition of retail brands, while also fostering stronger customer loyalty. The third subtheme, Valuable feedback from community members, captures how businesses gain real-time insights into customer needs, preferences, and service challenges, enabling timely improvements and innovation. The fourth subtheme, Increased sales, demonstrates how trust, credibility, and authentic peer recommendations within online communities contribute directly to higher sales and sustained business growth. Figure 4.1 presents a diagram of theme 1 and subthemes, together, these subthemes illustrate the multifaceted advantages that online communities offer retail businesses.

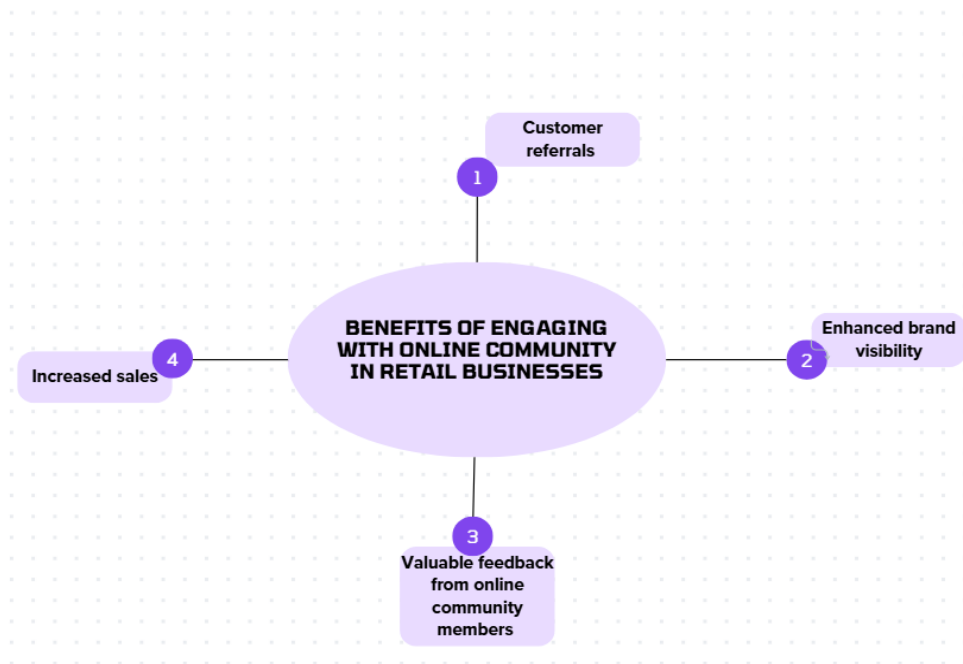


Figure 4.1: Diagram of theme 1 and sub-themes

Customer referrals

The findings show that one of the benefits was the increase in customer referrals generated through online community engagement. For example, participants explained that loyal customers often refer friends and family members, contributing to customer base expansion without incurring substantial marketing costs (e.g., participants 1 & 4). Participant four’s response reinforces this point; the participant has seven years of experience working as a social media manager. The participant stated that

“Most of our new customers actually come through word of mouth in the online community. When someone posts a positive experience with our products, their friends usually comment or ask questions, and often those friends end up buying as well. The referrals happen naturally because people trust recommendations from other community members.” **(Participant 1)**

“When community members refer a certain product to other members, it creates a chain reaction. Some other members often end up buying, and that increases our sales.” **(Participant 4)**

The extract attests that the role of online communities in enabling network-based customer acquisition, where trust and satisfaction serve as key motivators for advocacy and referral. This can be supported by participant one, who has 10 years of experience in digital marketing.

Enhanced brand visibility

A recurring point among participants was that their engagement in online communities significantly enhanced brand visibility and led to improved sales. One participant with a Diploma in Media Studies and Communications stated that

“The brand gains visibility and sales improve through customer recommendations.”
(Participant 1)

“Helped us to build brand loyalty.” **(Participant 7)**

This aligns with the idea that online communities act as a marketing channel where satisfied customers promote products or services through word-of-mouth. Such organic promotion often carries greater credibility and reach compared to conventional advertising. These customer-driven recommendations increase the likelihood of brand discovery among potential consumers and support sustainable sales growth. Engagement in online communities was further linked to improved customer retention. Participants noted that sustained interactions with community members helped maintain interest and foster repeat purchases. One respondent with six years of experience in a social media management position indicated that their community efforts suggested that consistent communication and value-driven engagement build emotional ties between customers and brands. These emotional ties translate into longer-term customer relationships and loyalty, contributing to the business’s overall customer retention strategy.

Valuable feedback from online community members

Participants highlighted the importance of feedback gained through online community engagement. Real-time feedback provided valuable insights into customer preferences, product performance, and service satisfaction. This allowed retail businesses to make timely improvements and tailor their offerings. This can be supported by participant two, with a Diploma in Marketing, who has five years of experience in Digital marketing. The participant said

“Receiving feedback from online members has been very important for us. Customers are quick to share what they like about our products and also where they think we can improve. For example, some members pointed out delivery delays, which helped us look into our logistics and make changes. Others have suggested new features they

would like to see, and that has given us ideas for future product development. The feedback is immediate and very honest, so it really helps us stay connected to what our customers need.” **(Participant 2)**

“The feedback we get from our community members is really valuable. For example, when a product doesn’t meet expectations, they let us know immediately, and we can fix the problem before it spreads.” **(Participant 5)**

The real-time feedback enables the retail businesses to remain responsive to customer needs and to improve overall service delivery. This can be supported by participant five, with twelve years of experience in marketing.

Increased sales

Participant eight, with five years of experience in social media, added that praising the power of engaging with the online community led to an increase in sales. This form of engagement not only strengthens customer relationships but also builds trust and loyalty.

“Since we started engaging more actively with our online community, we’ve noticed a steady increase in sales. People are not only more aware of our products, but they’re also more confident to purchase after seeing real user experiences shared on the platform.” **(Participant 8)**

“Being active in the community has boosted our sales significantly. Customers trust feedback from other members, and that word-of-mouth online quickly turns into actual purchases.” **(Participant 3)**

Importantly, the benefits align with the primary objectives of retail businesses, particularly the goal of increasing sales year after year, as customer satisfaction and continuous improvement contribute directly to sustained revenue growth. This can be supported by participant three with a Bachelor of Arts and eight years of experience as a brand manager.

Summary of Theme 1

The findings suggest that online communities play a strategic role in enhancing business performance through multiple interrelated outcomes. Firstly, peer-to-peer recommendations within the online communities act as a powerful driver of customer referrals, with trust in shared experiences proving more persuasive than traditional advertising. This dynamic not only supports customer acquisition but also contributes

to increased sales, as engagement within the community builds consumer confidence in purchasing decisions. In addition, the visibility of brands is strengthened by ongoing mentions, tags, and discussions, which position the brand prominently in digital spaces and extend its recognition beyond direct marketing efforts. Equally important, businesses benefit from valuable feedback provided by community members, who highlight strengths, pinpoint service gaps, and suggest improvements, effectively becoming co-creators of value. Collectively, these insights demonstrate that online communities are not only platforms for customer interaction but also vital mechanisms for growth, brand development, and operational learning in the retail business environment. The ability to connect directly with customers allows businesses to build trust, strengthen loyalty, and gain real-time insights into customer experiences and expectations. Figure 4.1 illustrates the hierarchy chart showing codes that contributed to the development of the theme: Benefits of engaging with online communities in retail businesses.

4.4.1.2 Theme 2: Specific examples of how online communities contributed to a business's growth and success

Figure 4.2 illustrates the diagram of theme 2. This theme explores how active engagement with online communities, particularly through social media platforms such as Facebook, has contributed to increased sales in retail businesses. Participants consistently highlighted that maintaining meaningful interactions with customers online resulted in greater visibility, stronger brand loyalty, and measurable sales growth. The findings suggest that social media engagement not only enhances communication with customers but also serves as a strategic marketing tool that directly influences purchasing decisions and business performance.

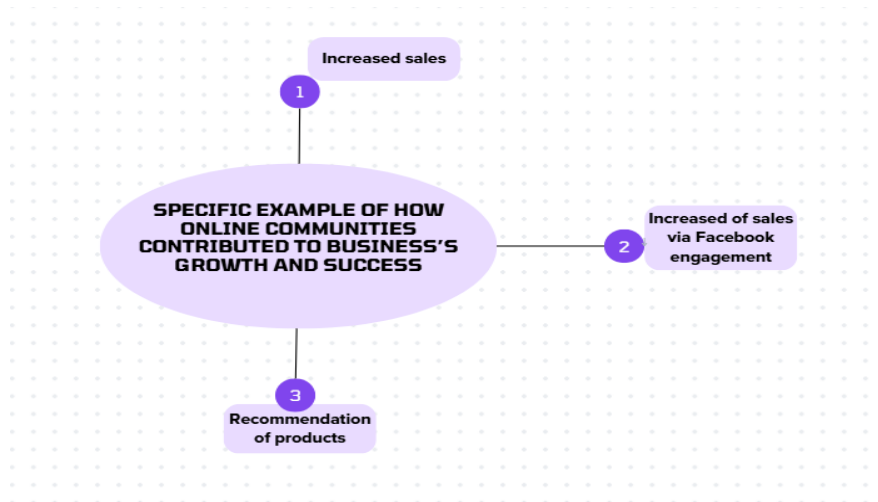


Figure 4.2: Diagram of theme 2 and sub-themes

Increased sales

Most respondents reported that their retail businesses experienced a percentage increase in sales as a result of community engagement. Participant nine, who has a Diploma in Media Studies and Communication with ten years of experience in digital marketing, stated that

“Since we became more active in engaging with our online community, we’ve seen a clear increase in sales.” **(Participant 9)**

“During the COVID-19 lockdown, we relied heavily on Facebook to engage with our customers. The platform really helped us to keep in touch with them and promote our products. As a result, our sales actually increased by about 25% during that period. Without Facebook, it would have been very difficult to reach our customers and achieve that kind of growth.” **(Participant 7)**

The consistent growth across different participants reflects the strategic importance of social media platforms in retail environments. The data points suggest that regular interaction with community members, combined with targeted content and product promotions, can yield tangible sales benefits for businesses operating in a digital economy. This can be supported by participant seven, who has six years of experience as a social media specialist.

Increase in sales via Facebook engagement

The results showed that sales increased directly as a result of engaging with the online community. Participants acknowledged that online platforms, especially Facebook,

served as an effective marketing and communication tool. Participant four, with ten years of experience in social media, mentioned that

"Facebook helped us to increase sales during lockdown by 40%" **(Participant 4)**

"We noticed a significant increase in our sales after we started engaging more actively on Facebook. By posting regular updates, running promotions, and responding to customer inquiries quickly, our customer base grew, and many people became repeat buyers." **(Participant 8)**

Participant four highlights the platform's role during critical periods when traditional in-store operations were limited. This increase suggests that online communities not only facilitated product exposure but also served as a critical channel for business continuity during times of crisis. This can be supported by participant 8, who has five years of experience in social media.

Recommendation of products

The results show that product recommendations made by members of the online community have a significant impact on what customers decide to buy. Participants emphasized that others are inspired to test the goods themselves when community members share their own experiences.

"A lot of customers recommend our products to others in the community" **(Participant 2)**

"We noticed a significant increase in our sales after we started engaging more actively on Facebook. By posting regular updates, running promotions, and responding to customer inquiries quickly, our customer base grew." **(Participant 6)**

Participant two with five years of experience remarked. For instance, members typically ask questions when someone posts about using a product, and the user ultimately ends up promoting it. This implies that peer-driven recommendations serve as a powerful, unofficial marketing technique that builds trust and boosts sales. This can be supported by participant six, who has a Diploma in Arts with four years of experience in campaign analysis and digital marketing.

Summary of Theme 2

The above findings indicate that online communities are not merely spaces for casual interaction but are powerful tools for driving retail business growth. The act of recommending products within these spaces creates a ripple effect that boosts brand awareness and encourages purchasing behaviour through social influence. The data underscores the role of digital platforms such as Facebook in sustaining and even enhancing sales performance during external disruptions like lockdown. These insights align with literature on social commerce and digital marketing, which emphasizes the growing reliance on community-based strategies for customer retention and acquisition. As presented in Figure 4.2, the hierarchy chart displays the codes that contributed to the development of the theme: Specific examples of how online communities contributed to business growth and success.

4.4.2 What challenges do retail businesses face when managing online communities?

Similarly, as exhibited in Table 4.2, two themes are connected to the second research question stated above: 1) Most challenges retail businesses encounter when managing online communities, and 2) The most significant obstacles encountered while managing community platforms.

4.4.2.1 Theme 3: Most challenges a business encounters when managing online communities

Figure 4.3 represents diagram of theme 3. This theme explores the common difficulties faced by retail businesses in sustaining productive and positive online communities. Although online engagement offers numerous benefits, participants reported several persistent challenges that hinder effective community management. These include dealing with disruptive behaviours such as spam, harassment, and trolling; addressing limited digital literacy among customers; and retaining valuable members who contribute meaningfully to discussions. The findings suggest that while online communities play a crucial role in driving customer interaction and sales, their management requires continuous effort to ensure safety, inclusivity, and sustained participation.

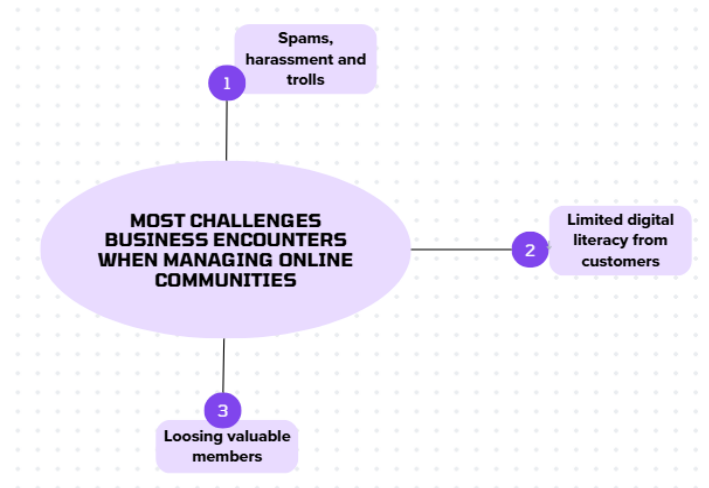


Figure 4.3: Diagram of theme 3 and sub-themes

Spams, harassment, and trolls

Participants highlighted disruptive behaviours such as spam, harassment, and trolling as ongoing threats to productive community engagement. These behaviours not only distract from constructive discussions but also create a hostile environment that drives away legitimate users. This can be supported by participant one and three, who has ten years of experience in managing social media platforms.

“One of the biggest challenges we face in managing the online community is dealing with spam, harassment, and trolls. Sometimes people post irrelevant advertisements or offensive comments that disrupt meaningful discussions.” **(Participant 1)**

“We encounter trolls who deliberately provoke arguments, which makes genuine members uncomfortable and less willing to engage.” **(Participant 3)**

Limited digital literacy from customers

A recurring challenge identified was the limited digital literacy among online community members, which negatively impacts engagement within the community. Participants noted that some users struggled with navigating platforms, understanding community guidelines, and utilizing features effectively.

“Many of our customers were not comfortable using digital platforms, and this made online sales more difficult for us.” **(Participant 9)**

“The participant stated that “Not all of our customers are digitally literate. Some struggle to navigate the online platforms, and this makes it difficult for them to fully engage in the community.” **(Participant 2)**

Participant nine, who has ten years of experience working as a social media manager, also supported this point. This often led to low participation rates, user frustration, and incorrect usage of the platform. The interpretation suggests that digital literacy is a foundational requirement for meaningful interaction. When online community members lack basic digital skills, retail businesses may need to offer support and simplified interfaces to bridge the gap and encourage participation. This can be supported by participant two, who has a Diploma in Marketing.

Losing valuable members

According to the study, retail businesses face a major difficulty when valuable members of the online community leave since they frequently leave behind active contributors who encourage participation and offer insightful commentary. These participants are crucial for maintaining conversations as well as influencing decisions on what to buy, among other things. This can be supported by participant seven, with six years of experience in social media and participant six with a Diploma in Arts confirmed.

"We occasionally lose valuable members who used to post regularly and recommend products" **(Participant 7)**

"When active members depart, it feels like we're losing not just numbers but also the knowledge and the sense of belonging they brought. It makes sustaining engagement much harder because those members often played a key role in keeping the community alive." **(Participant 6)**

This implies that keeping active members is crucial to preserving the online community's vitality and efficacy because their departure might have a detrimental impact on engagement, client recommendations, and eventually revenues.

Summary of Theme 3

The findings reveal that while online communities offer significant value to retail businesses, they are also challenged by spam, harassment, and trolls, which undermine trust and discourage participation. Limited digital literacy among some customers further restricts engagement, as these individuals struggle to navigate platforms and contribute effectively. In addition, keeping conversations on topic remains a concern, as off-topic discussions dilute the purpose of the community and

make it difficult to extract useful insights. The loss of valuable members who drive discussions, share recommendations, and influence purchasing decisions also reduces vibrancy and weakens overall engagement. Taken together, these challenges highlight the need for proactive management strategies that promote safety, inclusivity, relevance, and member retention. By addressing these barriers, retail businesses can protect their brand image, sustain community participation, and ensure that online communities continue to generate meaningful feedback, trust, and sales growth. To illustrate this further, Figure 4.3 presents a hierarchy chart showing the codes that contributed to the development of the theme: *“Most challenges businesses encounter when managing online communities.”*

4.4.2.2 Theme 4: The most significant obstacles encountered while managing community platforms

The outcomes associated with this theme are illustrated in Figure 4.4. According to the results of the study, the most significant obstacles encountered while managing community platforms include getting timely responses due to communication delays, difficulties in managing heated debates with our customers, misinformation about products, and trolls and spam posts have been difficult to control.

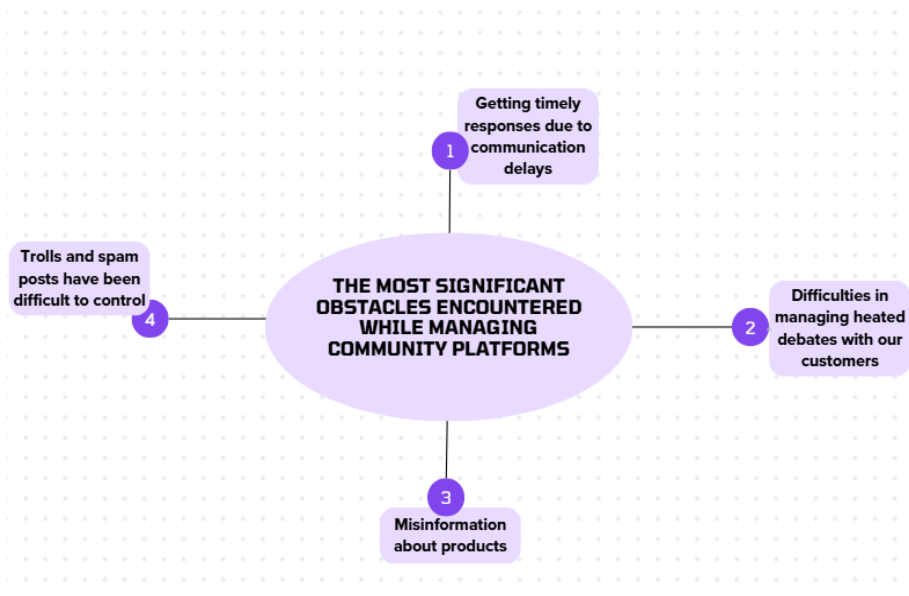


Figure 4. 4: Diagram of theme 4 and sub-themes

Getting timely responses due to communication delays

Another issue highlighted was communication delays, both internally and externally. Some participants noted that obtaining the correct information or approval from relevant departments took time, which delayed responses to community members. As a result, users grew frustrated with the lack of timely engagement, especially in urgent or sensitive matters. Communication delays can severely hinder customer satisfaction and may create the perception that the business is unresponsive. This can be supported by participant 3, who has eight years of working experience as a brand manager, and supported participant one, with ten years of experience in digital marketing. The participants stated that.

“Sometimes communication in the online community is not immediate. For example, a customer can post a question or a comment, but it doesn’t always appear at the same time due to the system or platform delays.” **(Participant 3)**

“The technology tools we use are very useful, but they are not always perfect, and that can slow down the flow of communication.” **(Participant 1)**

This finding indicates a need for streamlined internal communication channels and clear escalation procedures. Timely responses are crucial in maintaining active and supportive online communities.

Difficulties in managing heated debates with our customers

Disagreements between online community members and the retail businesses were identified as a significant challenge. Participants explained that public disputes, especially when not resolved quickly, often escalate and influence other online community members. Sometimes, customers aired grievances aggressively, putting pressure on retail businesses to respond diplomatically in public view. Participant seven, with a Diploma in Marketing, confirmed, while participant two, who specialises in digital marketing, disagrees.

“Sometimes discussions around products get too emotional, and members start arguing instead of sharing constructive feedback.” **(Participant 7)**

“It becomes difficult for us to step in without making customers feel silenced, but at the same time, we need to keep the environment respectful and professional.” **(Participant 2)**

This finding underscores the delicate balance community managers must maintain between professionalism and conflict resolution. Retail businesses must train their teams in empathetic communication and conflict management. Prompt and respectful handling of disagreements can prevent further escalation and demonstrate the brand's commitment to customer care.

Misinformation about products

Participants reported incidents of misinformation being shared about their products or services. These often involved users spreading incorrect details about product quality, pricing, or availability, which in turn misled other community members. For example, one participant with a Diploma in Marketing mentioned

“Sometimes customers post incorrect details about our items, which makes others hesitant to buy.” **(Participant 7)**

While another male participant with twelve years of experience in social media stated that

“We have to constantly clarify product specs because people share outdated or wrong information.” **(Participant 5)**

Some misinformation appeared to be unintentional, while others seemed to stem from dissatisfaction or misunderstanding. The spread of misinformation threatens brand reputation and customer trust. This finding points to the importance of timely fact-checking and active intervention by community managers. Addressing misinformation quickly and transparently is vital for preserving the integrity of the online space and ensuring customers make informed decisions. Participants reported receiving complaints and legal threats from community members, especially in cases where customers felt misled, ignored, or mistreated. While some threats were not serious, others required formal responses and legal consultation.

Trolls and spam posts have been difficult to control

The most common issues raised by participants were the persistence of trolls and spam posts across online platforms. One participant with 10 years in digital marketing noted,

“We spend a lot of time deleting spam and dealing with trolls, which takes away from focusing on actual customer queries.” **(Participant 1)**

This can be supported by participant nine, with ten years of experience in digital marketing, the participant stated that

“Even though we have moderators in place, it's really difficult to keep track of every single behaviour in the community.” **(Participant 9)**

This suggests that while online communities offer opportunities for engagement, the prevalence of unwanted content requires dedicated moderation strategies to maintain a productive environment. These unwanted interactions included irrelevant advertisements, offensive language, and deliberate attempts to disrupt constructive engagement within the online community. Despite moderation efforts, participants noted that such behaviours are difficult to monitor continuously, especially on large or multi-platform communities.

Summary of Theme 4

The findings indicate that managing online communities in retail settings presents multiple communication and moderation challenges. Delays in obtaining timely responses hinder swift decision-making and may frustrate members seeking support, while heated debates and disagreements with customers require careful handling to maintain a positive community atmosphere. The spread of misinformation about products further complicates community management, as it can negatively influence customer perceptions and trust. Additionally, the presence of trolls and spam posts diverts resources from meaningful engagement and threatens the overall quality of interactions. Collectively, these challenges highlight the need for structured moderation strategies, clear communication channels, and proactive content monitoring to ensure that online communities remain effective tools for enhancing customer relationships and supporting business objectives. Establishing a protocol for

dealing with complaints and threats can help businesses respond appropriately and reduce liability, as illustrated in Figure 4.4, which presents a hierarchy chart showing the codes that contributed to the development of the theme: *The most significant obstacles encountered while managing community platforms.*

What are the underlying causes of the challenges faced by retail businesses in managing online communities?

Also, as shown in Figure 4.5, the diagram of theme 5 and subthemes illustrates how key factors contribute to challenges of managing online communities.

4.4.3.1 Theme 5: Key factors contributing to the challenges of managing online communities

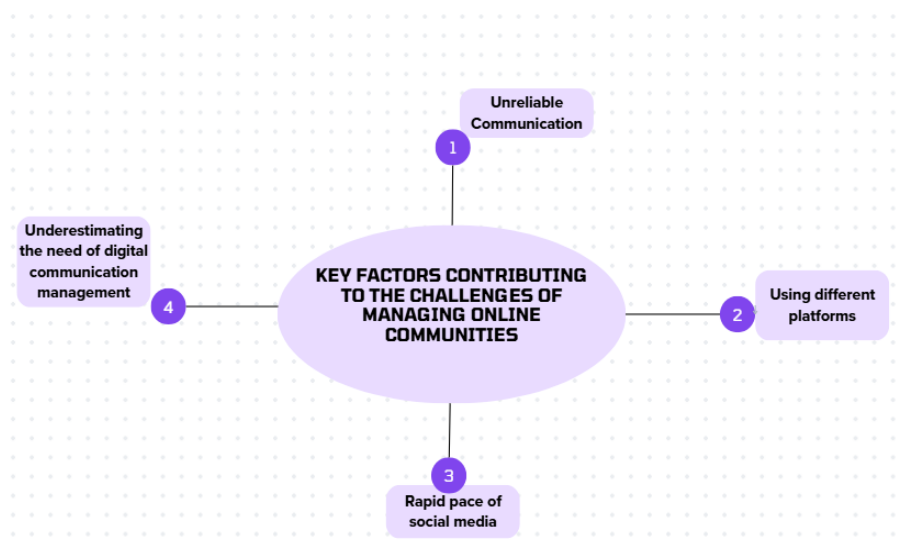


Figure 4.5: Diagram of theme 5 and sub-themes

Unreliable communication

A critical challenge identified was unreliable communication between the retail business and online community members. Respondents shared that technical issues, delays in responses, and misinterpretations due to poor message construction often resulted in communication breakdowns. One participant with ten years of experience as a brand manager noted

“Technical issues like system downtime make it hard to communicate with the community on time.” **(Participant 3)**

Participant eight, with a Diploma in Arts, supported these findings by stating that.

“In some cases, messages were not received or acknowledged, leading to frustration among online community members and missed engagement opportunities.” **(Participant 8)**

Using different platforms

One of the prominent findings was the challenge of using different platforms to manage online communities. Participants indicated that their organizations often maintain a presence on multiple social media and digital platforms, such as Facebook, Instagram, X, WhatsApp, and their own websites. Managing content, engagement, and communication across these diverse platforms can be overwhelming and inconsistent. One participant with Honours in Media Studies explained,

“We have to post the same thing on three or four different platforms, and sometimes the messaging doesn’t match up.” **(Participant 6)**

Another participant with a Bachelor of Arts added,

“It feels like duplication of work, and at times we miss engaging with customers properly.” **(Participant 3)**

This often leads to duplication of effort and disjointed messaging.

Rapid pace of social media

The study revealed that the fast-moving nature of social media presents significant challenges for retail businesses managing online communities. Participants indicated that content, trends, and customer interactions evolve quickly, making it difficult to respond promptly and maintain relevance. One participant with six years of experience as a social media specialist stated,

“By the time we prepare a response, the conversation has already moved on to something else.” **(Participant 7)**

Another participant with five years of experience in digital marketing added,

“Social media moves so fast that it’s hard to keep up with new trends and customer expectations.” **(Participant 2)**

This rapid pace often pressures community managers to allocate more time and resources to monitoring platforms continuously, which can lead to stress and inconsistent engagement if not managed effectively.

Underestimating the need for digital communication management

Retail businesses' funders and managers were found to underestimate the importance of digital communication management, treating it as an informal or secondary task. Participants explained that in many cases, there was no dedicated person or strategy in place to manage online interactions, which led to ad hoc and reactive communication efforts. One participant with seven years of experience in social media confirmed by stating that,

“We don’t really have someone responsible for handling customer comments online; it’s just whoever is available at the time.” **(Participant 4)**

Another participant with four years of experience in campaign analysis added,

“Management still thinks social media is just for marketing, not for serious engagement with customers.” **(Participant 6)**

This finding reveals a gap in recognizing the strategic value of digital communication in maintaining online communities.

Summary of Theme 5

The findings indicate that managing online communities in retail businesses is significantly influenced by communication and digital management challenges. Unreliable communication can delay responses and frustrate members, reducing engagement and trust. The use of multiple platforms adds complexity, often leading to inconsistent messaging, duplication of effort, and the need for careful coordination across channels. The rapid pace of social media further exacerbates these challenges, requiring businesses to respond quickly to trends and customer interactions to remain relevant. Additionally, underestimating the importance of structured digital communication management can leave organizations unprepared to handle these

demands, resulting in reduced effectiveness and potential reputational risks. Collectively, these interpretations highlight the critical need for deliberate planning, resource allocation, and strategic digital management to maintain meaningful engagement and support business objectives.

4.4.3.2 Theme 6: Strategies retail business utilizes to manage the challenges faced in online communities

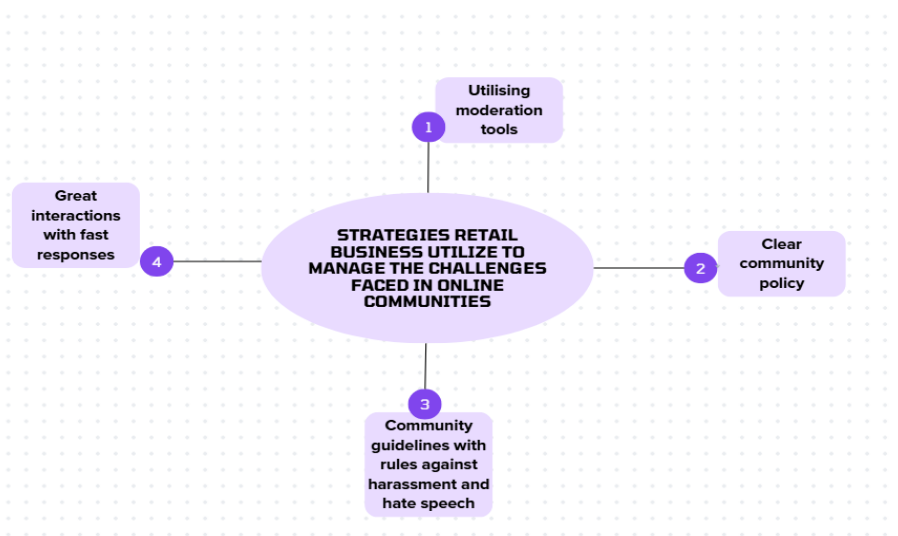


Figure 4.6: Diagram of theme 6 and sub-themes

Utilizing moderation tools

Participants reported that their organizations use moderation tools to maintain order and ensure respectful engagement within their online communities. These tools include automatic filters for inappropriate language, keyword blocking, and content reporting systems. One participant with a Diploma in Media Studies explained,

“The profanity filter helps us a lot because it removes offensive words before they even appear.” **(Participant 1)**

One participant with twelve years of experience in marketing confirmed by stating that,

“The reporting system makes it easier for staff members to flag issues so we can act quickly.” **(Participant 5)**

These features were seen as essential in reducing conflicts and creating a safer environment for interaction.

Clear community policy

Retail businesses adopted a clear community policy to guide member behaviour and expectations. These policies are often displayed publicly and outline the purpose of the community, acceptable conduct, and consequences of policy violations. One participant with seven years of experience in digital marketing explained,

“Our policy is pinned at the top of the group so everyone knows the rules before they start engaging.” **(Participant 4)**

This can also be supported by participant nine, who has ten years of experience in digital marketing. The participant stated that

“Having a clear policy makes it easier for us to moderate because we can refer back to it when someone misbehaves.” **(Participant 9)**

These policies were consistently seen as a vital tool for setting standards and managing interactions within the community.

Community guidelines with rules against harassment and hate speech

The findings indicate that community guidelines explicitly prohibiting harassment and hate speech are crucial in maintaining a safe and respectful online environment. Participants highlighted that clearly defined rules help set member expectations and provide moderators with a framework for taking action against inappropriate behaviour. One participant with ten years of experience in digital marketing noted,

“Having rules against hate speech makes it easier for us to act immediately when issues arise.” **(Participant 1)**

This can also be supported by participant eight, who has five years of experience in digital marketing as an administrator. The participant stated that,

“Members understand what is unacceptable, which reduces conflicts and keeps the community space positive.” **(Participant 8)**

These guidelines contribute to fostering trust, promoting constructive engagement, and protecting the community from toxic interactions.

Great interactions with fast responses

Participants highlighted that prompt responses within the community significantly enhance the quality of interactions. Quick engagement, typically within one to two hours, was noted as a key factor in maintaining active discussions and ensuring members feel heard and valued. One participant with six years of experience in social media noted,

“When we respond quickly, members are more likely to continue the conversation and engage positively.” **(Participant 7)**

This can also be supported by participant two, who has five years of experience in digital marketing,

“Fast responses show that we care about our customers, and it encourages them to participate more regularly.” **(Participant 2)**

These interactions were consistently seen as contributing to a dynamic, supportive, and engaged community environment.

Summary of Theme 6

The findings indicate that effective online community management relies on a combination of technological tools, clear policies, structured guidelines, and dedicated personnel. The use of moderation tools helps maintain a safe and respectful environment by addressing harmful content efficiently, while clear community policies and guidelines, particularly rules against harassment and hate speech, provide transparency and set expectations for member behaviour. Fast responses and great interactions contribute to member satisfaction, engagement, and trust, showing that timely communication is critical for fostering a positive community experience. Additionally, appointing a dedicated community coordinator ensures consistent oversight, accountability, and organization in managing interactions across the

community. Collectively, these strategies demonstrate that well-managed online communities require both robust systems and human oversight. By combining moderation tools, clear policies, structured guidelines, rapid engagement, and dedicated coordination, businesses can create a safe, engaging, and productive community environment that strengthens member trust, promotes sustained participation, and supports broader organizational objectives. Figure 4.6 illustrates the hierarchy chart showing the codes that contributed to the development of the theme: Strategies retail businesses utilize to manage the challenges faced in online communities.

4.4.3 What strategies do retail businesses use to address challenges associated with online communities?

In addition, as shown in Table 4.2, one theme is associated with the fourth research question stated above: The effectiveness of strategies to overcome challenges faced when managing online communities.

4.4.3.3 Theme 7: The effectiveness of strategies for overcoming challenges faced when managing online communities

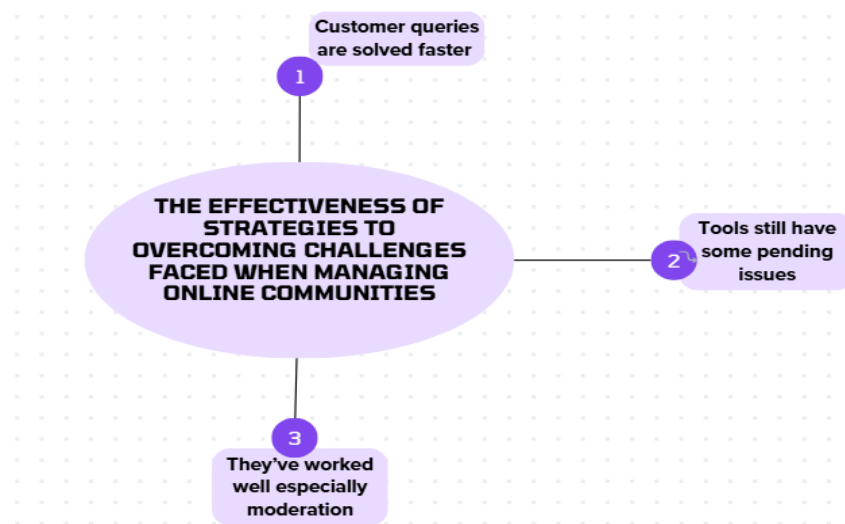


Figure 4.7: Diagram of theme 7 and sub-themes

Customer queries are solved faster

A positive finding was that community members' queries are solved faster due to the integration of support systems and proactive community management practices. One participant with ten years of experience in digital marketing,

“With our support systems in place, we can respond to most customer questions within hours, which keeps them happy and engaged.” **(Participant 9)**

One participant with twelve years of experience in digital marketing added,

“Quick responses prevent small issues from escalating into bigger complaints in the community.” **(Participant 5)**

Participants highlighted that rapid response times not only improve user satisfaction but also reduce the likelihood of negative sentiments spreading within the online community.

Tools still have some pending issues

Participants reported that although digital tools are widely used to manage their online communities, some tools still have pending issues. These issues include glitches in automated moderation, limitations in detecting nuanced harmful content, and occasional delays in content flagging or user reporting mechanisms. One participant with a Diploma in Media Studies stated,

“Sometimes the automated system misses harmful comments, and we only notice them when users report them.” **(Participant 1)**

“There are delays in notifications, so by the time we act, the conversation has already escalated.” **(Participant 6)**

They have worked well, especially the moderation

Despite some challenges, participants acknowledged that moderation tools have worked well in managing online communities. Female participant with a Bachelor of Arts stated,

“The automated filters for profanity and blocking abusive users have made our work much easier.” **(Participant 3)**

Another participant with five years of experience in social media added,

“Tools that highlight suspicious behaviour help us respond quickly before things escalate.” **(Participant 8)**

These tools have been particularly effective in maintaining order and ensuring that harmful content is addressed promptly, allowing community managers to focus on meaningful engagement rather than constant monitoring.

Summary of Theme 7

The findings suggest that digital tools in online community management play a crucial role in enhancing operational efficiency. Participants indicated that customer queries are resolved more quickly, demonstrating the effectiveness of these tools in supporting timely communication. However, some tools still have pending issues that require attention to optimize performance and prevent minor disruptions. Despite these challenges, moderation features, such as automated filters, blocking abusive users, and highlighting suspicious behaviour, have worked particularly well in maintaining a safe and respectful environment. Overall, the interpretation highlights that while digital tools significantly improve community management and customer engagement, ongoing refinement and maintenance are necessary to ensure maximum effectiveness and sustain positive interactions within online communities.

4.4.4 How can existing strategies be improved to enhance the management of online communities in retail businesses?

And lastly, as presented in Table 4.2, two themes are connected to the fifth research question stated above: 1) What improvements can be made to enhance the management of online communities in retail businesses, and 2) Strategies used to retain existing online members and attract new ones to grow the community.

4.4.5.1 Theme 8: What improvements can be made to enhance the management of online communities in retail businesses

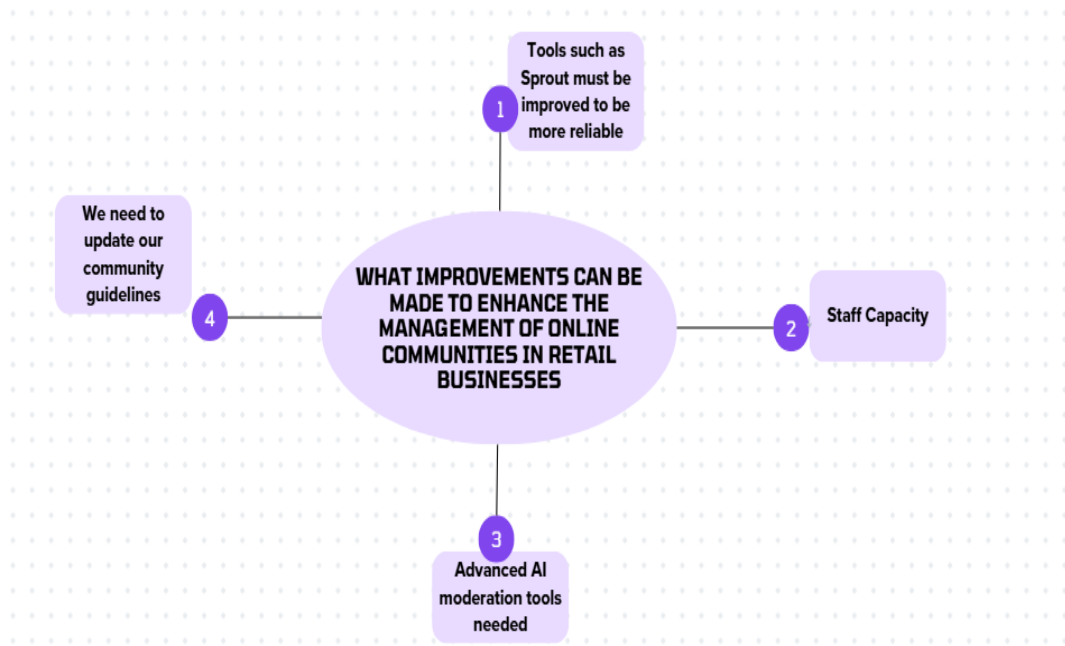


Figure 4 8: Diagram of theme 8 and sub-themes

Tools such as Sprout must be improved to be more reliable

Respondents highlighted the use of digital tools like Sprout, which supports content scheduling and engagement tracking. A female participant with a Diploma in marketing stated,

“Sprout helps us keep track of posts across different platforms, but sometimes it freezes and slows us down.” **(Participant 2)**

This can also be supported by participant seven, with six years of experience in social media. The participant added,

“The analytics are not always accurate, and we can’t fully rely on the data to make decisions.” **(Participant 7)**

Participant four with seven years of experience in social media also noted limited automation capabilities, by stating that,

“We still end up doing a lot of manual work that the system should handle.” **(Participant 4)**

These issues, system lags, inaccurate analytics, and insufficient automation, affect the efficiency of managing high volumes of content and interactions.

Staff capacity

The prominent theme was the issue of staff capacity. Participants reported that the current number of team members was insufficient to effectively manage the growing community demands. One participant with a Diploma of Arts stated,

“We simply don’t have enough staff to keep up with the number of queries and interactions every day.” **(Participant 4)**

Another participant with a Diploma of Arts added,

“It would really help to have multilingual managers, because not all our customers are comfortable engaging in English only.” **(Participant 8)**

This reflects the need for more resources and specialized roles to address diverse community needs.

Advanced AI moderation tools needed

The findings reveal that while existing moderation tools, such as profanity filters and blocking features, have been useful, participants emphasized the growing need for more advanced AI-driven moderation. Current tools often lack the sophistication to detect nuanced issues like sarcasm, cultural sensitivities, or subtle misinformation. One participant with Honours in Media Studies noted,

“Sometimes the system blocks obvious abuse, but it misses the more indirect, harmful comments.” **(Participant 5)**

Another participant with a Bachelor of Arts added,

“We need smarter tools that can adapt and learn from different contexts, not just keyword filters.” **(Participant 3)**

These insights highlight that businesses recognize the limitations of basic moderation systems and see value in AI tools that can provide real-time, context-aware responses.

Such tools would reduce manual intervention, ensure consistency, and create safer and more engaging online spaces for customers.

The need to update community guidelines

The findings indicate that some existing community guidelines are perceived as outdated and insufficient in addressing current challenges within online communities. Participants expressed that guidelines no longer reflect the evolving nature of customer engagement, new digital platforms, and emerging issues such as misinformation, trolling, and rapidly changing communication trends. One participant with ten years of experience in social media remarked,

“Our guidelines were written years ago, and they don’t cover the problems we are facing now.” **(Participant 1)**

Another participant with ten years of experience in digital marketing added,

“Members often don’t know what is acceptable or not because the rules are not clear enough.” **(Participant 9)**

This lack of clarity and relevance often leads to inconsistent enforcement, confusion among members, and increased pressure on moderators to handle issues on a case-by-case basis. The findings highlight that updating community guidelines is essential to ensure consistency, transparency, and fairness in community management while fostering a respectful and engaging environment that aligns with business objectives.

Summary of Theme 8

The findings suggest that effective online community management depends heavily on both reliable technological tools and adequate human resources. Tools such as Sprout were found to be useful, but in need of improvement, as system lags, inaccurate analytics, and limited automation hinder efficiency. Staff capacity also emerged as a concern, with participants highlighting that limited personnel reduces the ability to monitor and respond effectively to community interactions. The need for advanced AI moderation tools was emphasized as a way to reduce manual workload, enhance safety, and ensure faster response times. Furthermore, outdated community guidelines were noted as a barrier to consistency and clarity, as they no longer

adequately address modern challenges such as misinformation, trolling, and emerging digital behaviours. These sub-themes collectively highlight that sustainable online community management requires a balance between advanced, reliable digital tools, skilled and adequately resourced staff, and updated governance structures such as clear and relevant community guidelines. Without these elements working together, businesses risk inefficiency, weakened customer trust, and reputational damage, but with them, they can foster stronger engagement and long-term digital community success.

4.4.5.2 Theme 9: Strategies utilized to retain members and attract new ones to grow your online community

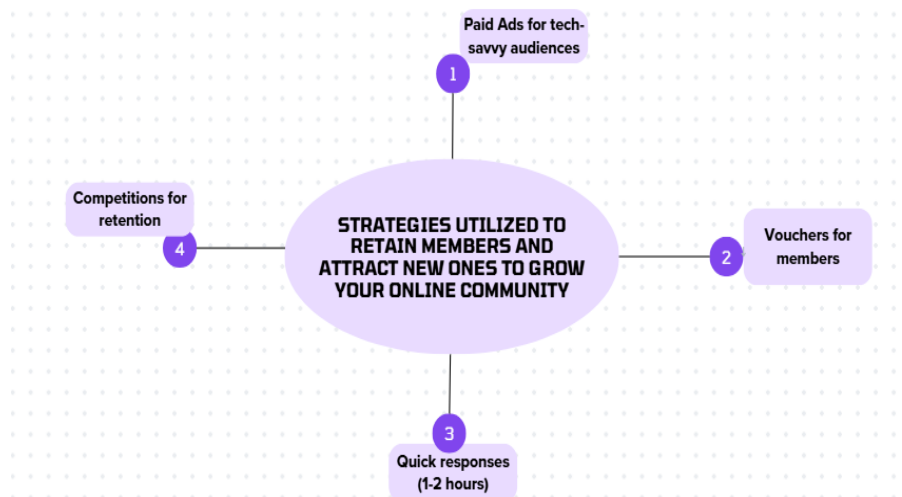


Figure 4 9: Diagram of theme 9 and sub-themes

Paid Ads for tech-savvy audiences

Participants revealed that their businesses use paid advertisements to target tech-savvy audiences, particularly on platforms where younger and digitally literate users are active. This can be supported by participant two, who has five years of experience in digital marketing. The participant stated that,

“We run ads on Instagram and X because that’s where the younger, more engaged customers are.” **(Participant 2)**

Another participant with a Diploma in Media Studies added,

“Paid ads help us reach people who are genuinely interested in our products, and they often end up joining our online groups.” **(Participant 1)**

These advertisements are designed to be visually engaging and algorithmically positioned to reach users with relevant interests, thereby expanding visibility and drawing in members who are likely to interact meaningfully. Participants further noted the implementation of targeted advertising strategies aimed not only at bringing in new users but also at retaining existing ones. These ads are based on user behaviour, preferences, and engagement history. The interpretation of this finding indicates that personalized marketing can significantly impact community growth. Targeted advertising ensures that content is relevant to both current and potential users, fostering a sense of belonging and increasing the chances of ongoing participation.

Vouchers for members

A notable strategy mentioned was the practice of giving vouchers to community members as incentives for engagement. Participants highlighted that these vouchers, often in the form of product discounts or special offers, were tied to participation in specific activities or milestones. One participant with four years of experience as a campaign analyst shared,

“When we give out vouchers for active participation, people are more excited to contribute.” **(Participant 6)**

Another participant with ten years of experience in digital marketing noted,

“Customers love the discount vouchers, it makes them feel appreciated and keeps them coming back.” **(Participant 9)**

This approach was consistently seen as an effective way of boosting interaction and rewarding loyalty.

Quick responses (1-2 hours)

Participants emphasized the importance of maintaining fast response times, with most aiming to respond to customer queries within one to two hours. Participant one with a Diploma in Media Studies stated,

“If we don’t reply quickly, customers lose patience and move to competitors.”
(Participant 1)

Participant three with a Bachelor of Arts added,

“We try to respond within an hour because people expect immediate feedback on social media.” **(Participant 3)**

This prompt engagement was consistently seen as critical for member satisfaction and sustaining active participation within the community.

Competitions for retention

It was also found that competitions are used as a method to retain existing community members. Retail businesses reported that activities such as giveaways, quizzes, and creative contests keep online community members engaged and invested in the brand. One participant with a Diploma of Arts remarked,

“Whenever we run a giveaway, the number of interactions on our page increases.”
(Participant 8)

Another participant with Honours in Media studies noted,

“Quizzes and small prizes keep members excited and coming back to participate.”
(Participant 5)

These activities were viewed as an effective way of sustaining interest and fostering stronger connections with the brand.

Summary of Theme 9

The findings highlight that businesses are increasingly adopting diverse strategies to enhance engagement and sustain participation in their online communities. Paid ads targeted at tech-savvy audiences enable businesses to reach a wider and more relevant customer base, strengthening visibility and brand positioning. Vouchers offered as incentives were found to boost motivation and satisfaction, as they create a sense of appreciation and encourage repeat participation. Quick responses within one to two hours were also emphasized as essential for building trust and reliability, ensuring members feel valued and supported. Furthermore, competitions were

identified as effective tools for retention, as they not only maintain active engagement but also foster excitement and community spirit. Taken together, these strategies suggest that a combination of targeted advertising, tangible rewards, timely communication, and interactive activities is key to sustaining strong online communities. Businesses that invest in such multifaceted approaches are more likely to enhance customer loyalty, foster long-term engagement, and align community participation with broader organizational goals.

4.5 Conclusion

Chapter 4 has presented and interpreted the results of this study. According to the study outcomes, the benefits of engaging with an online community in retail businesses include customer referrals, enhanced brand visibility, valuable feedback from the community, and increased sales. Also, the specific examples of how online communities contributed to businesses' growth and success comprise recommendations of products, improved sales, and an increase in sales via Facebook engagement. Further, the most challenges retail businesses encounter when managing online communities include spam, harassment, and trolls, losing valuable members, and limited digital literacy from customers can hinder engagement. While the most significant obstacles encountered while managing community platforms are trolls and spam posts, which have been difficult to control, misinformation about products, timely responses due to communication delays, and difficulties in managing heated debates with our customers. In addition, the key factors contributing to the challenges of managing online communities include using different platforms, unreliable communication, underestimating the need for digital communication management, and the rapid pace of social media. The strategies retail business utilises to manage challenges faced in online communities comprise great interactions with fast responses, clear community policy, utilising moderation tools, and community guidelines with rules against harassment and hate speech. The effectiveness of strategies to overcome challenges faced when managing online communities includes tools still having some pending issues, strategies working well, especially in moderation, and customers' queries being solved faster. The improvements that can be made to enhance the management of online communities in retail businesses comprise updating community guidelines, improving tools such as

Sprout to be more reliable, employing advanced AI moderation tools, and staff capacity building. And lastly, the strategies used to retain existing online members and attract new ones to grow the community include paid Ads for tech-savvy audiences, providing vouchers to members, quick response times of about 1-2 hours, and competitions for retention. Chapter 5 discusses the study outcomes with respect to the research objectives.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

5.1 Introduction

Chapter 5 presents the discussion of the findings made by the study, which explored strategies utilised for managing and sustaining online communities in retail businesses. The study was conducted in three retail businesses: Mr Price, Checkers, and Woolworths. This chapter discusses the findings from the mentioned retail businesses based on the study conducted. The chapter provides discussions of findings based on each research objective outlined in Chapter 1:

- a. To identify the current benefits of online communities to the retail businesses in South Africa.
- b. To determine the emerging challenges faced by retail businesses in managing online communities.
- c. To analyse the underlying causes of the challenges being faced by retail businesses in managing online communities.
- d. To critically examine the strategies used by retail businesses to manage challenges arising from online communities.
- e. To suggest improvements to existing strategies to enhance the management of online communities by retail businesses.

The subsequent sections present the discussion of the findings with respect to the research objectives. The discussions are supported by current literature on the subject, and then the chapter ends with a conclusion.

5.2 Discussion of the findings

The findings of this study are discussed based on the research objectives stated in Chapter 1. The findings (s) for each research objective is (are stated, analysed, and interpreted, accompanied by concise discussions supported with previous literature to address identified research gaps. This approach ensures that the findings remain aligned with the study's research objectives and questions to provide a coherent foundation for the subsequent discussion.

5.2.1 To identify the current benefits of online communities to the retail businesses in South Africa

The findings for the research objective were that:

- a. Retail businesses in South Africa benefit from online communities through increased sales.
- b. Retail businesses also benefit from online communities through stronger brand recognition and active member engagement.
- c. Retail businesses benefit from online communities through increased customer referrals and the collection of valuable member feedback.

According to the findings of this study, online communities make a strategic contribution to corporate success by enhancing sales performance, strengthening customer trust, increasing brand awareness, and providing real-time feedback. This is consistent with the findings of Oki and Uleanya (2021), who investigated factors influencing the adoption of online retail shopping in Buffalo City, South Africa. Their study confirms that online communities function not merely as platforms for interaction but as strategic tools that build customer confidence, encourage adoption, and ultimately drive sales (Sun, Zhong & Li, 2022).

The findings revealed that retail businesses benefit significantly from online communities through stronger brand recognition and active member engagement. When a retail business's brand is positively represented within an online community, it strengthens both its reputation and visibility. This aligns with the findings of Fourie (2021), who examined the effect of brand changes on the financial performance of eleven South African retailers. The study reveals that a strong and well-managed brand contributes to customer trust and loyalty, which in turn positively influences financial outcomes such as sales and profitability. Du Plessis (2017) demonstrated that cultivating a strong online brand presence within communities not only enhances consumer trust but also contributes to increased sales, thereby advancing the strategic objectives of retail management.

The findings of the study include customer referrals, as the findings indicate that community members often invite external individuals to join the community. New members frequently convert into online buyers or potential contacts for future purchases, thereby increasing sales. (Zhou *et al.*, 2022) Confirm the significant influence of customer referrals in boosting sales within online communities for retail stores. Their findings reveal how existing community members play an active role in expanding the customer base by inviting new participants, who often convert into

buyers (Chen, 2021; Cao, Chu, Hui, & Xu, 2021). This demonstrates that referrals are not only a social activity but also a strategic mechanism through which online communities drive customer acquisition and long-term business growth.

Retailers also benefit significantly from valuable customer feedback within online communities. For example, if a customer experiences a negative incident at a store, such as Checkers in the mall, they can share their concerns within the community. This provides an opportunity for the business to engage professionally with the customer, address the issue promptly, and implement improvements in its services. Wong and Chung (2023) confirm that active engagement within online retail brand communities strengthens consumer commitment and enhances interactions between businesses and customers. The study reveals that fostering meaningful engagement allows businesses to respond effectively to customer feedback, which not only resolves individual complaints but also increases customer loyalty and contributes to overall service quality (Nur'Kamisa & Novita, 2022). Therefore, online communities serve as a strategic mechanism for continuous service improvement and relationship building in retail environments (Son & Niehm, 2021).

In conclusion, the study highlighted that online communities play a strategic and multifaceted role in enhancing the performance of retail businesses in South Africa. The findings indicate that these communities contribute to increased sales, stronger brand recognition, and active customer engagement, which collectively strengthen business sustainability and competitiveness. Online communities act as dynamic spaces where customers not only purchase products but also share experiences, provide referrals, and offer valuable feedback that supports continuous service improvement.

5.2.2 To determine the emerging challenges faced by retail businesses in managing online communities

For this objective, two findings were made, namely:

- a. Retail businesses face challenges such as spam and online trolls when managing their online communities; and
- b. A challenge for retail businesses in dealing with communication barriers.

The major challenge identified in the management of online communities pertains to the disruptive presence of spam, harassment, and trolling behaviours. Such negative interactions undermine constructive dialogue, discourage member participation, and contribute to a hostile online environment. Consistent with the findings of Dineva and Breitsohl (2022), trolling activities have been shown to destabilize community dynamics, erode trust, and compel organizations to allocate substantial resources towards moderation and community management. This aligns with broader literature revealing that unmanaged disruptive behaviour fosters a toxic atmosphere that inhibits both active and peripheral members from sustained engagement within online brand communities. For instance, Dineva and Daunt (2023) noted that antisocial behaviours such as flaming, trolling, and cyberbullying are typically seen as destructive to a community and its users. Hossain, Quaddus, Akter, and Warren (2023) argue that trolling on social media has a profound impact on its victims, yet existing literature offers a limited understanding of the factors driving this behaviour. These insights underscore the critical need for effective moderation strategies to maintain a healthy and constructive community atmosphere.

Retail businesses also face challenges in managing heated debates among community members. Disagreements over product quality, pricing, or service experiences can escalate into arguments that disrupt the overall community environment. Jhaver, Zhang, Chen, Natarajan, Wang, and Zhang (2023) argue that when retail businesses are not moderated carefully, debates may alienate members and reduce participation, particularly among those who prefer a supportive and constructive space. Effective management requires trained moderators, clear community guidelines, and strategies to de-escalate conflicts while encouraging productive discussion (Dineva and Daunt, 2023). Conflicts among online community members create a complex interplay between information accuracy, responsiveness, and conflict management, and underscore the importance of proactive strategies, such as real-time monitoring, clear communication protocols, and trained moderation teams, to maintain a constructive and trustworthy online community (Schluger *et al.*, 2022; Seering, 2020)

In conclusion, the findings revealed that retail businesses encounter significant challenges in managing online communities, primarily due to disruptive behaviours such as spam, harassment, and trolling, as well as communication barriers among online community members. These issues not only hinder meaningful engagement but also weaken trust and participation within the community. Addressing challenges is therefore essential for maintaining a productive and trustworthy environment that supports the long-term success of online retail communities.

5.2.3 To analyse the underlying causes of the challenges being faced by retail businesses in managing online communities

In response to this objective, the study found that:

- a. The use of different online platforms, each with its own rules, features, and management requirements.
- b. Unreliable communication and the rapid pace at which social media evolves.
- c. Limited digital literacy among online members, which can hinder effective participation and engagement.

The use of different online platforms, each with its own rules, features, and management requirements.

The finding reveals that the use of different online platforms is one of the underlying causes of the challenges faced by retail businesses in managing online communities, aligning with existing literature revealing the complexities of multi-platform engagement. Zimba and Gasparyan (2021) argue that retail businesses struggle to present a cohesive brand image across various platforms, which can impact customer perception and sales. This study reveals that retail businesses increasingly engage customers across multiple digital platforms, including Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, TikTok, and X. While this multi-platform approach broadens reach and visibility, it introduces complexity in managing interactions consistently. Different platforms have distinct features, norms, and audience expectations, requiring tailored communication strategies (Kumar & Gupta, 2023). Research suggests that failure to adapt content and moderation practices for each platform can lead to inconsistent messaging, customer confusion, and reduced engagement (Gawer, 2022).

The findings also reveal that online communities are challenged by unreliable communication, which can result from technical issues, poor internet connectivity, or platform-specific limitations. Such unreliability disrupts the flow of information, delays responses, and diminishes trust between businesses and their customers. When communication is inconsistent, customers may perceive the brand as inattentive or unprofessional, which can negatively affect participation and loyalty in online communities (Wani, Agarwal, & Bours, 2020). The rapid pace of social media presents a continuous challenge for retailers. Trends, discussions, and viral content emerge and evolve quickly, requiring businesses to respond promptly to remain relevant. Slow reactions or missed opportunities can result in decreased engagement, negative publicity, or loss of competitive advantage. The dynamic nature of social media necessitates real-time monitoring, agile decision-making, and adaptive communication strategies to sustain community participation and brand credibility (Coleman, 2020).

Another critical barrier is limited digital literacy among customers. Some consumers lack the skills needed to fully engage with online platforms, interpret information, or navigate discussions effectively. This exclusion reduces the inclusivity of communities and limits their potential to build broad-based engagement. Zhang and Zhang (2024) reveal that digital literacy is a key determinant of customer experience in digital platforms, and low competence often restricts participation and loyalty. For retail businesses, this challenge underscores the need for customer education initiatives that empower all users to participate meaningfully. Based on South Africa's historical context, a large portion of the population has limited access to quality education, which contributes to low levels of digital literacy (Matli & Ngoepe, 2022). This presents a significant challenge for retail businesses seeking to engage customers through online communities. Research indicates that only 37% of households have access to a computer at home, revealing the disparity in digital access (Crawford International, 2025). Furthermore, the country's digital literacy levels are relatively low compared to international standards, with a substantial portion of the population lacking essential digital skills (GSMA, 2024).

In conclusion, the study found that the underlying causes of challenges faced by retail businesses in managing online communities stem from three key factors: the

complexity of using multiple digital platforms, unreliable communication, and limited digital literacy among customers. The management of several platforms with distinct rules and audiences makes it difficult for businesses to maintain consistent engagement and brand identity. Additionally, unreliable communication and the fast-paced evolution of social media hinder timely responses and reduce customer trust, requiring retailers to adopt agile and adaptive communication strategies. Limited digital literacy further compounds these challenges, as many consumers, particularly in South Africa, lack the technical skills necessary to fully engage in online communities.

5.2.4 To critically examine the strategies used by retail businesses to manage challenges arising from online communities

Regarding this objective, the findings demonstrated that:

- a. Retail businesses address online community challenges by implementing and enforcing clear community guidelines.
- b. Retail businesses address online community challenges by using moderation tools to monitor interactions.

The findings of this study reveal that the effective strategy for managing online communities is the regular updating of community guidelines to reflect emerging challenges and user behaviours. Clear, updated guidelines provide a framework for acceptable conduct and empower moderators to take consistent action against disruptive behaviours such as trolling, harassment, or misinformation (Schaffner *et al.*, 2024; Singhal *et al.*, 2023). According to Horta Ribeiro *et al.* (2025), transparent and regularly reviewed policies help establish trust, improve compliance, and create safer online environments that encourage meaningful engagement.

Retail businesses benefit from enhancing the reliability of digital tools like Sprout Social, which are designed to support social media management and monitoring. Reliable social media management tools, such as Sprout Social, streamline communication, automate content scheduling, and monitor engagement across multiple platforms, thereby minimizing inefficiencies and reducing delays in organisational response times (Chen, 2020). Gongane, Munot, and Anuse (2022) revealed that reliable technological support is central to maintaining customer

satisfaction and ensuring timely communication, both of which are crucial for sustaining online communities.

Another promising strategy is the use of AI-powered moderation tools, which can automatically detect and filter harmful content such as spam, offensive language, or misinformation. Ami (2021) argues that AI tools improve efficiency by handling repetitive monitoring tasks and enabling human moderators to focus on complex or sensitive issues. Research shows that AI moderation not only enhances scalability but also helps businesses manage large volumes of interactions while maintaining a safe and inclusive digital environment (Vidhya *et al.*, 2023). The study reveals that the use of moderation tools is also crucial in addressing community management challenges. Automated filters, keyword blockers, and reporting mechanisms allow businesses to manage spam, harassment, and other disruptive content more efficiently. By leveraging these tools, businesses reduce the burden on human moderators while ensuring that harmful interactions are minimized (Lim & Kim, 2025). Studies show that moderation tools not only improve efficiency but also contribute to building safer and more inclusive online spaces (Jhaver *et al.*, 2023).

In conclusion, the study found that retail businesses employ several strategic approaches to address the challenges associated with managing online communities, with a focus on establishing clear community guidelines and using advanced moderation tools. Regularly updating community guidelines ensures that rules remain relevant to evolving online behaviours and helps maintain a respectful and safe digital environment. Transparent and well-communicated policies foster trust and accountability among community members.

5.2.5 To suggest improvements to existing strategies to enhance the management of online communities by retail businesses

Findings related to this objective revealed that:

- a. Existing strategies can be enhanced by investing more in paid advertising to attract technologically literate audiences who are more likely to engage actively in online communities.

b. Retail businesses can improve community engagement by offering competitions and vouchers, incentivizing members to participate and remain active in online communities.

The findings of the study reveal that implementing targeted paid advertisements to reach tech-savvy audiences, offering vouchers to members, ensuring quick response times, and introducing competitions can enhance member retention. Huang and Depari (2021) argues that another way to strengthen online community growth is through paid advertisements targeting tech-savvy audiences. The study reveals that paid ads allow retail businesses to reach individuals who are already active online and more likely to engage with digital platforms. The study also reveals that tailoring advertisements to specific demographics, retail businesses can attract new members who contribute to meaningful discussions and community expansion. Existing literature suggests that targeted advertising increases visibility and engagement while driving traffic to online communities (Schwarz-Musch, Tauchhammer & Guetz, 2025).

The study also reveals that providing vouchers or discounts to existing community members is another effective strategy for enhancing both retention and participation. Bernardino, Freitas, and Oliveira (2021) argue that incentives create a sense of value for members, encouraging loyalty and repeat engagement. The study reveals that such an approach not only rewards active participants but also motivates less engaged members to interact more frequently. According to Xu and Hu (2022), reward-based strategies can significantly improve customer involvement in online communities, leading to higher satisfaction and stronger brand loyalty. Hosting competitions within online communities provides members with opportunities for engagement beyond routine discussions. Competitions not only increase activity levels but also foster a sense of fun and belonging among participants. Retailers can use contests to reward creativity, participation, or referrals, thereby sustaining engagement and strengthening loyalty. Studies indicate that gamification strategies, such as competitions, enhance user motivation and long-term participation in digital communities (Cheng & Zachry, 2020)

In conclusion, the study found that existing strategies for managing online communities in retail businesses can be significantly improved by adopting more

targeted, engaging, and incentive-based approaches. Investing in paid advertising aimed at technologically literate audiences enables retail businesses to attract members who are more likely to engage meaningfully and sustain participation in digital platforms. Additionally, the study revealed that offering vouchers and discounts strengthens member retention by rewarding active participation and fostering brand loyalty.

5.3 Limitations of the study

Research limitations refer to statements about the generalisability of the outcomes because of imperfection of the project (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Therefore, the researcher cannot issue supercilious claims about generalising the outcome of the research (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Because of differences in internet proliferation across countries, the inferences drawn from this small sample may not apply exactly to every company and in every country. Also, it was difficult to eliminate the reservation exercised by some participants in the course of these interviews.

5.4 Conclusion

Chapter 5 has discussed the study findings with respect to the research objectives. The discussions were supported by current literature on the topic. Chapter 6 presents the conclusions and recommendations from the study.

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 Introduction

Chapter 6 presents the conclusions and recommendations of this study. The aim of this study was to explore strategies utilised by retail businesses in managing and sustaining online communities within the digital retail environment. The ensuing were the research questions of the study:

- a. What are the benefits of utilising online communities for retail businesses in South Africa?
- b. What emerging challenges have retail businesses faced when managing online communities?
- c. What are the underlying causes of the challenges faced by retail businesses in managing online communities?
- d. What strategies do retail businesses use to address challenges associated with online communities?
- e. How can existing strategies be improved to enhance the management of online communities in retail businesses?

This subsequent segments cover an overview of the study, a summary of the findings, main conclusion, and contribution of the study, limitations of the study, and recommendations, suggestions for future research, and conclusion.

6.2 Overview of the study

This study consisted of six interrelated chapters each addressing specific area of the problem being addressed. Chapter 1 introduced the study by outlining the purpose, objectives, and research questions, and provided the contextual background for rationale and significant of the study. Chapter 2 presented a comprehensive literature review, discussing key concepts, theoretical frameworks, and previous studies related to online community management in retail businesses. Chapter 3 outlined the research methodology, detailing the research design, data collection methods, sampling techniques, and ethical considerations. Chapter 4 focused on data presentation and analysis, providing a detailed interpretation of the findings using tables and diagrams. Chapter 5 discussed the findings, comparing them with existing literature and highlighting their implications for businesses.

6.3 Summary of the findings and conclusions

The findings and conclusions of this study are presented according to each research question.

6.3.1 What are the benefits of utilizing online communities for retail businesses in South Africa?

For this question, the findings were that:

- 1) Retail businesses in South Africa benefit from online communities through increased sales.
- 2) Retail businesses also benefit from online communities through stronger brand recognition and active member engagement.

The study concluded that online communities provide significant benefits for retail businesses in South Africa by strengthening brand presence and driving sales through both direct and indirect means. For instance, a clothing retail business such as Mr Price with an active Facebook group may notice increased purchases when members share photos wearing the brand's products, tag the store, and discuss styling tips. This direct interaction not only encourages immediate sales among community members but also motivates their friends or followers to explore the brand. The study also concludes that online members often become brand advocates by inviting others to join the community. For example, a satisfied customer in an online community might add friends to access exclusive promotions or early product launches. Such organic growth expands the business's customer base at little or no extra cost. This process represents indirect marketing, where brand awareness spreads through word-of-mouth and peer-to-peer interaction rather than costly advertising campaigns.

6.3.2 What challenges do retail businesses face when managing online communities?

For this question, the findings were that:

- 1) Retail businesses face challenges such as spam and online trolls when managing their online communities.

The study concludes that the most pressing challenges faced by retail businesses are the presence of spam and online trolls, which disrupt meaningful interactions and

discourage genuine community engagement. For example, a retail store's Facebook group might be flooded with unrelated advertisements or offensive comments, causing legitimate customers to lose interest in participating. These issues not only reduce the quality of discussions but can also harm the business's credibility if left unmanaged, as potential customers may associate the negative tone of the community with the brand itself.

2) Another challenge for retail businesses is dealing with communication barriers and the technical complexity.

The study also concludes that a set of challenges arises from communication barriers and the technical complexity of managing multiple platforms. Retail businesses often struggle to ensure clear and respectful interactions among community members. For example, in an online community, members may post racist or homophobic remarks toward each other, which creates confusion, tension, and discourages meaningful participation from others. Overall, the study concludes that addressing communication barriers is essential for retail businesses to foster safe, inclusive, and effective online communities.

6.3.3 What are the underlying causes of the challenges faced by retail businesses in managing online communities?

Three findings were made with regard to this research question.

The first finding was the use of different online platforms, each with its own rules, features, and management requirements. For this finding, the study concludes that the challenges arise from the simultaneous use of multiple social media platforms. For example, a retail business may have a single administrator responsible for managing accounts on Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), TikTok, YouTube, and Instagram. This not only increases the workload but also fragments communication efforts, making it difficult to maintain consistent messaging, track member interactions, and respond promptly to inquiries. As a result, some online member questions or complaints may go unanswered on one platform while being addressed on another, creating gaps in engagement and reducing the overall effectiveness of community management strategies. Additionally, differences in audience behaviour and communication styles

across platforms, such as TikTok's preference for short-form, creative videos versus Facebook's longer posts and discussions, require businesses to adapt their content and interaction approaches for each platform, often with limited resources.

The second finding is that unreliable communication and the rapid pace at which social media evolves make it challenging for businesses to maintain consistent engagement and adapt their strategies effectively. It could be concluded that the underlying cause relates to unreliable communication and the rapid pace at which social media evolves. For example, a retail business managing a live Instagram shopping event may receive dozens of questions from online members within minutes, expecting responses almost immediately. When the retail business is unable to reply promptly due to limited staff or fragmented communication channels, member trust and engagement can quickly decline. The fast-changing nature of social media trends, technological updates, and shifting user preferences adds further complexity. For instance, a viral challenge on TikTok may require businesses to rapidly create content to remain visible and relevant, placing a strain on resources and planning. For example, the recent Maskandi song trend that went viral on TikTok pushed many local brands to quickly produce short videos and join the challenge to stay connected with their audiences. Together, these factors show that the challenges of managing online communities are not merely operational but are deeply rooted in the structural and technological dynamics of social media environments.

The third finding is the limited digital literacy among online members, which can hinder effective participation and engagement. For this finding, the study concludes that limited digital literacy among online community members represents a significant challenge for retail businesses seeking to foster meaningful engagement on social media platforms. Members with low levels of digital literacy may struggle to navigate community features, post content correctly, or respond to interactive elements such as polls, forums, or discussion threads. For example, a customer who is unfamiliar with Facebook group settings may not know how to comment on a product discussion or participate in a brand-hosted competition, leading to reduced interaction and engagement. Similarly, members who are unable to interpret or respond to automated prompts, chatbots, or digital feedback forms may experience frustration, which can discourage continued participation. This limitation not only affects the quantity and

quality of engagement within the community but also constrains the business's ability to leverage peer-to-peer interactions for marketing, trust-building, and customer retention. Addressing this challenge requires retail businesses to implement strategies such as user-friendly interfaces, digital literacy guidance, and supportive tutorials to ensure all members can participate effectively and confidently.

6.3.4 What strategies do retail businesses use to address challenges associated with online communities?

Two findings were made with regard to this research question.

The first finding was that retail businesses address online community challenges by implementing and enforcing clear community guidelines. For this finding, the study concludes that retail businesses adopt the creation of community guidelines that set clear expectations for behaviour and explicitly prohibit harassment, hate speech, or any form of disruptive activity. For example, Woolworths South Africa's online community includes rules that ban offensive language and require members to treat others with respect when commenting on posts. Similarly, by establishing these rules at the outset, retail businesses create a structured framework that discourages negative conduct and builds a sense of trust and safety among participants. Furthermore, having clear community policies ensures that both employees and community members understand the standards for interaction, making it easier to enforce the rules consistently. This consistency in moderation not only maintains order but also encourages members to engage positively, knowing that their contributions will be respected and protected.

The second finding is that retail businesses address online community challenges by using moderation tools to monitor interactions, remove inappropriate content, and maintain a positive environment. It could be concluded that the active moderation allows retail businesses to monitor discussions, remove inappropriate content, and address conflicts before they escalate. Previously, Woolworths' online community on Facebook relied on manual moderation, where community managers reviewed posts daily, deleted spam or offensive comments, and responded to customer complaints in real time. However, the company has since adopted automated moderation tools that

detect and flag harmful or misleading content, making the process faster and more consistent. Similarly, Mr Price also uses automated systems to maintain respectful and focused discussions. This proactive approach helps create a safe and engaging online space where members feel valued and heard, ultimately strengthening customer loyalty and participation.

6.3.5 How can existing strategies be improved to enhance the management of online communities in retail businesses?

For this question, the findings were that:

1) Existing strategies can be enhanced by investing more in paid advertising to attract technologically literate audiences who are more likely to engage actively in online communities.

The study concludes that paid advertising is a key strategy used to attract technologically literate audiences, but retail businesses need to invest more in refining and integrating these efforts. For example, Woolworths could use targeted paid ads to reach audiences specifically in Cape Town who have shown interest in sustainable fashion or premium grocery products. By combining these advertisements with data analytics, the company can ensure precise audience targeting, increasing engagement while maximizing the return on investment. Greater investment in such targeted campaigns would help retail businesses build a more engaged, responsive, and sustainable online community.

2) Retail businesses can improve community engagement by offering competitions and vouchers, incentivizing members to participate and remain active in online communities.

The study also concludes that competitions and vouchers can be leveraged to improve community engagement by incentivizing members to participate actively and remain involved in online communities. For example, retail businesses can design competitions that reward members not only for purchases but also for contributions such as posting reviews, sharing content, or helping other members. Similarly, vouchers can be personalized to recognize ongoing participation or community milestones, encouraging sustained interaction rather than one-off engagement. By strategically using these incentives, retail businesses can foster a more active, loyal,

and collaborative online community that supports long-term brand engagement and growth.

6.4 Main conclusion

From the findings made, the overall conclusion is that retail businesses face challenges such as limited digital literacy among community members, the presence of trolls and spam, and the complexity of managing multiple platforms. Despite these issues, businesses employ strategies to sustain and grow their online communities, including targeted advertising, rapid response times of one to two hours, and competitions to promote retention. This study concludes that managing online communities in South African retail is not a one-size-fits-all endeavour but a dynamic process. The OCLCM provides a vital lens, revealing that strategies must evolve from proactive seeding in inception to empowered stewardship in maturity, all while contending with locally specific barriers like digital literacy

6.5 Contribution of the Study

The study contributes to the retail sector by highlighting insights to South African retail businesses on the challenges associated with managing online communities and offering guidance on strategies to effectively address those challenges. Retail businesses stand to benefit from the feedback that will be provided in this research, as the findings can guide them in investing more strategically in engagement practices that drive sales growth. The interview process further served as a valuable exercise in self-evaluation for the participating businesses, allowing them to reflect on their current online community management approaches. Overall, the strategies identified in this study can be applied to strengthen online community engagement and improve business performance. The study suggests possible solutions by finding workable strategies, and it highlights possible solutions that can guide retailers to improve community management practices, foster stronger customer engagement, and enhance long-term brand loyalty and sales performance. In addition, this study adds to the literature on digital retail by applying the OCLCM in a developing economy. It extends the model by stressing digital literacy as a key cross-stage mitigation factor.

6.6 Limitations identified during data analysis

The study is subject to certain limitations that warrant acknowledgment. One key limitation concerns the scarcity of existing literature on online community management within the South African retail sector. Most prior studies have been conducted in developed countries, which limits the availability of contextualised theoretical and empirical evidence to support local analysis. This gap in the literature may constrain the generalisability of the findings to broader contexts beyond South Africa. Furthermore, limited access to senior-level participants with extensive experience in managing online communities may have reduced the depth of strategic insights obtained.

6.7 Recommendations

On account of the study outcomes, the following are recommendations on managing and sustaining online communities within the digital retail environment: Continually promote great interactions with fast responses to manage online communities more efficiently. This can be accomplished through clear community policy and guidelines, and also through quick response times of about 1 to 2 hours. Ensure to put in place sufficient moderation and moderation tools, such as advanced AI tools, to facilitate moderation in dealing with harassment and hate speech, which are often rife in online communities. Continually update community guidelines and also improve tools such as Sprout to be more reliable. Promote capacity building, such as staff capacity building, to deal with issues peculiar to online communities. Implement paid Ads for tech-savvy audiences and provide vouchers to members, and also organise competitions for retention to attract new members and retain old members. Because the data showed that moderation issues increase throughout the growth phase (establishment), businesses should invest in scalable AI moderation capabilities at this point to ensure community health.

6.8 Suggestions for future Research

Building upon the limitations identified in this study, several recommendations are proposed for future research. First, scholars should address the scarcity of South African literature on online community management by conducting more context-specific studies that reflect local business environments. Future research should also include participants from diverse sectors beyond retail to enhance the generalisability

of findings. In addition, involving senior managers or executives could provide deeper insights into strategic decision-making processes for sustaining online communities.

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APENDICES

Appendix A: Ethical Clearance from Rhodes University

The appendix includes the provisional ethics approval letter issued by the Rhodes University Human Research Ethics Committee (RU-HREC). This letter confirms that the submitted research proposal has been reviewed by the committee and has been provisionally approved pending gatekeeper permission. The inclusion of this document serves as evidence that the study complies with the university's ethical standards for conducting research involving human participants and that final approval will be granted upon receipt of the necessary gatekeeper authorization.

2 May 2025

Mr Gcinamina Humphrey Mqadi, .

Email: gcinamina@gmail.com

Review Reference: 2025-8318-9732

Dear Mr Gcinamina Humphrey Mqadi

Re: Exploring strategies utilised for managing and sustaining online communities in a retail business environment.

Researcher: Mr Gcinamina Humphrey Mqadi

Supervisor(s): Dr Moses Moyo

This letter confirms that the above research proposal has been reviewed by the Rhodes University Human Research Ethics Committee (RU-HREC) and **PROVISIONALLY APPROVED PENDING GATEKEEPER PERMISSION.**

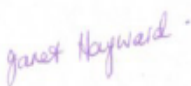
Gatekeeper permission is required from the managers of Woolworths (Longmarket St, Cape Town), Mr Price (Masabalala Yengwa Ave, Durban) and Checkers (Brackenfell, Western Cape).

Once the Gatekeeper permission letter/s has been received please forward it to the Ethics Coordinator, to finalise your ethics approval.

If your study also involves participants who do not need gatekeeper permission because they are participating in their individual capacity, and you would like to commence data collection with these participants, you may apply to the committee for Partial Approval to do so. Email your request to ethics-committee@ru.ac.za.

PLEASE NOTE THAT PROVISIONAL APPROVAL DOES NOT ALLOW YOU TO COMMENCE DATA COLLECTION: YOU MUST OBTAIN FULL OR PARTIAL ETHICS CLEARANCE BEFORE INTERACTING WITH ANY HUMAN PARTICIPANTS.

Sincerely,



Dr Janet Hayward

Chair: Rhodes University Human Research Ethics Committee (RU-HREC)

Appendix B: Participant Consent Form

The appendix contains the gatekeeper permission letters required to conduct the research at the selected retail stores. Permission was granted from the managers of Woolworths (Longmarket Street, Cape Town), Mr Price (Masabalala Yengwa Avenue, Durban), and Checkers/Shoprite (Brackenfell, Western Cape). These three letters grant the researcher authorization to collect data within the respective retail environments and ensure that the study complies with institutional and organizational research protocols.

Letter from Mr Price



A Division of Mr Price Group Limited
Upper Level, North Concourse, 65 Masabalala Yengwa Avenue, Durban, 4001
T: +27 310 8038 F: +27 31 304 3058 Private Bag 204, Small Parade, 4074, South Africa www.mrp.com
Registration Number 9233/0044 18/05 Incorporated in the Republic of South Africa

Date: 16/05/2025

Subject: Authorization for Research Data Collection and Staff Interviews

Dear: Gcinamina Humphrey Mqadi

This letter confirms that Mr Price Group grants you permission to conduct research within our store as part of your academic study titled "Exploring Strategies Utilised for Managing and Sustaining Online Communities in a Retail Business Environment."

We acknowledge the importance of this research in understanding and enhancing online community management within the retail sector. As part of this agreement, you are authorized to conduct interviews with selected staff members.

Please note the following conditions apply to this authorization:

1. **Confidentiality:** All collected data must be kept confidential and used solely for academic purposes.
2. **Anonymity:** The identities of our staff members and the retail store should remain anonymous in the final report unless explicit consent is provided.

We appreciate your interest in including our store in your study and wish you success in your academic journey. For any further support or clarification, please feel free to reach out to us.

Best Regards,

Thapido Yeni
Manager
+27 31 310 8000

Letter from Woolworths



WOOLWORTHS

Date: 14/05/2025

Subject: Authorization for Research Data Collection and Staff Interviews

Dear Gcinamina Humphrey Mqadi

This letter serves to confirm that Woolworths grants you permission to conduct research involving our store, in line with your study titled "Exploring Strategies Utilised for Managing and Sustaining Online Communities in a Retail Business Environment."

We understand that the research will involve conducting interviews with selected staff members. We acknowledge the importance of this research in contributing to the understanding and improvement of online community management within the retail sector.

Please note that the following conditions apply to this authorization:

1. **Anonymity:** The identity of our staff members and the retail store should remain anonymous in the final report, unless explicit consent is provided.
2. **Professional Conduct:** The interviews should be conducted professionally, without disrupting the normal business operations of the store.

We appreciate your interest in including our store as part of your study and wish you the best of luck in your academic pursuits. Should you require any further support or clarification, please feel free to reach out to us.

Best Regards,

Mrs Azzah Awaldien
Social Media Manager
+27 21 407 9111

Letter from Shoprite



Date: 12/05/2023

Permission to Conduct Academic Research at Shoprite Checkers SA

Dear Gcinamina Humphrey Mqadi,

On behalf of Shoprite Checkers SA, we are pleased to grant you permission to conduct your academic research titled *"Exploring Strategies Utilised for Managing and Sustaining Online Communities in a Retail Business Environment"* within our premises.

Limitations and Conditions:

While we support your academic endeavour, please be advised of the following limitations and conditions under which your research can be conducted within our retail environment:

1. **Confidentiality and Data Protection:** All information collected must be treated as confidential and used solely for academic purposes. Any data involving our customers, staff, or business operations must be anonymized to ensure privacy and comply with data protection regulations.
2. **Brand Representation:** Any mention of our store in publications or presentations should be pre-approved to ensure accurate representation.

We trust that you will adhere to these conditions and conduct your research ethically and professionally.

We wish you all the best in your academic pursuits and look forward to supporting your research.

Yours sincerely,

Mpho Sabela
Shoprite Checkers SA
+27 (0)21 980 4000



REGISTERED OFFICE: 04R WILLIAM DABBS STREET & OLD PAARL ROAD, PO BOX 216, BRACKENFELL, 7961, SOUTH AFRICA
TEL: +27 (0) 21 980-4000 FAX: +27 (0) 21 980-4050 www.shopriteholdings.co.za

DIRECTORS: P. CEMOELBRECHT (CEO), J. V. R. BRONKHORST, A. DE BRUYN, P. O. O. P. RIEZ, S. FRITZ, A. B. GARDENER, B. HARRISONER,
W. J. H. NEL, R. M. MOOUMANI, N. L. SCHREUDER, Z. A. SIBINA, P. B. VAN DER MERWE

Registered Credit Provider - Reg. no. CP192

Registered Financial Services Provider - Reg. no. 1132

Appendix C: Interview Guide

The following appendix covered the research questions that guided this study. These questions were developed in alignment with the study's aim and objectives, and they served as the foundation for the data collection and analysis processes.

Data Collection Instrument: Exploring Strategies for Managing and Sustaining Online Communities in a Retail Business Environment

1. Section A: Demographic Information

- a) Name of Business :
- b) Position in the Business:
- c) Years of Experience in Managing Online Communities:
- d) Gender:
- e) Age:
- f) Education Level:

2. Section B: Benefits of Online Communities (Objective A)

- a) What do you consider to be the key benefits your retail business gains from engaging with online communities, and how have they impacted your overall success?

Answer:

- b) Can you share specific examples of how online communities have directly contributed to your business's growth and success?

Answer:

3. Section C: Challenges in Managing Online Communities (Objective B & C)

- a) What are the biggest challenges your business encounters when managing online communities?

Answer:

- b) What are the most significant obstacles you've encountered while managing community platforms?

Answer:

- c) What do you think are the key factors driving these challenges?

Answer: Not providing clear information to our community members about certain products may lead to these challenges.

4. Section D: Strategies for Managing Challenges (Objective D)

- a) What strategies does your retail business currently use to manage the challenges faced in online communities?

Answer:

- b) How effective have these strategies been in overcoming challenges with online communities?

Answer: They are effective depending on the type of community you have, they are handling the situation but they are not getting rid of it.

5. Section E: Suggested Improvements to Existing Strategies (Objective E)

- a) In your opinion, what improvements can be made to enhance the management of online communities in businesses?

Answer:

6. Section F: Online Community Life Cycle Model Alignment (Briefly explanation of CLCM)

- a) What strategies do you use to retain members and attract new ones to grow your online community?

Answer:

- 7. Closing Statement:** Thank you for your participation. Your insights are valuable in understanding and improving online community management in retail businesses.

Appendix D: Sample of Interview Transcripts

The appendix below provides a sample of the interview transcripts used in this study. This sample illustrates the structure of the interviews, the nature of the questions posed, and the manner in which participants' responses were recorded for analysis.

Data Collection Instrument: Exploring Strategies for Managing and Sustaining Online Communities in a Retail Business Environment

1. Section A: Demographic Information

- a) Name of Business : Mr Price
- b) Position in the Business: Operations Director
- c) Years of Experience in Managing Online Communities: 2 years
- d) Gender: Male
- e) Age: 42
- f) Education Level: Degree

2. Section B: Benefits of Online Communities (Objective A)

- a) What do you consider to be the key benefits your retail business gains from engaging with online communities, and how have they impacted your overall success?

Answer: Our online community helps us understand local preferences and promote in-store events.

- b) Can you share specific examples of how online communities have directly contributed to your business's growth and success?

Answer: We once used a Facebook page to drive awareness of a new branch, which increased opening week foot traffic by 40%.

3. Section C: Challenges in Managing Online Communities (Objective B & C)

- a) What are the biggest challenges your business encounters when managing online communities?

Answer: Limited digital literacy among some of our customers can hinder engagement.

- b) What are the most significant obstacles you've encountered while managing community platforms?

Answer: Getting timely responses from the business side due to internal communication delays.

- c) What do you think are the key factors driving these challenges?

Answer: Staff capacity and underestimating the need for digital community management.

4. Section D: Strategies for Managing Challenges (Objective D)

- a) What strategies does your retail business currently use to manage the challenges faced in online communities?

Answer: We appointed a community coordinator and integrated our CRM with Facebook and WhatsApp for faster replies.

- b) How effective have these strategies been in overcoming challenges with online communities?

Answer: Engagement has improved by 30% and customer queries are resolved quicker.

5. Section E: Suggested Improvements to Existing Strategies (Objective E)

- a) In your opinion, what improvements can be made to enhance the management of online communities in businesses?

Answer: Hire multilingual community managers to increase inclusivity and communication quality

6. Section F: Online Community Life Cycle Model Alignment (Briefly explanation of CLCM)

- a) What strategies do you use to retain members and attract new ones to grow your online community?

Answer: Loyalty points, customer feature stories, and competitions help retain users, while promotions attract new members through shares.

- 7. Closing Statement:** Thank you for your participation. Your insights are valuable in understanding and improving online community management in retail businesses.

Appendix E: Certificate from editor

01 December 2025

RE: LANGUAGE EDITING STATEMENT

I, the undersigned, hereby confirm that I have edited a research report titled: **EXPLORING STRATEGIES UTILISED FOR MANAGING AND SUSTAINING ONLINE COMMUNITIES IN A RETAIL BUSINESS ENVIRONMENT** by Gcinamina Humphrey Mqadi, student number: 24M3966, for the Master of Commerce (Information Systems)

Yours faithfully,



Ramatshekgisa Malebo Gratitude

Associate member

Membership number: RAM006

0760 288 485

gratitudemalebo@gmail.com

Appendix F: Turnitin Digital Receipt



Digital Receipt

This receipt acknowledges that Turnitin received your paper. Below you will find the receipt information regarding your submission.

The first page of your submissions is displayed below.

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Assignment title: Plagiarism Checkers Part 1 (Moodle TT)
Submission title: Masters in IS
File name: 71555_gcinamina_mqadi_Masters_in_IS_553663_104425274.pdf
File size: 1.87M
Page count: 140
Word count: 34,911
Character count: 221,649
Submission date: 04-Dec-2025 12:11AM (UTC+0200)
Submission ID: 2834756650



Appendix G: Recent Turnitin Similarity Report

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