

# Value perceptions in online customer communities: Its influence on affective social identity and member behavioural response

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## ABSTRACT

Developments in information technology have resulted in the internet becoming a hub of not only personal but also commerce-related social interactions. Drawing on the Uses and Gratification theory, this study examines value derived from online customer communities and its influence on members' behavioural response. A structured questionnaire was used to collect data from a total of 221 members of independent online customer communities. Convenience sampling was used to select respondents and the collected data was analysed using structural equation modelling. The results show that respondents derived intellectual, social and hedonic value from their online customer communities though in moderate level. Affective social identity as well as communication performance were found to be significantly influenced by intellectual value and hedonic value. Social value was, however, not found to have significant influence on both affective social identity and communication performance. The results further show that affective social identity exerts significant influence on communication performance and on continued participation intentions. The findings of this study contribute to theory by demonstrating the utility of the Uses and Gratification theory in understanding value derived from online customer communities and its affective and behavioural bearing on members. The findings also have significant practical implications as they can be used by managers of online customer communities to harness practices that can improve perceived value associated with their communities. In so doing, the sustainability of their communities can be enhanced.

**Keywords:** Online customer communities; perceived value; affective social identity; communication performance; participation continuance intention; uses and gratification theory

The proliferation of internet access as well as online social networking platforms has facilitated the transformation of the internet to become the new marketplace, where interaction among and between buyers and sellers is ever-increasing. Seraj (2012:209) observes that just as, for thousands of years, the traditional marketplace served as “an interactive platform for both economic and social activity as well as knowledge sharing”, so too does the internet

serve this purpose in the modern age. Many companies, and in some cases customers on their own, have taken keen interest in facilitating customer interaction using online platforms resulting in the formation of online customer communities. Rouse (2014:Online) notes that online customer communities serve as web-based gathering places for customers, experts, partners and others to engage with one another around company products and services.

Growing interest on the part of companies in facilitating the formation of customer communities and customer-to-customer interaction on community sites stems not only from developments in technological capability but also from the perceived benefits of such interaction. Driven by the knowledge economy, many organisations have realised that knowledge is a valuable key to competitive advantage. Online customer-to-customer interaction can facilitate market intelligence generation for effective marketing decision-making (Chiu, Chiu, Sung & Hsieh, 2015a:477). Companies can also use customer communities to foster emotional connections with their brands. To consumers, online customer communities enable their voices to become important in the marketplace. Online customer communities provide opportunities to share experiences and opinions regarding a company's products and services rapidly, with ease and at very low cost. The anonymity that online communities can offer, especially independent communities, enables customers to complain about poor services received without fear that their opinions will be attached to their company database profiles (Rouse 2014:Online).

Underlying the perceived benefits of online customer communities is the supposition that established sites will be successful in attracting and sustaining membership that is willing to share information. Active participation through information sharing is thus important to unleashing the potential of online customer communities as sources of market intelligence both for companies and customers (Hajli, Shanmugam, Powell & Love 2015:232). While this is so, due to limited research focused on online customer communities, not much is known about factors that influence the active participation of members of such communities (Pai and Tsai, 2016:39). The sustainability of online customer communities is not assured without continued active participation on the part of its members (Al-Debei, Al-Lozi & Papazafeiropoulou 2013:43).

Drawing on Uses and Gratification

theory, this paper aims to contribute to an understanding of some of the factors that may explain member behaviour in online customer communities, including continued participation intentions. The focus of the paper is on gratifications obtained, as encapsulated in the perceived value associated with online customer communities, and the impact this has on members' behaviour. The paper is structured such that the following section outlines the research problem and objectives. This is followed by a review of the literature and presentation of the conceptual model deployed. Thereafter, the study's research methodology is described followed by presentation of the results obtained. Following that, the results are discussed and their implications outlined. Finally, the study's limitations are outlined and suggestions for future research provided.

## RESEARCH PROBLEM AND OBJECTIVES

Huang, Hsieh and Wu (2014:774) observe that as much as use of online communities is increasing, many online communities do not succeed and are consequently abandoned. The fact that the success of online communities depends largely on member participation (Chiang 2013:851) makes it imperative that researchers and companies address the question as to what drives active participation in online customer communities. Answering this question is critical, particularly as participation on such sites is voluntary. This study aims to contribute to addressing this question in the context of non-company hosted online customer communities. Review of the literature shows that while online sharing of information has increased, empirical research focusing on why and how information sharing takes place remains limited (Malik, Dhir & Nieminen, 2016:130).

In addressing the question of what drives active participation in the context of independent online customer communities, this study takes cognisance of the importance of behaviour as it relates not only to continued participation but also to quality of participation. Drawing on the

Uses and Gratification theory, the paper argues for the need to examine the value derived from online customer communities to understand members' participation behaviour. With online customer communities being social groupings, the study further argues for the need to examine the extent to which members identify with their online communities in explaining participation. To this end, the study includes affective social identity as one of its key constructs. The study posits that perceived value in online customer communities has a direct influence on the extent to which members identify affectively with their communities, and that this in turn influences members' continued participation intentions and communication behaviour. The paper also posits that communication behaviour is directly influenced by levels of perceived value.

The main objective of the study is thus to examine the influence of perceived value on member participation in online customer communities. The specific objectives of the study are to:

- uncover levels of perceived value derived from online customer communities;
- investigate the influence of perceived value on online customer community members' level of affective social identity with their respective communities;
- investigate the influence of perceived value on communication performance by members of online customer communities;
- examine the relationship between affective social identity and members' communication performance as well as their continued participation intentions; and
- propose and test a conceptual model of the relationship between perceived value, affective social identity, communication performance and continued participation intentions.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### *Uses and Gratification theory*

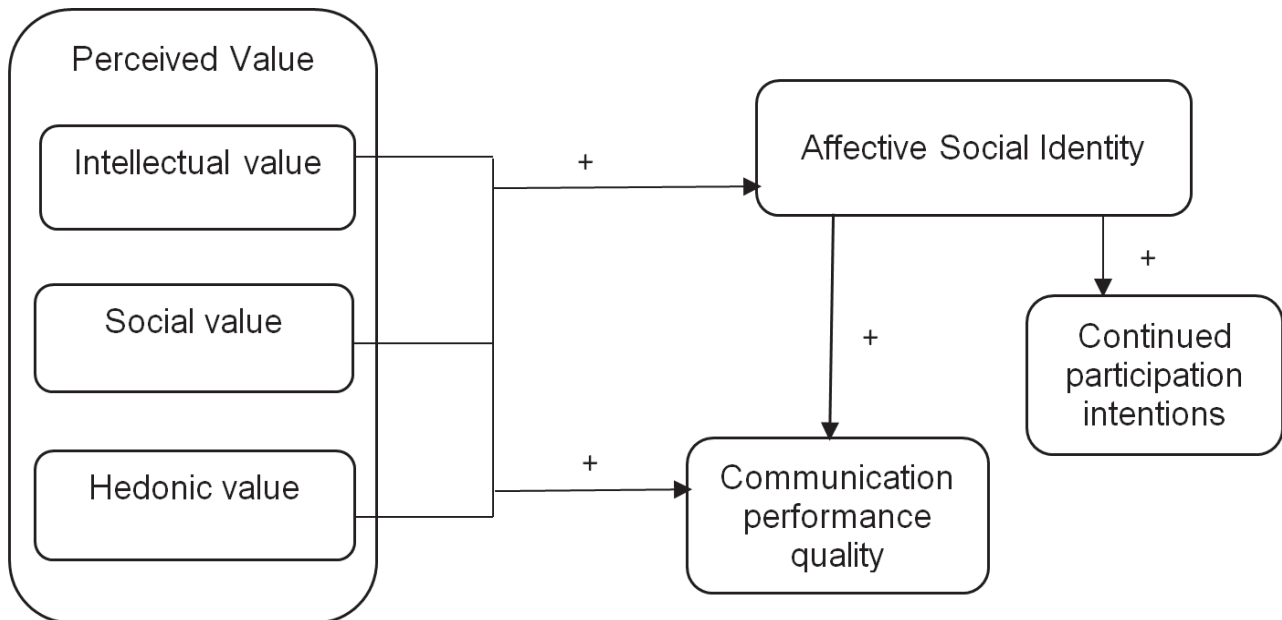
Uses and Gratification theory is a dominant theory in the field of communication studies. The history of the theory can be traced to the

research work of Herta Herzog in 1944 which examined the reasons behind people's choice of media (Sherwood 2015:13). Her work identified three main categories of gratification associated with media consumption, namely: emotional, wishful thinking and learning (Sherwood 2015:13). The theory is based on certain key underlying assumptions. These include the fact that people make active choices in selecting media to use; are aware of their needs; that their choices are goal-oriented with respect to their needs; and that value judgments as to whether a need has been satisfied can best be made by media consumers themselves (Han, Min & Lee 2015:460).

The Uses and Gratification theory has been widely applied to explain consumers' choices regarding various traditional media, including newspapers, radio, television and magazines (Ifinedo, 2016:195). Recently, the theory has been applied to the question of consumer choice relating to new media and, specifically, internet-enabled applications. Lev-On (2015:163) observes that the widespread adoption of the internet has led to renewed interest in the Uses and Gratification theory. This is due to the fact that, unlike traditional media, which one can easily get exposed to without consent, use of the internet requires active decision-making regarding which sites to visit and/or which items to read. Users are thus purposive and conscious in their selection of sites to engage with and this is in line with the underlying assumptions of the Uses and Gratification theory.

While a number of studies have applied the Uses and Gratification theory to investigate media choice, including choice of internet-enabled applications, Luo and Remus (2014:282) observe that studies using the theory have focused primarily on identifying the motivations behind media choice and/or use. This has resulted in lists of gratifications sought, without exploring gratifications derived and/or empirically exploring the relationship between gratifications derived and consumer behaviour. The theory can, however, be useful in understanding attitude and behaviour as

**FIGURE 1:  
HYPOTHESES RESULTS AND PATH COEFFICIENTS**



the gratification of needs does have positive attitudinal and behavioural effects (Quan-Haase & Young 2010:352). Accordingly, this study applies the Uses and Gratification theory to uncover gratifications derived, as evident in the perceived value associated with online customer communities, and the influence of these on members' affective and behavioural responses. Drawing on the Uses and Gratification theory, the study specifically proposes a conceptual model that can be used to explain the influence of value derived from online customer communities on members' levels of affective social identity with their communities and their behavioural responses in terms of communication behaviour and continued participation intentions.

### ***Proposed conceptual model***

Figure 1 presents the study's proposed conceptual model. The model suggests that perceived value positively influences affective social identity and communication behaviour. It further indicates that affective social identity has a direct positive influence on both communication behaviour and continued participation intentions.

### ***Value in online customer communities***

Research on customer value points to the fact that customers derive two main types of value in their consumption activities, namely utilitarian value and hedonic value. This study adopts this perspective in examining the perceived value derived from online customer communities. Utilitarian value is inherent to the consumption of an item, and has to do with the effectiveness of the consumption item and is thus concerned with the primary benefits of consumption of the item (Bilgihan, Kandampully & Zhang, 2016:108). The literature shows that the primary reason that online communities exist is to facilitate information sharing (Hajli, Sims, Featherman & Love 2015:239). In addition, just as membership of traditional communities accords one opportunities for social interaction and support, online communities also serve as a source of social support (Cheon, Choi, Kim & Kwak, 2015:32). Similarly, Lev-On (2015:165) argues that while social media generates different kinds of uses and gratifications, these are primarily social and cognitive. Cognitive aspects pertain to knowledge-growth and include the amount and quality of information available as these have a direct effect on the

level of knowledge acquisition within social media networks. Gan and Wang (2015:354) remark that information content is of interest to users of social media because they expect to benefit from information shared on such platforms. In line with the assertion made by Lev-On (2015:165), that gratifications within social media are primarily cognitive and social, this study locates utilitarian value in the levels of intellectual and social value that members perceive as arising from participation in the online community.

While utilitarian value is inherent in the consumption of an item, hedonic value is process centred. It is concerned with levels of pleasure associated with engaging in a consumption task (Gan & Wang, 2015: 354). Li, Liu, Xu, Heikkilä and Van Der Heijden (2015:261) observe that people increasingly make use of information systems for hedonic purposes. Holsapple and Wu (2007:86) note that while development of information systems has traditionally been utilitarian in orientation, many new systems, especially those targeting individual consumers, are deliberately designed as both utilitarian and hedonic. Gan and Wang (2015: 354), as well as Pai and Tsai (2016:41) point out that social media can be used for the hedonic purposes of getting entertained, passing time, relaxing and facilitating escapism.

Hennigs, Wiedmann, Klarmann and Behrens (2015:926) observe that it is important for managers to analyse consumer responses to value propositions in order to determine if and to what extent value perceptions translate into desired responses.

### ***Perceived value and affective social identity***

Affective social identity refers to positive feelings of emotional attachment to an in-group (Bagozzi & Dholakia (2006:52). Guegan, Moliner and Buisine (2016:349) note that social identity is important in inter-group relations because it shows the extent to which an individual may feel that they are part of a given group. When it becomes salient,

this sense of belonging results in individuals taking great interest in preserving or enhancing the group (McLeod, 2008: Online). Research shows that value derived from one's in-group may help explain levels of one's social identity. Seminal work on value and social identity in communities, by Dholakia, Bagozzi and Pearo (2004:245), finds that identifying with a group "that one has chosen voluntarily stems from an understanding that membership entails significant benefits". In that study, it was found that some forms of value, namely purposive and entertainment value, have a positive influence on social identity in general.

While research empirically linking value perceptions to social identity in communities is scarce, organisational behaviour as well as relationship marketing literature point to the important role played by perceived value in explaining affective commitment (Zhou, Jin, Fang and Vogel, 2015:256; Lai, 2015:96). Research also shows that identification with an organisation is positively related to commitment (Wilkins, Butt, Kratochvil & Balakrishnan 2015:12). Accordingly, this study posits that levels of perceived value in online customer communities has a positive influence on affective social commitment. Given that value is examined at dimensional level, the specific hypotheses posited are that:

$H_{1a}$ : Perceived intellectual value has a positive influence on affective social identity in online customer communities.

$H_{1b}$ : Perceived social value has a positive influence on affective social identity in online customer communities.

$H_{1c}$ : Perceived hedonic value has a positive influence on affective social identity in online customer communities.

### ***Perceived value and communication performance quality***

Users of online customer communities manifest a wide range of behavioural engagements which may be of interest to managers of such communities (Chiu, Huang, Cheng & Sun, 2015b:506). One of these relates to the communication behaviour exhibited



by members. Spitzberg (2006:629-630) notes that in order for computer-mediated communication to impact human relations, the actor needs to demonstrate communicative competence appropriate to such contexts. In line with the interactionist paradigm of communication, Spitzberg (2006:629-630) further states that for an actor to perform appropriate communication, there is a need for motivation as such motivation “represents the energising component of good performance”. Good communication performance, from an interactionist perspective, includes elements of attentiveness and expressiveness (Yoo, Namkoong, Choi, Shah, Tsang, Hong, Aguilar & Gustafson 2014:15; Platonova & Shewchuk 2015:337). Attentiveness demands commitment of time to understand communication issues and display concern. Expressiveness involves being vivid and detailed when communicating.

While empirical studies linking value and communication performance are scarce, researchers on value generally agree that perceived value plays an important role in influencing positive behavioural response (Chiu, Wang, Fang, & Huang, 2014:103; Hennigs et al., 2015:931). The association between value and positive behaviour is consistent with the norm of reciprocity. Sánchez-Franco and Roldán (2015:7, 9) observe that in community activities, members seek to justify their time and effort by using what they gain from the community. They note that, in doing so, individuals look for a fair balance. Spitzberg (2006:629) identifies perceived benefits and gratifications as some of the factors that exert a motivating force on communication performance. Similarly, Pai and Tsai (2016:45) point to the reciprocal effect that value derived from social networks has on members conduct.

Accordingly, this study argues that levels of perceived value in online customer communities exert a positive influence on the quality of members’ communication performance as evident in being expressive in one’s contributions and attentive to other people’s contributions. The specific hypotheses

are that:

H<sub>2a</sub>: Perceived intellectual value has a positive influence on communication performance quality in online customer communities.

H<sub>2b</sub>: Perceived social value has a positive influence on communication performance quality in online customer communities.

H<sub>2c</sub>: Perceived hedonic value has a positive influence on communication performance quality in online customer communities.

### ***Affective social identity and behavioural response***

Fielding and Hornsey (2016:2) observe that the reason that social identity is important in group dynamics is because of the influence it has on member behaviour. In general, the more one identifies with a group, the more they are likely to act in the best interests of their group (Chiu et al. (2015b:507). The core tenet of social identity is that having identified the self with a particular social group, individuals act in a way that helps to maintain or enhance the group that they identify with (Bartels and Onwezen, 2014:82; Haslam, Egghins & Reynolds, 2003:83). Studies by Arenas-Gaitan, Rondan-Cataluña and Ramírez-Correa (2013:1158), as well as Chiu et al. (2015b:511) confirm the positive influence that social identity has on group member behaviour. Arenas-Gaitan et al. (2013:1158) specifically find that social identity in social networking sites is a significant antecedent to use of social networking sites. Bagozzi and Dholakia (2006:55) find that social identity influences an individual’s desire to participate in group activities. Chiu et al. (2015b:514) find that one’s identification with an online support community positively affects one’s engagement in online citizenship behaviour. With regard to communication behaviour, Spitzberg (2006:630) notes that communication performance in computer-mediated communication can be a useful dependent variable in social identification models.

In line with these findings and arguments as advanced in the literature, this study posits

that:

H<sub>4</sub>: Affective social identity has a positive influence on communication behaviour in online customer communities.

H<sub>5</sub>: Affective social identity has a positive influence on continued participation intentions in online customer communities.

## METHODOLOGY

### *Research design*

This study adopts a quantitative research approach. It thus falls within a positivist research paradigm. The reason for adopting a quantitative approach is that such an approach allows for statistical testing of hypotheses (Zikmund & Babin 2012:92). The proposed conceptual model requires investigation into the relationships between the dependent and independent variables.

### *Population and sampling*

The population of interest in the present study are members of independent online customer communities from Gauteng, South Africa. Independent online customer communities are communities that are not managed by companies (Teichmann et al. 2015:341). Unlike company-affiliated communities, independent online customer communities are regarded as less prone to manipulation by those who may want to protect the image of the products or companies being discussed by community members (Choi, 2015:3).

Convenience sampling was applied to choose respondents for the study. The choice of convenience sampling was informed by budgetary constraints as well as the fact that there was no available list of members of online customer communities from which to draw a random sample. Due to the need for informed consent, the study targeted only respondents who were 18 years and older.

### *Measurement instrument*

A structured questionnaire was used to collect data. Constructs of interest in the study

were adapted from established scales in the literature. The reason for use of established scales was to enhance the validity of the constructs. Adaptation of the scales was aimed at ensuring that they reflect the context and purpose of the current study. Specifically, items used to measure intellectual value were adapted from Nambisan and Baron (2010:570); items used to measure social value were adapted from Dholakia, Bagozzi and Pearo (2004:252); and items used to measure hedonic value were adapted from Verhagen, Swen, Feldberg and Merikivi (2015:354). Items used to measure affective social identity were adapted from Nambisan and Baron (2010:570) and Dholakia et al. (2004:252). Items used to measure communication behaviour were adapted from Spitzberg (2006:664), while continued participation intention was measured using items adapted from Verhagen et al. (2015:354) and Chan (2014:231). All items were measured using a 7 point scale ranging from 1 (very strongly disagree) to 7 (very strongly agree). Detail pertaining to the scale items is provided in Table 2. The questionnaire used to collect data was pre-tested on 10 respondents before being used for final data collection. The pre-testing assisted in ensuring that questions were easily understood by respondents.

### *Profile of respondents*

Table 1 presents a demographic profile of the respondents in the present study. In terms of gender, 52.9 percent of the respondents were female while 47.1 were male. The age profile shows that 36.2 percent of the respondents were aged between 18 and 24, 47.0 percent were aged between 25 and 35 and 16.8 percent were aged between 36 and 49. Most of the respondents had a post-high school certificate or diploma as their highest qualification. Only 6.8 percent of the respondents held a postgraduate qualification. The majority of the respondents were found to have been part of their community for a period of 1 to 2 years and only 15.8 percent had been involved in their online community for a period of over 5 years.

**TABLE 1:  
DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE OF  
RESPONDENTS**

Gender	n	%
Male	104	47.1
Female	117	52.9
Age Group	n	%
18-24	80	36.2
25-35	104	47.0
36-49	37	16.8
Education Level	n	%
Below high school	5	2.3
High school	60	27.3
Post high school certificate/ Diploma	79	35.9
Bachelor's degree	61	27.7
Postgraduate qualification	15	6.8
Length of time as community member	n	%
Less than one year	38	17.2
1-2 years	92	41.6
3 to 5 years	56	25.4
Over 5 years	35	15.8

### **Data analysis**

The proposed conceptual model was tested using Structural Equation Modelling (SEM). SEM is a multivariate statistical technique that helps test theory using hypothesised relationships between dependent and independent variables in a conceptual model (Hair, Black, Babin and Anderson 2010:634; Nusair and Huan, 2010:315). A two stage approach, recommended by Hair et al. (2010:730), was used in the analysis. The first stage entailed running a confirmatory factor analysis in order to assess the measurement model for goodness of fit, construct reliability and validity. The second stage entailed assessment of the proposed structural paths between dependent and independent variables. Multiple fit indices were used to test goodness of fit of the measurement model including the normed chi-square, the goodness of fit index (GFI), the adjusted goodness of fit index, the comparative fit index (CFI) and the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA).

Construct reliability was assessed using a composite reliability index. Convergent,

discriminant and nomological validity were examined in assessing construct validity. Factor loadings as well as average variance extracted (AVE) coefficients were used to assess convergent validity. Discriminant validity was assessed by comparing AVE coefficients with maximum shared variance (MSV) coefficients as well as by comparing the square-root of the AVEs with correlation coefficients between constructs. Nomological validity was tested by examining the correlation between constructs hypothesised in the conceptual model to be related. Before running the confirmatory factor analysis, the adequacy of the data for factor analysis was assessed using the Kaiser-Mayer-Olkin (KMO) test and Bartlett's test of sphericity. The results showed a KMO value of 0.906 and a significant Chi-square coefficient of 2422.88 with 153 degrees of freedom ( $p = 0.000$ ) thereby providing evidence that the sample was adequate. As noted by Hair et al. (2010), sample adequacy is evidenced by KMO values of 0.5 or greater and when Bartlett's test of sphericity yields a significant Chi-square value.

### **RESULTS**

#### ***Results of the assessment of the measurement model***

Findings pertaining to the reliability tests undertaken, as presented in Table 2, show that the composite reliability coefficients of all constructs in the model were greater than the adequacy benchmark of 0.7 (Hair et al. 2010:710). Specifically, the results were .856 for intellectual value, .838 for social value, .831 for hedonic value, .856 for affective social identity, .859 for communication performance quality and .845 for continued participation intention.

Table 3 also presents findings relating to discriminant and nomological validity analysis. With regard to discriminant validity, the results show that the correlation between each pair of constructs was lower than the corresponding square roots of AVEs. According to Hair et al. (2010:710) this is an indication of discriminant



**TABLE 2:  
MEASUREMENT ITEMS, FACTOR LOADINGS AND DESCRIPTIVES**

Constructs and Items	Factor Loadings	Descriptives		Composite Reliability (CR)
		Overall Mean	Overall Standard Deviation	
<b>Intellectual Value – IV</b>				
This online community/forum site enables me to ---		5.52	1.191	0.856
IV1 - enhance my understanding of product/services	0.811			
IV2 - obtain solutions to specific product related problems	0.767			
IV3 - enhance my knowledge for informed decision making	0.748			
<b>Social Value – SV</b>				
This online community/forum site enables me to ---		5.44	1.197	.838
SV1 - stay in touch with others	0.804			
SV2 - expand my social network	0.730			
SV3 - enhance my reputation among community members	0.808			
<b>Hedonic Value – HV</b>				
This online community/forum site enables me to ---		5.71	1.148	.831
HV1 - be entertained	0.832			
HV2 - have enjoyable time	0.823			
HV3 – relax	0.876			
<b>Affective Social Identity - ASI</b>				
ASI1 - I am emotionally attached to the online community	0.876	5.45	1.308	.856
ASI2 - I feel feelings of belonging towards the online community	0.823			
ASI3 - I am very attached to this online community	0.832			
<b>Communication performance quality - CPQ</b>				
CB1 - I respond to calls to support on the online community expressively	0.798	5.45	1.211	.859
CB2 - I pay close attention to contributions by other members on the online community	0.772			
CB3 - I am very detailed in my contributions to the online community	0.768			
<b>Continued Participation Intentions - CPI</b>				
CPI1 - I intend to continue using this online community in the future	0.782	5.80	1.136	.845
CPI2 - I do not want to discontinue my use of this online community	0.724			
CPI3 - I believe it is worthwhile for me to use the online community	0.782			

**TABLE 3:  
CORRELATION AND VALIDITY**

Construct	IV	SV	HV	ASI	CPQ	CPI
IV	.815					
SV	.789	.795				
HV	.736	.661**	.788			
ASI	.618	.480**	.508**	.816		
CPQ	.739	.604**	.620**	.715**	.818	
CPI	.466	.598**	.486**	.449**	.488**	.804
AVE	.665	.633	.621	.666	.669	.646

Note: Bold diagonal coefficients are square-root of AVEs

\*\* All correlations are significant at 0.01 level of significance

validity. Regarding nomological validity, the results show significant correlations between each pair of constructs as hypothesised in the proposed model.

The overall fit statistics show that all fit indices were within the recommended thresholds for good model fit as per Hair et al. (2010:672). The specific results obtained were that the normed chi-square value was 1.972; the CFI was .950; the TLI was .935; the IFI was .951; the AGFI was .854 while the RMSEA was .066.

### Results of hypotheses testing

Table 4 presents the results obtained from assessment of the structural paths. As can be seen, intellectual value as well as hedonic value had a significant influence on affective social identity. The path coefficients were ( $\beta = .406$ ;  $p = .000$ ) for intellectual value and ( $\beta = .186$ ;  $p = .029$ ) for hedonic value. The results, however, show that social value did not exert significant influence on affective social identity ( $\beta = .096$ ;  $p = .247$ ). Accordingly, hypotheses H1a and H1c are supported while H1b is not supported.

The results in Table 4 also show that communication performance quality is significantly influenced by intellectual value ( $\beta = .241$ ;  $p = .001$ ) as well as hedonic value ( $\beta = .132$ ;  $p = .035$ ). Social value was, on the other

hand, found to have no significant influence on communication performance quality ( $\beta = .069$ ;  $p = .290$ ). Accordingly, hypotheses H2a and H2c are supported while H2b is rejected. Affective social identity was found to have a significant influence on both communication performance quality ( $\beta = .439$ ;  $p = .000$ ) and continued participation intentions ( $\beta = .465$ ;  $p = .000$ ). Hypotheses H3 and H4 are thus supported.

Figure 2 shows the variance in dependent variables explained by the model. According to the results, the proposed structural model was able to explain 37.9 percent of variance in affective social identity, 55.9 percent of variance in communication performance and 21.6 percent variance in continued participation intentions.

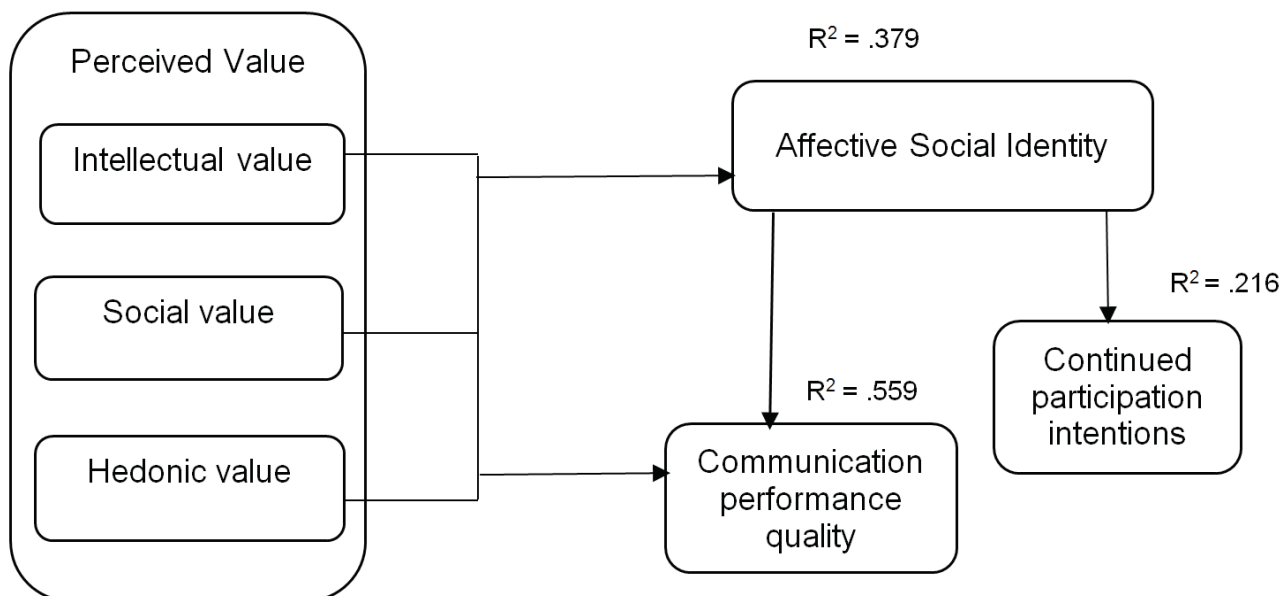
## DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study sheds light on the value derived from online customer communities and its influence on members' affective social identity within their respective communities as well as their behavioural response. The results show that users derive intellectual value, social value and hedonic value from their online customer communities. This is evidenced by the fact that the mean values of the three forms of value ranged between 5.44 and 5.52 on a seven-point scale. These findings are

**TABLE 4:  
RESULTS OF HYPOTHESES TESTING**

Hypothesis	Precursor variable	Outcome variable	Path coefficients	$p$ value	Supported/ Rejected
H1a	Intellectual value	Affective social identity	.406	.000	Supported
H1b	Social value	Affective social identity	.096	.247	Rejected
H1c	Hedonic value	Affective social identity	.186	.019	Supported
H2a	Intellectual value	Communication performance quality	.241	.001	Supported
H2b	Social value	Communication performance quality	.069	.290	Rejected
H2c	Hedonic value	Communication performance quality	.132	.035	Supported
H3	Affective social identity	Communication performance quality	.439	.000	Supported
H4	Affective social identity	Continued Participation intentions	.465	.000	Supported

**TABLE 2:  
STRUCTURAL MODEL RESULTS**



consistent with assertions by Gan and Wang (2015:359) who note that users obtain different types of gratifications from their online social networks. It is important to note, however, that while the mean values show that users generally agreed to having derived all three forms of value from their online communities, the perceived levels of value derived are on the lower side of the 'agree' range on the seven-point Likert scale. This means that users did not regard their online communities as exceptional sources of any of the three forms of value examined.

Investigation into the impact that perceived value exerts on online community members' affective response shows that intellectual value as well as hedonic value have direct significant influence on affective social identity within their respective communities. These findings are consistent with assertions by Dholakia et al. (2004:245) that identification with voluntarily chosen groups stems from the belief that there are benefits to be derived from such associations. Intellectual value as well as hedonic value were also found to have significant positive influence on communication performance quality. These

findings specifically show that members who believed that they derived intellectual and hedonic value from online communities readily engaged in positive communication behaviour, including paying close attention to other members' contributions, being detailed in their own contributions, and responding expressively to other people's calls for support. The fact that such conduct is positively associated with levels of perceived value is consistent with assertions by Pai and Tsai (2016:45), namely that benefits gained in relationships wield positive influence on engagement in reciprocal behaviours.

Contrary to expectations though, social value was not found to have a significant influence on either affective social identity or communication quality. This may be due to the fact that some of the items used to measure social value are generic to all social networking platforms. In examining social value, this study focused on the extent to which members felt that their online communities provided opportunities to stay in touch with others, expand one's social network and enhance one's reputation among community members. It can be argued that staying in

touch with other members and expanding one's social network are benefits that most social networking platforms provide. Such value can thus not be a significant differentiator of social networking platforms and is thus likely to have limited impact on individuals' response. With regard to enhancing one's reputation, this would apply mainly in cases where a member feels that they are a source of expert knowledge on many of the issues discussed on their community platforms. The fact that respondents in this study agreed that they derived significant intellectual value means that they also regarded others to be important sources of information.

Finally, affective social identity was found to have a direct positive influence on communication quality as well as on members' intentions to continue participating. This is consistent with arguments by Chiu et al. (2015b:507) that, in general, people who identify with an interest group behave in a way that helps to maintain or enhance that group. The success of online customer communities depends on information sharing and quality of interaction. The findings in this study have significant theoretical and practical implications and these implications are discussed in the sections that follow.

### ***Theoretical implications***

From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to the literature in four ways. First, the study contributes to extant literature on online information sharing. As noted by Malik et al. (2016:130), while the practice of online information sharing has grown significantly, not much is known, from empirical studies, about the factors that influence such behaviours. By investigating value perceptions in online customer communities and their influence on customers' affective and behavioural responses, this study contributes to filling this research gap.

Second, this study is among the first to examine perceived value and its effect on members of independent online customer communities using a sample of respondents

from South Africa – a developing country in Africa. This represents a new perspective as most studies on online customer networking focus on samples drawn from countries outside of Africa.

Thirdly, studies on customer networking have tended to primarily focus on company sponsored communities (Choi, Fowler, Goh & Yuan, 2015:3). Company sponsored communities are known to be patronised mainly by brand loyalists (Adjei, Noble and Noble, 2010:639). This may limit the extent to which member behaviour may be explained by other factors, such as perceived value, rather than loyalty. By focusing on independent online customer communities, this study contributes to knowledge on customer networking in contexts that may not be highly compromised by brand loyalty.

Lastly, by using the Uses and Gratification theory to understand value and its effects on members of online customer communities, this study contributes to advancing knowledge on the explanatory ability of the theory outside traditional media, specifically in the online media domain. The study specifically shows that gratifications obtained can help explain online customer communities' levels of affective social identity as well as quality of communication and participation continuance intentions.

### ***Practical implications***

The findings are of significant practical implications for managers of online customer communities. They show the need for managers of online communities to realise that such forums serve varied functions that determine the value that is derived by users. The findings specifically show that online communities are important sources of intellectual value, social value and hedonic value. Intellectual value emanates from content shared by members of the community. Social value emanates from the fact that such platforms facilitate opportunities for customers to stay in touch, expand consumption-related social networks and enhance their reputation in the group.



Hedonic value, meanwhile, is determined by the level of pleasure experienced when engaging with an online community.

While members derive different forms of value from online customer communities, managers need to be aware that not all forms of value may have significant influence on the extent to which members identify with these communities. Not all forms of value may have significant influence on member behaviour. The study's results show that delivery of superior intellectual and hedonic value is what influences members' level of affective social identity with their communities as well as quality of communication, with intellectual value being the most significant.

The results point to the need for managers to give attention to the intellectual value associated with the communities that they manage. Managers can do this by inviting individuals with expert knowledge on consumer-related issues to contribute to discussions on their sites and/or respond to some of the members' contributions as appropriate.

Enhancement of hedonic value calls for managers to take interest in factors that may help arouse pleasure in the process of one's engagement with the online community. One way in which managers can do this is by paying attention to features of their sites and ensuring that these bring enjoyment to users. Managers can, for example, invest in improving ease of usability, facilitate sharing of content in varied forms including visual and audio, and pay attention to the general visual appeal of their community sites. Ease of use helps ensure that users are not frustrated due to difficulties in navigating sites and engaging with content (Peker, Kucukozer Cavdar & Cagiltay, 2016:167). Varied forms of content as well as the visual appeal of sites are factors that are known to help stimulate feelings of pleasure when engaging with online platforms (Floh & Madlberger, 2013:432; Mpinganjira, 2015:1334).

The findings in this study show that it is also important for managers to take special interest in examining members' level of affective

social identity within their community as this has the potential to affect the sustainability of communities through the direct effect that it has on continued participation intentions. Furthermore, members' level of affective social identity within a community exerts significant positive influence on members' quality of communication. This study has shown that members with high levels of social identity communicate expressively and take special interest in other members' contributions. According to Rangel, Chung, Harris, Carpenter, Chiaburu & Moore (2015:18) expressiveness in communication is important because it attracts attention, facilitates understanding and encourages active participation.

### ***Limitations and suggestions for future research***

Despite its significant theoretical and practical implications, this study is not without limitations. These limitations provide avenues for future research. The first limitation relates to the fact that the study is based on a convenience sample drawn from a limited geographical area, Gauteng. This reduces the generalisability of the findings. Future research in other geographical settings, using samples drawn with random methods, can help validate the findings of the present study.

A second limitation is that this is a cross-sectional study, which means that the findings pertain to a particular point in time. The concepts investigated in this study are not static, however. The levels of perceived value associated with online customer communities are likely to change, as are levels of affective identity, communication behaviour and participation intentions. Future research should include longitudinal surveys so as to explore changes in these constructs and the relationships between them over time.

The fact that the proposed model explained only 21.6 percent of the variance in participation continuance intention, 37.9 percent of variance in affective social identity and 55.9 percent of the variance in quality of communication points to the need for future studies to explore

other sources of value that may enhance the explanatory power of perceived value in online customer communities. This is particularly important as only three forms of value were examined in the present study.

## CONCLUSIONS

The main purpose of the study has been to examine the value derived from online customer communities and the influence this has on members' level of affective social identity as well as on their behaviour. Based on the findings, it can be concluded that members derive varied forms of value from their online customer communities including intellectual value, social value and hedonic value. The respondents in this study did not, however, accord their online customer communities particularly high sources for any of the three forms of value examined. It can also be concluded that different forms of value exert varied levels of influence on affective social identity and quality of communication. Social value was, in particular, found to have no significant influence on either affective social identity or quality of communication. Intellectual value and hedonic value had, on the other hand, significant influence on both, with intellectual value having the stronger influence. Furthermore, the findings of this study point to the fact that affective social identity exerts significant influence on quality of communication in online customer communities as well as participation continuance intentions. Given that online social networking has become a common phenomenon, the model proposed in this study can provide useful guidance to managers of online customer communities for exploring value, affective social identity and member behaviour in their communities.

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