The Platformization of Brands

Julian R. K. Wichmann[1,a]

Nico Wiegand[2,a]

Werner J. Reinartz[3]

[1]Assistant Professor, University of Cologne.
University of Cologne, Department of Retailing and Customer Management,
Albertus-Magnus-Platz 1, 50923 Cologne, Germany, wichmann@wiso.uni-koeln.de.

[2]Assistant Professor, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam.
Department of Marketing, De Boelelaan 1105, 1081 HV Amsterdam, The Netherlands,
n.wiegand@vu.nl.

[3]Professor of Marketing and Director of the Center for Research in Retailing (IFH),
University of Cologne. Department of Retailing and Customer Management, Albertus-
Magnus-Platz 1, 50923 Cologne, Germany, werner.reinartz@uni-koeln.de.

[a] The first two authors contributed equally to this work. The article is based on the first
author's dissertation.

The Platformization of Brands

Abstract

Digital platforms that aggregate products and services, such as Google Shopping or Amazon, have emerged as powerful intermediaries to brand offerings, challenging traditional product brands that have largely lost direct access to consumers. As a countermeasure, several long-established brands have built their own flagship platforms to resume control and foster consumer loyalty. For example, sports brands like Nike, adidas, or ASICS launched tracking and training platforms that allow for ongoing versatile interactions among participants beyond product purchase. The authors analyze these emerging platform offerings, whose potential brands struggle to exploit, and provide guidance for brands that aim to platformize their business. This guidance comprises the conceptualization of digital platforms as places of consumer crowdsourcing (i.e., consumers drawing value from platform participants such as the brand, other consumers, or third-party businesses) and crowdsending (i.e., consumers providing value to platform participants) of products, services, and content along with a well-defined framework that brands can apply to assemble different types of flagship platforms. Evaluating the consequences of crowdsourcing and crowdsending for consumer–platform relationships, the authors derive a typology of archetypical relationship states and develop a set of propositions to help offline-born product brands thrive through platformization.

Digitization promised established product brands nothing short of their emancipation from the traditional retailing value chain. Online channels made cutting out intermediaries and establishing direct consumer access and relationships both simple and inexpensive (Gielens and Steenkamp 2019), and many brands willingly embraced this opportunity. However, when new digital aggregators of products and services emerged—especially online marketplaces and search engines—they rapidly usurped the interface to consumers, forcing many offline-born product brands back to second rank. For example, Amazon, Google Shopping, and JD have become important access points for products from household tools to sports equipment (which we use as a recurring example), leaving brands like adidas, Nike, or ASICS to resume their places as suppliers to this new group of digital intermediaries.

These intermediaries, which we call *brand aggregation platforms*, differ from conventional retailers by relying on a platform business model, where they provide the infrastructure and governance to enable commercial transactions between external suppliers and consumers of branded products while not offering these products themselves (Boudreau 2017; Täuscher and Laudien 2018). For example, searching for adidas running shoes on Google brings up Google Shopping pages from numerous retailers as well as adidas's own shop. Google aggregates these offerings while the consumer transacts directly with the brand or an online retailer. As a result, these platforms provide value by granting users access to a vast variety of products and services, enabling them to organize their consumption around a few powerful interfaces (Reinartz, Wiegand, and Imschloss 2019).

This re-intermediation through brand aggregation platforms arguably leaves many brands worse off than in the pre-digital retailing era because these platforms diminish brand differentiation and foster price competition by featuring many similar or even identical offerings at different prices from competing suppliers (Gielens and Steenkamp 2019). For example, a search for sports jerseys on Zalando, a former online apparel retailer turned brand

aggregation platform, provides an exhaustive overview of products from brand-owned shops and myriad retailers.

As a countermeasure to this development, some established product brands have started to venture into the platform business themselves (Constantinides, Henfridsson, and Parker 2018), either by extending their operations organically (e.g., Nike Run Club) or by acquiring existing platforms (e.g., adidas Runtastic or ASICS Runkeeper). This "platformization" of brands creates offerings that transcend the specific product brand by including third-party complementary products, services, and content to occupy the broader category space and address consumer needs more holistically (Zhu and Furr 2016). For example, Nike features events, expert guidance, exclusive products, motivational music playlists, and even personal training as part of its Run Club and Training Club platforms. These emerging offerings, which we call *brand flagship platforms,* may be a potent means for product brands to fend off brand aggregation platforms and establish a direct interface to consumers.

However, brands have a hard time building competitive flagship platforms. While retailers have long embraced platformization (e.g., Amazon, Zalando, Douglas) as a natural evolution of their consumer-focused aggregator approach, product brands lack cross-product expertise, treat the platform as yet another sales channel, or fear the inclusion of competitor offerings, to name just a few impediments. Thus, the platformization of brands is still in its infancy, although some encouraging examples have emerged in such markets as athletics (e.g., Nike, Garmin), DIY (e.g., Bosch), mobility (e.g., BMW and Daimler), nutrition (e.g., Maggi), or gaming (e.g., EPIC). For example, Bosch's DIY & Garden allows consumers to register their tools, engage with a versatile community, and receive advice for DIY projects. In mobility, BMW and Daimler have extended their Share Now platform to include ride hailing, renting scooters, cars, and bikes, and finding parking and charging spots. And in nutrition, Maggi offers online cooking classes and events, inspirational content, as well as

recipes that link directly to supermarkets. In other industries, including B2B industries, brands gradually acknowledge the potential of building their own digital platforms, but many have difficulty getting started (Bughin, Catlin, and Dietz 2019; Zhu and Furr 2016).

We address this difficulty by proposing paths for brands to build brand flagship platforms. To this end, we develop a novel conceptualization of digital platforms as places of consumer *crowdsourcing* and *crowdsending*, which lie at the core of platformized value creation and which the brand can foster or restrict to shape platform interactions. Consumer crowdsourcing in this context denotes the consumer's assignment of a task (e.g., finding the perfect running shoe, learning how to train for a marathon) to a network of diverse platform participants (i.e., the brand, other consumers, or third-party businesses) that supply products, services, and content, allowing her to *draw value from* these participants (Howe 2006). Consumer crowdsending denotes the consumer's own contribution of products, services, and content, allowing her to *provide value to* these platform participants.

Drawing on this conceptualization, this article provides brands with a step-by-step guide to venture into platform business. First, we put forth five key goals that consumers pursue when using digital platforms, enhancing the understanding of why platform offerings are often preferred over retail or brand offerings. These insights help design flagship platforms that align consumer and brand goals. Second, we develop a clear framework that disassembles the platform concept into building blocks that facilitate consumer crowdsourcing and crowdsending. Depending on the assemblage of these building blocks, different platform types emerge that may foster or impede the achievement of consumer and brand goals. Third, we propose the intensities of consumer crowdsourcing and crowdsending as typology dimensions that give rise to distinct consumer–platform relationship states. The typology allows brands to evaluate how their selected assemblage affects consumers' use of and attachment to the brand flagship platform. A set of propositions details the benefits and risks

of the emergent relationship states. Finally, we offer several suggestions to rethink managerial practices in order for brands to master the platform transition.

Our analysis liaises with an existing stream of literature on (digital) platforms and two-sided markets, extending related work in several directions. Above all, prior studies focus on businesses that are "born" as platforms or retailers that expand on their natural aggregation function through platformization. However, how product brands—especially those originating from a non-digital, non-platformized marketspace—may build and use their own platform has been neglected. As a notable exception, Reinartz, Wiegand, and Imschloss (2019) raise the idea that platformized brands may pose a threat to traditional retailers in their attempt to reclaim direct consumer access. Yet they neither flesh out the nature of those brand platforms, nor do they analyze how brands can successfully transition to that stage. Furthermore, literature predominantly examines platforms that facilitate commercial exchange. Perren and Kozinets (2018) develop a typology of peer-to-peer markets, classifying platforms into discrete types that offer distinct benefits. However, they do not focus on value creation beyond buyer-seller transactions, nor does their model accommodate the possibility that versatile platform assemblages may mix and match functionalities to offer combined benefits. Finally, this study is the first to examine the relational consequences of platformization. While prior work stresses platforms' ability to lower transaction costs, we show that brands can use flagship platforms to build intimate, mutually beneficial relationships based on high levels of self-relevance and affective commitment.

Brand Flagship Platforms

Research and practice have developed a multifaceted understanding of (digital) platforms. However, broad applicability of the platform concept and the myriad platform types and markets that emerged also add complexity especially for traditional brands, which were largely founded before the advent of Internet technologies. To develop the concept of brand

flagship platforms, we first briefly define digital platforms in general. We then introduce brand flagship platforms—a specific type of digital platform—by highlighting the opportunities they present to counter and differentiate from brand aggregation platforms.

Platform Definition

Platforms provide the infrastructure and governance to facilitate interactions between autonomous agents (Boudreau 2017; Parker, Van Alstyne, and Choudary 2016; Täuscher and Laudien 2018). That is, platforms link agents on two or more market sides that determine the conditions of their interaction directly (i.e., what to exchange, how to exchange it), maintaining residual control rights over their assets (Hagiu and Wright 2015). If Nike or a designated retailer offers the brand's merchandise to consumers on Amazon or an online comparison site, the seller can typically set prices, control the items and quantities offered, and decide sales promotions and delivery conditions. Platforms therefore assume a mediator role, aiming to provide optimal matches between agents on both market sides often through digital technologies (Perren and Kozinets 2018).

Platform interactions can range from the commercial selling of products and services (e.g., Perren and Kozinets 2018; Rangaswamy et al. 2020) to engaging in forums or social communities (e.g., Schau, Muñiz, and Arnould 2009), to posting and consuming media content on video platforms (e.g., Rangaswamy et al. 2020). Accordingly, examples are abundant, and include social media (Instagram, TikTok), knowledge exchange forums (StackOverflow, Quora), communities (Reddit, brand communities), video sharing platforms (YouTube, Vimeo), advertising platforms (Google AdWords), service platforms (Uber, Airbnb), hardware–software (game consoles) or software–software (operating systems, app store) platforms. The starting point of this analysis is the digital re-intermediation of established brands by brand aggregation platforms (e.g., Amazon, Google Shopping, booking.com), which emerged as powerful interfaces to consumers' product search and

purchase activities. Brand flagship platforms may offer a way out of this renewed dependence for product brands that aim to re-establish direct consumer access and foster brand loyalty. We describe these two types of platforms next.

Brand Flagship Platforms as a Counter to Brand Aggregation Platforms

Research has developed a detailed understanding of brand aggregation platforms (e.g., Hagiu and Wright 2015; Parker, Van Alstyne, and Choudary 2016), on which the interaction between market sides is, at its core, a commercial exchange between buyers and sellers of branded products. Brand aggregation platforms thus serve as intermediaries to discrete transactions that lower search costs and efficiently match customers with product or service offerings (Iansiti and Levien 2004). The transactions are discrete in that purchases do not trigger an ongoing feedback process (other than, for example, dialogues on social media) and customers typically return to enter a new purchase cycle (Siebert et al. 2020). For instance, a consumer who needs running shoes might compare different models on JD or Wish, purchase on the platform, and return once she needs a new pair or other equipment.

A set of distinct features of brand aggregation platforms (see Table 1) poses numerous challenges for product brands, of which we highlight a few. First, their broad, cross-category scope induces consumers to increasingly start their purchase journeys on brand aggregation platforms, often searching for product classes rather than specific brands (Statista 2020). This development puts the platform brand (e.g., Amazon) in the center, threatening to degrade product brands to "white-label back offices" (Atluri, Dietz, and Henke 2017, p. 13). Second, contributing to this degradation, brands have difficulty differentiating from competitors because aggregation platforms standardize product presentation, limit the use of branding elements, and encourage simple comparison on a few key features (e.g., price, rating, delivery). Third, product competition occurs not only between brands (e.g., adidas vs. ASICS) but also within brands, as different sellers will offer the identical product at different prices.

This aspect represents a strong benefit for customers, making the platform itself agnostic to legitimate brand interests (such as preventing price erosion and brand-building efforts) since its primary goal is to provide optimal matches.

Despite the widespread success of brand aggregation platforms, their focus on facilitating transactions across a broad product range also makes them vulnerable to competitive attacks. They typically lack the resources, expertise, reputation, and infrastructure to individualize customer experiences with respect to any single category and thus fail to occupy a specific category space (Reinartz, Wiegand, and Imschloss 2019). By contrast, product brands can approach value creation through platformization from a more specialized angle (for example, Nike with its Run Club and Training Club platforms built around athletics).

Critically, brand flagship platforms, as mediators of versatile interactions between participants, are destined to become much more than an own-brand sales channel. They offer vast opportunities to co-create value within the brand's category space through a plethora of commercial and non-commercial activities (Ramaswamy and Ozcan 2018). Versatile interactions may include anything from buying products to providing and consuming content (e.g., product reviews, creative videos, educative podcasts) or services (e.g., participating in brand- or community-organized events). For example, participants on Bosch's DIY & Garden can access and upload home projects, discuss tools and techniques in forums, receive expert advice, participate in DIY challenges, collect points and badges, and engage in many other activities. The platform thus provides a rich array of products, services, and content around consumers' idiosyncratic DIY needs, offering them a potentially superior, more specialized yet more comprehensive experience than brand aggregation platforms.

Owing to their versatility, brand flagship platforms may pursue numerous goals such as increasing brand awareness and loyalty, offering complementary products and services, or triggering consumer feedback processes. Although the platform may include direct selling of

brand inventory, this need not be its sole or central purpose. Runtastic started out as a tracking application and, despite its acquisition by adidas in 2015, has preserved and enhanced these features, which remain at the core of the platform's value proposition. Table 1 summarizes our conceptions of brand aggregation and brand flagship platforms.

Assembling brand flagship platforms is not trivial as they require strategic and operational choices that may substantially enhance or limit their value to consumers. In both, practice and theory, brand platformization is still evolving and guidance on how to approach the transformation is scarce. In response, we next present a novel conceptual framework to systemize the assemblage and management of brand flagship platforms.

--- Insert Table 1 about here ---

A Decision–Process–Outcome Framework of Brand Flagship Platforms

Our framework is rooted in the idea of platforms as communities that leverage the wisdom and addressability of the crowd—that is, "an undefined (and generally large) network" of actors (Kozinets, Hemetsberger, and Schau 2008, p. 346). Brands can use this framework as a conceptual basis to map the possible paths to their own flagship platform. We detail the underlying concepts and their relationships and tie them to brands' platform assemblage decisions and consumer relationship outcomes.

Digital Platforms as Places of Crowdsourcing and Crowdsending

Digital platforms address consumer goals by relegating them to the open community, or the crowd (Howe 2006; Surowiecki 2004). Underlying the platform concept is the idea that standing in a crowd and shouting out why you are there is often more beneficial than reaching out to agents in this crowd individually (Afuah and Tucci 2012; Howe 2006). The crowd's assets and capabilities collectively exceed those of any subset of agents, making scarce resources more abundant and increasing the number of unique offerings (Howe 2008, p. 186). Furthermore, the search for solutions in crowds become less resource-intensive because one

market side (e.g., the consumer) articulates its goal to all participants of the other side (e.g., suppliers) once and simultaneously. As a result, drawing from the crowd is likely to increase effectiveness and efficiency of problem solving (Surowiecki 2004; Von Hippel 1994).

Crowds have been shown to play an important part in new idea generation and selection (Füller, Matzler, and Hoppe 2008), product development (Allen, Chandresakaran, and Basuroy 2018), and solving of micro tasks (Gino and Staats 2012). However, most studies take a managerial perspective, focusing on firms' decision to relegate business problems to consumers (Zhao and Zhu 2014). We extend this notion to the digital platform context, where the "shouting out" of platform participants' goals translates to, for example, consumers browsing through content, using search queries, or sorting and filtering categories.

We view these activities as forms of consumer crowdsourcing—that is, consumers' open assignment of a task to a network of people or other entities (Zhao and Zhu 2014). On platforms, task assignment pertains not only to consumers but all platform participants, including third-party businesses and product brands, which assume similar positions as contributors to the whole. Consumers harness the power of this crowd—rather than individual retailers or brands—whose product, service, and content offerings are bundled and made digestible through technology. Notably, it is irrelevant if the consumer decides to source from one platform participant only (e.g., follows one training plan posted by a single person) as this choice is the outcome of the crowdsourcing activity, akin to the winner of a crowdsourcing competition. The consumer selects the offering that suits her best out of all crowd-supplied offerings, like strolling through the weekly market to fill her bag.

On digital platforms, recipients can also add to crowd solutions themselves by, for example, rating products, engaging in discussions, and uploading pictures, videos, or music playlists. We term such behavior consumer "crowdsending", which we define as consumers' activity of contributing to the network through the supply of products, services, or content.

Engaging in crowdsending may, for example, strengthen consumers' social identity and status (Jeppesen and Frederiksen 2006), bestow a sense of purpose and belonging (Spaeth, Von Krogh, and He 2015), and allow them to gain (monetary) rewards (Kozinets et al. 2010). Akin to crowdsourcing, crowdsending on digital platforms supersedes piecemeal activities by ensuring that the input resonates with a large and engaged crowd of recipients who in turn use the crowd-sent material for further value creation, dramatically extending the scope of these activities compared to a non-platform environment.[1]

From Flagship Platform Assemblage to Consumer–Platform Relationships

Building on these ideas, we structure our conceptual development along a decision–process–outcome framework. Assembling infrastructure and governance mechanisms represent upstream *decisions* the brand makes. The resulting platform assemblage, as the totality of infrastructure and governance mechanisms, determines which crowdsourcing and -sending activities the platform facilitates and how these activities are designed.

Consumer crowdsourcing and crowdsending represent value-creating *processes* that aim to fulfill consumer goals. While brands may foster or restrict specific processes through their assemblage decisions (Kozinets, Ferreira, and Chimenti 2021), they manifest only in the interplay with consumers. That is, a platform's capacity to affect (through crowdsourcing) or to be affected (through crowdsending) needs to be met with the capacity to affect or be affected on the part of the consumer (DeLanda 2016). Accordingly, which platform offerings are exploited hinges on each consumer's idiosyncratic engagement with the platform's crowdsourcing and -sending capacities, which he mixes and matches to create his own solution (Epp and Price 2011). For example, learning how to consistently lose weight requires the exploration of parts of the flagship platform that differ from those required when training

---

[1] Naturally, not all activities on digital platforms involve the crowd (e.g., covertly sharing private data to feed recommendation algorithms). However, crowd-based activities are key to distinguish platform from pipeline offerings, thus chiefly contributing to the conceptual uniqueness and novelty of brand flagship platforms.

for a marathon.[2]

Finally, crowdsourcing and -sending experiences on the brand flagship platform have important downstream consequences (*outcome*) for the development and maintenance of consumer relationships, which ultimately define the long-term success of the brand's platform business. As we show later, different relationship states manifest from consumer crowdsourcing and -sending which can range from transaction-oriented, discrete exchanges to ongoing interactions that lead to profound embeddedness of the platform in consumers' lives (Belk 1988; Zhu and Iansiti 2019). Brands need to assess the level of alignment between the relationship states they seek with their flagship platform (i.e., their brand goals) and the achieved outcome, and dynamically re-assemble platform parts to spur new crowdsourcing and -sending processes or re-direct existing ones. Figure 1 summarizes this framework.

The following sections tie together the depicted processes of crowdsourcing and crowdsending with brands' platform assemblage activities (decision) on the one hand and with the emerging consumer-platform relationships (outcome) on the other hand.

--- Insert Figure 1 about here ---

Decision: Consumer Goals and Platform Building Blocks

We posit that the crowd, that is, the collective of platform participants, is particularly good at addressing important consumer goals, which renders digital platforms a superior alternative to retailers and direct interaction. The question thus arises as to when crowdsourcing and -sending activities become particularly rewarding for consumers. We have synthesized prior research from major marketing journals (see Web Appendix A) and industry observations to derive five key goals that consumers pursue when sourcing from or sending to the crowd: commercial exchange, social exchange, self-improvement, epistemic

---

[2] We thus distinguish between assemblages on two levels: the brand's infrastructure and governance decisions giving rise to the *platform assemblage* and the consumer's idiosyncratic interactions with the platform in the context of *consumer–platform sub-assemblages* (DeLanda 2016; Hoffman and Novak 2018).

empowerment, and creative empowerment. We put forth these goals, summarized in Table 2 and explained below, because they follow directly from the interpretation of platforms as crowd-based providers of value.

Crowdsourcing may pertain to efficiently finding an offer for products or services from the network of suppliers (Hagiu and Wright 2015), but also extends to, for instance, gathering knowledge or inspiration about products, services, or activities. Likewise, crowdsending may pertain to, for example, the goals of engaging in social interaction (e.g., Schau, Muñiz, and Arnould 2009), self-actualization (Smith and Colgate 2007), or self-expression by providing information or inspiration (Labrecque et al. 2013). Consumers strive to become active contributors on the platform and are rewarded by the crowd's engagement with their contributions (Kozinets, Hemetsberger, and Schau 2008). Naturally, consumers may pursue more than one goal with the same platform (and the same platform feature) and platforms may serve different goals for different consumers.

Digital platforms cater to these important goals in the form of five building blocks, depicted on the right-hand side of Table 2. Importantly, following straight from the consumer-goal perspective, these building blocks do not map exactly to technical platform features. For instance, the sharing of a training exercise could reflect a social desire (engaging with the crowd) but also serve as guidance, inspiration, or a way of benchmarking for users. Thus, the same technical implementation may reflect several building blocks and thus cater to several consumer goals. We explain each block and corresponding goal in the following.

--- Insert Table 2 about here ---

Commercial Exchange—Transaction Block

Catering to the goal of commercial exchange with a transaction block focuses on providing matches between demand and supply to ensure that consumers find the offering that best suits their needs within the assortment of products or services (Hagiu and Wright 2015; Wu,

Zhang, and Padmanabhan 2018). Although facilitating commercial exchange is not unique to digital platforms, the introduction of virtually endless shelf space coupled with advanced matching algorithms and rapid scalability on both market sides (buyers and sellers) through network effects has laid the foundation for platforms providing superior customer value vis-à-vis traditional pipeline businesses (Van Alstyne, Parker, and Choudhary 2016). Digital platforms allow for almost frictionless participation, provide higher price and quality transparency, and allow buyers and sellers to find the perfect exchange partner easily and quickly, thereby vastly diminishing transaction costs (Iansiti and Levien 2004).

For many commercial platforms (including brand aggregation platforms) the exchange block is at the core of their operations, with additional infrastructure assuming supporting functions (e.g., Amazon Marketplace, eBay, Uber). However, some platforms integrate an exchange block as part of a more balanced approach so that the commercial-exchange focus does not dominate other platform benefits and thereby prevent further user growth.

Social Exchange—Community Block

Social exchange relates to the goal of engaging in interactions with other platform participants such as consumers, third parties, or employees. These interactions are often part of an ongoing and evolving dialogue between participants aimed at advancing an array of social practices (Schau, Muñiz, and Arnould 2009). Research on co-creation, brand communities, and website use shows that these interactions lead to several social benefits for consumers (e.g., Nambisan and Baron 2009). They create a sense of belonging, identity, and even friendship (Xie, Bagozzi, and Troye 2008), and consumers enjoy the status, reputation, and esteem they acquire within a community of peers as well as their expression of a unique self-image, giving them a sense of self-efficacy (Holbrook 1999; Nambisan and Baron 2009).

Consumers may achieve these goals on the platform through a variety of means, such as by sharing experiences and personal beliefs (Marder et al. 2016). Depending on which

features are part of the platform assemblage and how well they are integrated, broadly positioned brand flagship platforms are able to cater to social exchange goals much better than individual brand communities, which are limited by their commercial and brand focus, relatively small group of active participants, and lack of diversity.

Self-Improvement—Benchmarking Block

Consumers have the fundamental urge to live up to their full potential, "the desire to become more and more what one is, to become everything that one is capable of becoming" (Maslow 1943, p. 383). Prior literature has incorporated individual aspects of self-improvement in terms of acquiring excellence (Holbrook 1999). We extend this concept to include self-respect and accomplishment (Holbrook 1999; Xie, Bagozzi, and Troye 2008). These aspects underlie the quantification and competition trends that many digital platforms address, especially in the context of fitness, health, nutrition, or sports (Ruckenstein and Pantzar 2017). We posit two points of reference that are most relevant for the consumer in terms of benchmarking and drawing motivation to self-improve (Kelly 2016; Wolf 2010): the platform crowd and the consumer's own past performance. This development is fueled by the widespread use of connected devices such as mobile phones and wearables that can track and quantify consumers' activities, workouts, sleep quality, heart rate, and more (James, Deane, and Wallace 2019). Digital platforms often combine self-tracking and measurement technology with crowd-based motivational features and gamified experiences such as user rankings, virtual badges, and opportunities to share accomplishments (Labrecque et al. 2013).

Epistemic Empowerment—Guidance Block

Consumer empowerment is defined as "the strengthening of consumers' abilities, rights, or authority to consume or otherwise fulfil their objectives as a marketplace actor" (Kozinets, Ferreira, and Chimenti 2021, p. 7). Digital platforms support epistemic consumer empowerment through information on the products and services they offer—but also do more.

Some platforms focus on participants' exchange of information, as in the case of Skillshare, where thousands of teachers can upload educational videos, or Komoot, where participants can record hiking or biking routes and recommend them to others. Other platforms build a strong guidance block around their main commercial operations by allowing participants to share instructional videos, blog posts, or structured product feedback and evaluation (Kozinets, Ferreira, and Chimenti 2021).

Guidance blocks are typically standardized, tailored to a specific purpose, one-directional, and aim to provide clear and concise results compared to the more open and socially oriented community block. Owing to the quantity and diversity of content available through crowd-based guidance blocks, epistemic empowerment of participants on all market sides easily supersedes what retailers or single brands can offer.

Creative Empowerment—Inspiration Block

With creative empowerment, we denote satisfying consumers' curiosity and longing for new experiences (Sheth, Newman, and Gross 1991; Sweeney and Soutar 2001). Whereas epistemic empowerment refers to objective and functional knowledge such as that for comparing product alternatives for purchase, creative empowerment refers to knowledge and stimulation that inspires consumers (Böttger et al. 2017). Consumers can use digital platforms to gain or provide elements of creative empowerment by consuming or creating content (including entertaining content) and products. Platforms such as Pinterest or Wattpad leverage the crowd to provide a richer set of ideas for consumers seeking inspiration and a large and engaged group of potential recipients for consumers sharing their ideas. Nike's Run Club platform induces consumers to inspire and be inspired by the crowd through music playlists or workout videos that they can add for others to use in their own routine.

Assembling the Building Blocks

The five building blocks can be (re-)assembled to represent different types of platforms

observable in the market (Figure 2). Thinking about the heterogenous platform landscape as different assemblages of these building blocks presents a powerful tool for brands in their creation of their own flagship platforms because it helps them select the optimal assemblage to achieve specific brand goals. We suggest that the existence and the relative scope of each building block jointly determine which platform type emerges. For example, an emphasis on the transaction block tends to produce marketplaces that cater primarily to the goal of commercial exchange. A strong benchmarking block yields tracking and coaching platforms that cater primarily to the goal of self-improvement. Other platforms combine blocks to fulfill several consumer goals at the same time and allow each consumer to pursue her own goal choosing a specific consumer-platform sub-assemblage (DeLanda 2016; Hoffman and Novak 2018). For instance, Nike's Run Club offers tracking and ranking features to support self-improvement and sharing features to socially engage with other participants. While the consumer's idiosyncratic crowdsourcing and -sending activities yield individual sub-assemblages, the brand sets the general frame through its assemblage of building blocks.

--- Insert Figure 2 about here ---

Our conceptualization of digital platforms as places of consumer crowdsourcing and crowdsending and corresponding assemblages of building blocks moves the focus of analysis from the platform architecture, which most prior studies address, to the consumer goals that platforms aim to fulfill. It also reduces the complexity and ambivalence of the platform concept reflected in prior literature. This view implies that digital platforms are revolutionary not only because of their ability to scale quickly and leverage network effects (Rochet and Tirole 2003), but because of their versatility and integration ability: they create greater value for consumers by allowing them to draw from and provide to the crowd based on assemblages of building blocks that facilitate idiosyncratic goal pursuit. This recent development is important for brands because it allows them to counter the intermediation through brand

aggregation platforms by evading direct competition on their home turf and instead establish a direct interface with consumers, developing relationships that go beyond discrete transactions. Next, we discuss what these relationships look like and how crowdsourcing and -sending activities affect their emergence.

Outcome: Consumer–Platform Relationships

The relationships that emerge on flagship platforms reflect focal outcomes of brands' platformization efforts because they determine how brands can leverage their platforms strategically. By relationship we denote the possible states that consumers may enter in their interactions with brand flagship platforms and that vary in terms of their self-relevance, commitment, and durability (e.g., Fournier 1998). As consumers interact with platform participants through crowdsourcing and -sending activities, the nature of these interactions shapes the relationship states that emerge (Hudson et al. 2016).

The following sections develop this effect in two steps. In the first step, we establish the general link between the consumer processes of crowdsourcing and -sending on the one hand, and the consumer-platform relationship on the other. To this end, we argue that the nature of interactions on brand flagship platforms varies by the intensity of consumer crowdsourcing and -sending, and that this intensity increases as consumers use the platform to pursue higher-level goals. We then show that this intensity in turn affects consumer-platform relationships on a spectrum from discrete, exchange-based transactions to versatile, ongoing interactions. More intense crowdsourcing and crowdsending move the needle towards the versatile end of the spectrum, that is, increasingly profound relationships that culminate in a deep embeddedness of the platform in consumers' lives (Belk 1988; Zhu and Iansiti 2019).

In the second step, we detail this general link by separating out crowdsourcing and crowdsending intensities to constitute key dimensions of a typology of archetypical relationship states. This step allows us to enter a more fine-grained discussion of consumer-

platform relationships that helps brands analyze specific outcomes of their platform assemblage efforts. We first describe the typology and then develop propositions that clarify which relationship state brands should foster on their flagship platform to realize particular brand goals, and which risks are involved.

Consumer Crowdsourcing and Crowdsending Intensities as Relationship Determinants

The nature of consumers' crowdsourcing and -sending activities on brand flagship platforms can vary greatly in terms of their intensity—that is, how extensive and/or intimate they are (Altman and Taylor 1973; Granovetter 1973). Drawing from prior literature, we refer to extensiveness as the frequency, duration, and variety of activities, whereas intimacy in crowdsourcing (crowdsending) denotes how sensitive or personal the consumed (disclosed) information is or the degree to which participants are influenced by (influence) other platform participants with respect to their attitudes and behaviors (Altman and Taylor 1973; Aral and Walker 2014). Intensity is therefore a continuous dimension of crowdsourcing and -sending that increases with growing extensiveness and intimacy. For example, rating a running shoe constitutes lower-intensity crowdsending than writing a review, which in turn reflects a lower crowdsending intensity than sharing a series of videos that explain different running postures.

When does intense consumer crowdsourcing and crowdsending occur on brand flagship platforms? Brands provide the infrastructure that enables consumers to engage in crowdsourcing and -sending through the platform's assemblage of building blocks and governance mechanisms. However, intense interactions only occur if consumers are also motivated to draw from and contribute to the crowd. As a key factor of this motivation, we put forth whether and how comprehensively the platform addresses consumers' higher-level goals and thus allows to transcend discrete, product-centric transactions, as we explain in the following.

According to means-end theory, consumer goals are hierarchically organized (Huffman,

Ratneshwar, and Mick 2003; Pieters, Baumgartner, and Allen 1995). On the highest level, consumers formulate abstract goals that describe why they perform certain actions in the pursuit of their personal values and ideal self-identity, such as following a healthy and active lifestyle (Pieters, Baumgartner, and Allen 1995). Mid-level goals constitute projects with concrete targets such as being able to run ten kilometers in under 50 minutes (Pieters, Baumgartner, and Allen 1995). On the lowest level, consumers define actions and behaviors that allow them to achieve their superordinate goals, including purchase decisions like buying a particular pair of running shoes (Belk 1988; Pieters, Baumgartner, and Allen 1995).

Brand flagship platforms that address higher-level goals should be more central to consumers' sense of self (Aron et al. 1991; Belk 1988) and thus increase the platform's self-relevance—that is, the alignment of the platform with consumers' self-concept and self-image (Bhattacharya and Sen 2003). As self-relevance grows, consumers' satisfaction, trust, and commitment tend to increase (Johnson, Matear, and Thomson 2011) along with their willingness to engage in more intense interactions. A platform with an exchange-based, product-centric focus serves lower-level goals (Huffman, Ratneshwar, and Mick 2003), implying low self-relevance. In contrast, flagship platforms with a higher-level goal focus should achieve greater self-relevance to consumers and motivate them to engage in more intense crowdsourcing and -sending.

Bardhi and Eckhardt's (2012) findings on the car-sharing provider Zipcar show how fostering intense crowdsourcing and -sending may fail when higher-level consumer goals are not addressed. Zipcar tried to create more intense interactions by introducing a community block to the platform. However, the platform lacked self-relevance as consumers used the platform mainly for utilitarian motives. Hence, they remained highly focused on the lower-level consumption-related goals, did not engage in intense crowdsourcing or -sending, and even actively rejected the community features. By contrast, adidas Runtastic and Nike Run

Club explicitly and consistently address higher-level, self-relevant consumer goals pertaining

to self-improvement and an active lifestyle that foster intimate crowdsourcing (e.g., following

advice) as well as crowdsending (e.g., contributing to the community) activities.

> P_1: Brand flagship platforms that address higher-level rather than lower-level consumer goals (a) are more self-relevant to consumers and, therefore, achieve (b) higher crowdsourcing and (c) higher crowdsending intensities.

By motivating consumers to engage in intense crowdsourcing and -sending, a platform's

locus of value creation shifts from ephemeral value-in-exchange towards ongoing value-in-

use (Ramaswamy and Ozcan 2018; Vargo and Lusch 2004). Accordingly, product-centric

exchanges evolve to project-centric interactions, as consumers use the platform to pursue

discrete (e.g., running a marathon, remodel one's garden) or even continuous projects based

on their higher-level goals (e.g., living an active and healthy life, living in a comfortable and

safe home). These projects are inherently long-term, involving a number of consumer

crowdsourcing and -sending activities on different levels. The platform thus offers a crowd-

based, integrated solution that goes far beyond selling products or services (Epp and Price

2011; Tuli, Kohli, and Bharadwaj 2007).

To illustrate, brand aggregation platforms typically revolve around discrete transactions,

including buying and rating products, or answering product-related questions. These activities

may occur repeatedly but remain superficial and short-lived, lacking intimacy and

extensiveness. Platforms such as Google Shopping provide outstanding transactional value

but crowdsourcing and -sending beyond that are limited and often discouraged or even

prevented (Broekhuizen et al. 2021). In contrast, a brand flagship platform like adidas

Runtastic supports extensive and intimate crowdsourcing and -sending. Consumers upload

self-created content, publicize their performance, or follow workout routines from peers. As

the value-creation process is inherently interactional, greater intensity in these activities leads

to greater and perpetuated value for consumers (Ramaswamy and Ozcan 2018).[3]

The extensiveness and intimacy of intense crowdsourcing and -sending and the interdependence that follows from the joint, project-centric value creation elevate consumer-platform relationships from being ephemeral and exchange-focused to becoming more committed and durable (Fournier 1998; Payne, Storbacka, and Frow 2008). As a result, brand flagships platforms can transcend the traditional customer journey stages and achieve an increasingly deep embeddedness in consumers' lives (Belk 1988; Zhu and Iansiti 2019) with increasing intensities of crowdsourcing and crowdsending.

> **P2:** Brand flagship platforms that support more intense rather than less intense crowdsourcing and crowdsending foster consumer relationships that are (a) less exchange-focused, (b) more committed, and (c) more durable.

A Typology of Relationship States on Brand Flagship Platforms

The general assertion that crowdsourcing and crowdsending intensities are directly related to relationship outcomes can be further detailed by separating out the activities and examining their distinct effects on consumer–platform relationships. Accordingly, we propose consumer crowdsourcing and -sending intensities as the two core dimensions that determine the emergence of archetypal relationship states on brand flagship platforms (Figure 3). We briefly describe these states and illustrate their differences using our athletics example before discussing their implications for product brands as platform owners.

--- Insert Figure 3 about here ---

The ad hoc relationship. When consumer crowdsourcing and -sending intensities are low, value creation is typically transaction- or product-centric, addressing consumers' lower-level goals. Value creation may occur through purchase-related activities (e.g., commercial exchange, product reviews) or functional extensions to the core product (e.g., 'smart' features such as reporting the wear on a running shoe). Importantly, the crowd is not uninvolved in the

---

[3] Sharing intimate data may also constitute intense crowdsending if it is directed at the crowd and creates value for it (e.g., uploading performance data as part of a leaderboard or competition on athletics platforms).

platform's value creation, as consumers may still crowdsource from and crowdsend to the platform by, for example, consulting or providing product ratings or responding to product-related questions (Banerjee, Dellarocas, and Zervas 2021). However, these activities remain superficial as they lack extensiveness and intimacy. As a result, self-relevance is low and the emerging relationship is ephemeral and exchange-focused. This outcome is not necessarily negative because consumers do not always seek highly committed relationships but value instrumentality in low self-relevance consumption contexts (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2017).

The capitalizing relationship. When consumer crowdsourcing intensity is high but crowdsending intensity is low, the consumer primarily capitalizes unidirectionally on value provided by the brand flagship platform while not being highly engaged in the creation of value herself. For example, the consumer may follow a workout routine or extend her knowledge base by watching instructional coaching videos. But as crowdsending intensity is low she does not share her progress with the crowd or engage in community discussions. Intense crowdsourcing implies that the platform addresses self-relevant higher-level consumer goals, creating a willingness to integrate the platform assemblage into her own self (Aron et al. 1991). The platform becomes part of the consumer and her identity, endowing her with new capacities that result in self-expansion experiences (Hoffman and Novak 2018). However, as consumer crowdsending intensity is low, the platform misses out on the input that "lurking" consumers fail to provide, neither creating value for the consumer by actively contributing to the crowd, nor being able to collect data from these crowdsending activities to further improve crowdsourcing opportunities down the line (Schlosser 2005).

The catalyzing relationship. When consumer crowdsourcing intensity is low but crowdsending intensity high, the brand flagship platform catalyzes consumers' value creation, providing a canvas on which they can express and affirm their self (Arnould and Thompson 2005; Toma and Hancock 2013). For example, consumers may share and annotate their

favorite running routes or design sportswear.[4] This intense crowdsending implies that the platform addresses self-relevant higher-level goals and leads to self-extension experiences (Belk 1988) as the consumer integrates part of her self into the platform (Hoffman and Novak 2018). As a result, the platform assemblage gains new capacities from the participant. Hence, in contrast to the relationship states with low crowdsending intensity, consumers are more deeply integrated into the value co-creation process (Ramaswamy and Ozcan 2016).

Nonetheless, value creation in these relationships is innately truncated. The consumer self-extends into the platform while his self remains stuck in the status quo owing to a lack of self-expansion. He thus does not gain new capacities such as skills or knowledge. The relationship is limited by what the consumer *is* instead of what he *could be*.

The nurturing partnership. When consumers engage in intense crowdsourcing and crowdsending, a nurturing partnership between consumer and platform emerges. Contrary to other relationship states, value creation is virtually unrestricted as the both parties can grow mutually. When the consumer extends her self into the platform (crowdsending), the platform's capacities expand, allowing it to provide value through which the consumer self-expands (crowdsourcing). For example, while the consumer engages in crowdsourcing by following a series of video tutorials and live events, she may also engage in crowdsending by contributing to discussions, sharing her training diary, and creating workout playlists. These activities may create consumer value as others engage with her input by upvoting her content, cheering her on, or inviting her to challenges. Furthermore, the input can also spawn new opportunities for crowdsourcing, for example by others offering advice on the consumer's newly acquired skills or the platform improving and personalizing her crowdsourcing experience, reaching ever higher levels of value drawn from the crowd. With these ongoing

---

[4] Intense crowdsending in the form of sharing intimate data (e.g., as part of the benchmarking block) is less common in this relationship state, since consumers receive little in return because of low crowdsourcing intensity (Martin and Murphy 2017).

interactions, the platform and consumer can keep nurturing each other's capacities through the interplay of extending into and being expanded by the respective other. Mutual value creation and co-dependence in a nurturing partnership occur to perpetuate the relationship and its intense interactions (Martin and Murphy 2017), bearing the potential for the platform to become a close companion on the consumer's path toward her higher-level goals.

Aligning Consumer–Platform Relationships with Brand Goals

Brands can use the depicted typology to assemble and dynamically revise their flagship platform to foster the desired relationship state with consumers. Which relationship state is desirable depends on the goal(s) a brand pursues as not every state lends itself well to each brand goal (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2012). Thus, brands need to identify and prioritize their goals and select building blocks and governance mechanisms accordingly. We first present brands' main goals when venturing into platform business and subsequently discuss suitable relationship states to achieve specific goals, as well as the pitfalls that may arise.

Combining insights from academic literature, the business press, and a practitioner workshop (see Web Appendix B), we identified five primary goals that brands pursue when creating their own flagship platform. First, brands expect the platform to support sales of their core offering, either by selling on the platform directly as an additional distribution channel or by indirectly generating leads through recommendations and ads. This activity may also include after-sales services and customer care. Second, brands may aim to extend their core offering by sourcing functional enhancements through the platform, such as connected software applications or inspiration for alternative or improved product use. Third, brands aim to extend their core offering through complementary products and services, typically reaching into adjacent product categories. To stick with our sports example, a brand that sells running equipment might use the platform to offer sports nutrition, personal coaching, active travel booking, and a sports events ticketing service with the help of third-party suppliers. Fourth,

brands aim to increase brand equity and deepen consumer relationships through frequent interactions and ways to nudge engagement behavior (e.g., by facilitating social interaction or co-creation activities). For example, a platform may allow runners to co-design their own sports gear, thereby increasing engagement with the core offering and the brand (Prahalad and Ramaswamy 2004). Fifth, brand flagship platforms promise access to vast amounts of data that brands can use to better understand consumers, competitors, and complements providers.

In *ad hoc relationships*, the transaction block often is core to interactions. If other building blocks exist, they either serve the exchange (e.g., community features for product-related questions) or are limited to functional product enhancements (e.g., after-sales service, tracking features). Means for intense crowdsourcing or -sending are usually not provided, yielding an instrumental consumption experience with low self-relevance for consumers and a focus on utilitarian benefits rather than intimate relationships (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2012). As interactions are limited, brand flagship platforms can employ a restrictive governance style in which the brand retains control over interactions (Broekhuizen et al. 2021).

Despite its lack of self-relevance, the platform can still achieve high consumer loyalty if consumers seek instrumental consumption experiences and the platform provides substantial utilitarian benefits (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2012; Johnson, Matear, and Thomson 2011), for example through efficiency gains from a broad range of offerings or high matchmaking quality (Iansiti and Levien 2004; Perren and Kozinets 2018). This loyalty built on utilitarian benefits such as convenience or cost savings constitutes what we term "cold loyalty". If a flagship platform fails to deliver on these utilitarian benefits or if a competitor delivers greater utilitarian benefits, consumers are likely to quickly abandon the ad hoc relationship.

> **P3a**: If the brand's main objective is to support their core offering (direct selling, functional enhancements), it is optimal to foster ad hoc relationships on the brand flagship platform.
>
> **P3b**: Lower consumer crowdsourcing *and* crowdsending intensities on the brand flagship platform (a) foster instrumental consumption experiences and, therefore, (b) increase the risk of consumers switching to platforms that offer superior utilitarian benefits.

In *capitalizing relationships*, platforms offer opportunities for intense crowdsourcing under higher-level consumer goals. These goals spur concrete needs that the platform may address to increase self-relevance and foster intense crowdsourcing. On an athletics platform, for example, the higher-level goal of an active and healthy lifestyle may create needs for adhering to a training schedule, learning about nutrition, or taking part in sports events. The more comprehensively a platform covers the many needs associated with a higher-level goal—that is, the further it expands into the broader category space—the more self-relevant the platform can become and the more intensely consumers can engage in crowdsourcing. Thus, capitalizing relationships allow—and usually require—brands to extend their core operations into a variety of adjacent fields connected to higher-level goals.

The low degree of consumer crowdsending intensity implies that consumers are not deeply involved in the value creation so that value is usually provided by the brand itself or by third parties. In addition, it allows for a stricter governance style through which brands can retain control over the value creation process and by extension monetization and customer satisfaction (Broekhuizen et al. 2021). Typically, the guidance block is most pronounced as consumers focus on expanding their selves rather than engaging with others. Discrete interactions in capitalizing relationships thus become part of a longer journey to self-expansion, during which the consumer builds knowledge and skills. The result is a "warm loyalty" that goes far beyond rational motives and that features a high level of self-relevance, affective commitment, and attachment (Johnson, Matear, and Thomson 2011).

Despite consumers' strong attachment, this relationship state faces risks of destabilization (DeLanda 2016). On the one hand, as the platform extends further into a category space supported through third-party complementors, the brand risks being diluted as its positioning is stretched across the category space and it vies with third parties for consumers' attention (Swaminathan et al. 2020). On the other hand, consumers may disengage from the platform if

the platform lacks alignment with their higher-level goals (Novak and Hoffman 2019). This

response may result from the lack of intense crowdsending, which challenges the brand's

ability to evaluate the alignment. As consumers are not deeply involved in the value creation,

they cannot steer the platform toward their own higher-level goals.

> **P4a**: If the brand's main objective is an extension of its offering into the broader category space, it is optimal to foster capitalizing relationships on the brand flagship platform.
>
> **P4b**: Higher consumer crowdsourcing intensity on the brand flagship platform increases the risk of brand dilution.
>
> **P4c**: Lower consumer crowdsending intensity on the brand flagship platform increases the risk of misalignment with consumer goals.

In *catalyzing relationships*, consumers engage in intense crowdsending through which

they self-extend into the platform and co-create its value. The platform thus becomes a canvas

that consumer can project their self and higher-level goals onto. It enables this activity

through its assemblage of building blocks, typically by providing pronounced community and

inspiration blocks, and a relaxed governance style. The resulting co-creation experiences are

associated with a variety of psychological benefits that increase involvement, attachment, and

engagement of consumers, fostering another form of "warm loyalty" (Brodie et al. 2011).

Given the low degree of consumer crowdsourcing, interactions typically center on the

brand's core products or a few key platform functionalities. Thus, the brand focus is stronger

in these relationships, decreasing the risk of brand dilution compared to states with high

crowdsourcing intensity. Accordingly, brands can leverage catalyzing relationships to

increase consumers' engagement with the brand's core products. Relationship states with high

crowdsending intensity also allow brands to gather intelligence from the information shared

and value provided by consumers, such as for product development (Hoyer et al. 2010).

While intense crowdsending requires a relaxed governance style that enables consumers'

creative empowerment (Perren and Kozinets 2018), a catalyzing relationship may degrade

when consumers exploit these conditions (Novak and Hoffman 2019). For example,

consumers may hijack the platform by taking it in a direction that is not aligned with the

product brands' values, such as by engaging in anti-brand behavior (e.g., Parmentier and Fischer 2015) or hostile behavior against others (e.g., stalking, bullying). Accordingly, product brands may be tempted to inhibit the expressive capacities granted to consumers. However, this reaction may cause the platform to become unresponsive to consumers' intense crowdsending (Novak and Hoffman 2019), thereby reverting to an ad hoc relationship.

Because the low crowdsourcing intensity increases consumers' focus on the brand and its core offerings, the potential to expand into the broader category space, as in capitalizing relationships, is limited. This limitation bears the risk that consumers feel constrained by the brand corset, and the platform may attract (only) product and brand enthusiasts rather than a more diverse crowd. Take LEGO Ideas as an example, which allows consumers to create and share own designs, but which is firmly tied to the core product of LEGO bricks and its buyers. Thus, an open and inspiring interest community may revert to a more specialized (brand) community (Gruner, Homburg, and Lukas 2014). This issue may further aggravate as in-group members tend to seclude from out-group members (Thompson, Kim, and Smith 2016) which could result in the latter leaving the platform or refraining from joining it in the first place. The focus on the brand's core offering and its existing customers may also render the platform less attractive for third-party businesses and reduce positive network effects (Parker and Van Alstyne 2018). The platform crowd may thus become smaller and less diverse.

> **P5a**: If the brand's main objective is to strengthen engagement with its core offering, it is optimal to foster catalyzing relationships on the brand flagship platform.
>
> **P5b**: Higher consumer crowdsending intensity on the brand flagship platform increases the risk of platform hijacking.
>
> **P5c:** Lower consumer crowdsourcing intensity increases the risk of attracting a (a) smaller and (b) less diverse crowd.

In *nurturing partnerships*, platforms enable high-intensity crowdsourcing and -sending by assembling a variety of building blocks and by extending value creation into the category space spurred by consumers' higher-level goals, thereby fostering self-relevance. The resulting combination of simultaneous self-expansions and self-extension experiences has

profound implications for the relationship. The platform becomes an integral part in the consumer's identity project by being not only a resource to be used (Arnould and Thompson 2005) but an actual partner co-creating the consumer's self just as much as the consumer co-creates the platform offering. In this way, brands may achieve what remained beyond their reach in traditional non-platformized business models: a profound embeddedness in consumers' identity and lives (Arnould and Thompson 2005; Belk 1988).

As a user of an athletics platform is spurred by the higher-level goal of living a healthy and active life, he follows chosen training schedule and participates in weekly challenges (crowdsourcing). His self expands and he increasingly identifies as an active and healthy person. By sharing his performance and achievements, forming a running group, and giving recommendations to others (crowdsending), he proclaims and exerts his new, expanded self. Thus, by extending his expanded self into the platform, the consumer is affirming and reinforcing it (Toma and Hancock 2013). Therefore, self-expansion combined with self-extension is likely to be more profound and lasting than self-expansion alone. As the platform becomes part of the consumer and vice versa, the relationship can achieve a new level of intimacy, attachment, and perpetuation of value (co-)creation, leading to what we term "hot loyalty." Hence, brands can harness nurturing partnerships to build consumer relationships that are highly self-relevant, committed, and durable that downstream benefit multiple brand goals relating to the extension of the offering, sales, engagement, and intelligence.

However, nurturing partnerships also combine the risks of high intensity crowdsourcing and -sending in terms of brand dilution and platform hijacking. In addition, highly self-relevant relationships have been shown to elicit strong adverse consumer reactions when a critical incident occurs, even provoking anti-brand behavior such as spreading negative word of mouth (Johnson, Matear, and Thomson 2011). Thus, if goals in nurturing partnerships should become misaligned or perceptions of exploitation emerge, consumers'

"hot loyalty" may boil over, causing a sudden and lasting dissolution of the relationship.

Nurturing partnerships also tend to be demanding and costly to maintain because brands need to manage third-party businesses as well as high-intensity consumer crowdsourcing and -sending. Their interactions may create new challenges such as complementors defecting with consumers (Zhou et al. 2021) and consequently, the value captured from the platform—monetary or otherwise—may be insufficient to justify its continuation. A case in point is Under Armour, which recently discontinued parts of its brand flagship platform Connected Fitness to focus on a more concentrated set of functionalities (PRNewswire 2020).

> P_{6a}: If a product brand's main objective is to establish consumer relationships that are highly (a) self-relevant (b) committed, and (c) durable, it is optimal to foster nurturing partnerships on the brand flagship platform.
>
> P_{6b}: Higher consumer crowdsourcing *and* crowdsending intensities on the brand flagship platform increase the risk of (a) conflicts causing a lasting relationship dissolution and (b) the incurrence of high operational costs.

Our discussion of relationship states clarifies that although it may seem intuitively desirable for brands to reap the full benefits of intense consumer crowdsourcing and -sending activities, aiming for nurturing partnerships poses specific risks and requires high conviction to overturn the traditional product-centric business model. This strategy is not ideal for all brands, and not every product category is suitable to elicit intense crowdsourcing and -sending. We discuss these aspects next and propose directions of necessary managerial rethinking for brands aiming to create their own flagship platform.

Implications and Research Agenda

Theoretical Implications

Brand flagship platforms are flexible vessels that harness the latest evolutions in platform-based business models. Based on our analysis of these platforms, we offer three sets of extensions to conceptual thinking. First, we extend the notion of sourcing from consumer crowds, as prevalent in the crowdsourcing and community literatures (Kozinets,

Hemetsberger, and Schau 2008; Hemetsberger 2012), to a platform context, where consumers crowdsource value from a pool of offerings supplied by other consumers, third-party businesses, and the platform owner. We integrate this notion with its flipside of crowdsending to an overarching theory of consumer value creation in platform-based business models.

Second, our approach spans the boundaries between different types of digital platforms discussed in literature and observable in the marketplace. Our assemblage model generalizes across diverse platforms such as exchange markets or online communities and accommodates a wide range of consumer benefits derived from platform offerings. In extension to the typology developed in Perren and Kozinets (2018), which classifies exchange markets into discrete types (forums, matchmakers, enabler, and hubs), the assemblage model suggests that brand flagship platforms may unify several or even all these types under one roof, while also integrating other, non-commercial interactions. Our conceptualization thereby also expands the usage of assemblage theory to study consumption and market phenomena (e.g., Price and Epp 2015) by applying it to the context of digital platforms.

Third, we introduce a relational perspective to the theory of platform intermediation. Prior research emphasizes transaction cost advantages and efficiency gains of digital platforms based on network effects (Katz and Shapiro 1985). Our analysis reveals that this rational view, which culminates in relationships of "cold loyalty" and the pursuit of immediate consumption goals, paints an incomplete picture. Consumer-platform relationships may evolve towards ongoing and versatile interactions that target consumers' higher-level goals and elicit self-expansion and self-extension experiences. While product brands are in a good position to build these kinds of relationships, the mechanisms carved out in this article generally hold also for other platform owners across myriad industries.

Areas of Managerial Rethinking

The platformization of the digital space has put substantial pressure on traditional product

brands as competition intensifies and the role of the brand diminishes (Gielens and Steenkamp 2019). However, our analysis shows that the poison can also be the antidote: product brands can carefully assemble their own flagship platforms to loosen aggregation platforms' grip and reclaim direct consumer access. That is, if decision makers successfully rethink long-established viewpoints and behaviors, which we discuss in the following.

Rethinking markets: From products to category spaces. With brand flagship platforms, product brands can expand beyond their core offering and into the broader category space. Operating a flagship platform, especially with ample consumer crowdsourcing opportunities, will thus shift brands' locus of value creation from selling (somewhat standardized) merchandise to offering a virtually endless variety of project solutions that consumers can mix and match to integrate in their discrete or ongoing goal pursuit.

Three steps are important to manage this shift: First, brands must decide on the ground they want to cover. While consumers define the boundaries of the category space, brands fix how far and how fast they want to move away from their home turf. Following literature on brand extensions and resource-based advantage, we suggest that brands address those higher-level goals that fit their positioning and resource configuration. A conservative approach would be to advance in concentric circles by gradually expanding the brand's core offering (e.g., an athletics brand may initially provide guided runs instead of leaping into nutrition). This approach would also give the brand time to build the required infrastructure and additional capabilities, while bearing the risk of competitors occupying larger parts of the category space more quickly through bolder expansion strategies.

Second, brands need to decide which brand goal(s) to pursue and align their platform assemblage. Not any goal can be achieved with any combination of building blocks, and forcing brand goals on a specific assemblage will likely have dire consequences. For example, aggressive selling on platforms with a strong benchmarking block forces the source of value

for consumers to reduce or even collapse. Furthermore, if brands do not consider how each building block creates crowd-based value, their goal attainment on the platform is inhibited and consumers look for alternatives. For example, to achieve a strong brand presence, product brands may be inclined to stack building blocks closely around their core business. In this regard, turning a versatile platform community into a narrow brand community could be just as detrimental as curating inspirational content to ban competitors. Such excessive control would limit the platform's ability to expand into the broader category space.

Third, the brand needs to decide what parts of the offering it intends to "make", "buy" (from third-party businesses), or "earn" (from consumers). While own production is the default for product brands, occupying entire category spaces implies that offerings will increasingly lie outside of their core business. To expand effectively and efficiently, managers must integrate third-party businesses and stimulate supply from consumers. Again, brands should not be afraid to give up (some) control, as creating large parts of the offering in-house is costly and leads the crowdsourcing- and sending concepts ad absurdum.

Rethinking measurement: From brand performance to interaction quality. Just as focus needs to shift away from the core offering, key performance indicators (KPIs) need to evolve beyond product sales. Instead, the value created and appropriated through crowdsourcing and -sending should be measured holistically, with broader system of KPIs. This system should capture at least five facets of value: (1) value to the brand from its products, (2) value to the brand from intermediation, (3) value to third parties, (4) value to consumers from crowdsourcing activities, and (5) value to consumers from crowdsending activities.

Brand flagship platforms are unique in that they are built around a product-based business core and owned by a brand that ultimately aims to strengthen this core (Zhu and Furr 2016). Thus, a suitable measurement system would augment rather than replace traditional product KPIs such as sales and market share. Additional indicators that reflect value to the

brand from intermediation may comprise direct earnings from operating the platform (commissions, subscription fees, ad revenues), but also extend to engagement metrics such as feedback and word-of-mouth activities by third-party businesses and consumers. Brand managers could also learn from Netflix or YouTube, which largely focus on time spent with their services as a key success measure (Sherman 2019). Finally, brands should integrate measures of interaction quality through short, automated surveys, reciprocal feedback systems (such as those used by Airbnb or Uber), and tracking of interactions such as the rate of completion of content or service consumption (e.g., training session drop-out).

To measure value to third parties and consumers, individual-level or segment indicators can inform effective lifetime management. Brands need to track, for example, customer growth and new product, service, and content listings by third-party businesses, consumer usage and ratings of platform offerings, as well as platform access frequency and recency. One idea to structure all these measurement activities would be to classify them into platform building blocks such that brands can better identify white spots in their offering.

With the expansion of the brand's role, optimization objectives expand as well. Brands need to steer away from their sales maximization logic and towards keeping all platform participants happy (Van Alstyne, Parker, and Choudary 2016). Accordingly, managers may have to balance conflicting interests between different value objectives (e.g., do I integrate an open feedback system to increase crowdsending intensity or would that counter my core brand objectives?). This stretch is uniquely difficult for traditional brands owing to the double burden of being offline born and having to entertain a profitable product business "on the side". Our relationship typology can point managers in the right direction, but brands need to be aware that they cannot have the cake and eat it too: Brand flagship platforms are doomed to fail if immediate value to the core products always trumps all other measures.

Rethinking resources: From manufacturing to orchestrating. Contrary to common wisdom, brands aiming to build their own flagship platform need to commit to substantial investments and organizational re-structuring. Manufacturing brands must, for example, develop market research expertise to elicit consumers' higher-level goals, set up a partner management to integrate third-party solutions, and develop user experience and engagement skills. Contrary to pure players, brands must juggle both industrial production and digital intermediation, which require different skillsets and infrastructure.

This latter point pertains also to resources that leverage the exciting dynamics flagship platforms provide an ideal playground for. Owing to the shift from sequential purchase journeys, characterized by so-called loyalty loops that describe a predictable cyclical purchase pattern, to an ever evolving and highly individual platform experience, brands have the unique chance to establish so-called "involvement spirals" (Siebert et al. 2020, p. 45). Perpetuating consumer crowdsourcing and/or crowdsending activities can create unpredictable experiences at every interaction and thereby motivate "increasing experiential involvement over time" (Siebert et al. 2020, p. 46). To this end, brand managers used to sequential product lifecycles will need to provide the resources, manpower, and organizational setup to adopt an agile approach.

Despite these challenges, product brands possess numerous existing assets and capabilities that level the seemingly skewed playing field. Contrary to pure platform players, brands can often rely on an engaged customer base, strong industry ties, expertise in their category, and an assortment of fresh and enticing products to offer. Managers ought to capitalize on these resources, for example by using their brand power and partnerships to negotiate exclusive supply deals, to jumpstart crowdsourcing and -sending and propel strong network effects (Van Alstyne, Parker, and Choudary 2016). Relatedly, while brand aggregation platforms may be unsurmountable in their ability to realize efficiency gains, their

Achilles' heel is the lack of tailored consumer experiences and credible expertise within a specific category space. This, however, is exactly where brand flagship platforms excel.

Avenues for Future Research

To derive future research avenues in the emerging field of brand platformization, we build on open issues that arise from our theorizing and classify these using a survey of 72 marketing managers in the consumer goods industry. We asked participants to evaluate important topic areas relating to key platform decisions, processes, and outcomes. Managers rated each area in terms of its *novelty* and *current relevance* for the success of their brand (see Web Appendix C for details). We then mapped their answers onto a two-by-two matrix (Figure 4).

--- Insert Figure 4 about here ---

In *niche areas*, researchers must identify specific market conditions under which topics are important and interesting to craft a contribution. *Evergreens* promise profound impact as they represent lasting conundrums that practice and research have not or not sufficiently tackled thus far. In *emerging areas*, research opportunities are plenty and although results may not be of immediate practical relevance, they can shape future business practices that put brands at the forefront of innovation. *New key challenges* promise researchers strong and immediate impact due to their high degree of novelty and managerial relevance. We add this classification to our extensive research agenda presented in Table 3. Next, we highlight a few key challenges and emerging areas that may inspire future inquiries, structured along our decision-process-outcome framework.

Decision-related avenues. How to assemble elements of consumer inspiration garners strong managerial interest but is only sparsely researched (Böttger et al. 2017). Further studies could examine different types (e.g., integrated narratives vs. open sequences, professional vs. improvised), sources (e.g., consumers, designers, product brands), and presentation modes (e.g., music, picture, video, text) of inspiring content and how to optimally integrate these in

the platform assemblage. Research may also expand our conceptualization of building blocks by exploring whether and how the weaving together of building blocks gives rise to positive or negative interactions. For example, creating a strong inspiration block alone may elicit less intense crowdsourcing and -sending than if paired with community features that allow for collaborative idea development. Lastly, managers view the role of branding on flagship platforms as a key challenge to address. Important questions that arise are whether the joint creation of consumer experience on flagship platforms diminish brands' importance and dilute their image, and whether the shift away from product-centricity could harm especially traditional manufacturing brands. On the other hand, increasing crowdsourcing and -sending intensities could reinforce the importance of brands as they may become the connective tissue that embodies and communicates the platform's higher-level goal. This perspective complements the work by Swaminathan et al. (2020), who argue that the importance of brands in access-based, instrumental consumption contexts—characteristic of the ad-hoc relationships we describe—may diminish. Research could examine these issues, using relationship states as relevant moderators to branding outcomes.

Process-related avenues. With platformization being unchartered territory for most brands, several issues emerge that concern the governance of flagship platforms. For example, how fast and to what degree should the platform open up to consumers and third-party businesses? And how does the optimal degree of openness vary by building block? Governance issues may also pertain to the individual sub-assemblages that emerge on the platform. That is, while our discussion focused on consumer-platform interactions, it can be fruitful to explore the individual sub-assemblages emerging from consumer-supplier interactions and their consequences for the platform. For example, consumers may build close relationships with third parties that may even culminate in defection from the platform (Zhou et al. 2021). Thus, future research should explore how brands can monitor consumer-supplier

relationships and deploy governance mechanisms that prevent such exploitative behaviors. Researchers should also consider the moderating role of relationship states as exploitative behaviors may be more common in the ad-hoc consumer-platform relationships studied by Zhou et al. (2021), but less likely in intimate consumer-platform relationships. Future studies may also extend our conceptualization beyond the individual consumer to collectives such as families and groups of friends as relevant actors on the platform (Price and Epp 2015). Increasing embeddedness in consumers' lives makes the platform more likely to affect their immediate social environment, raising the question of how interactions and interventions may affect such collectives rather than individuals.

Fostering consumer interactions reflects a key challenge that researchers can explore on different levels. For one, it would be important to garner insights about coherent incentive systems, for example based on gamification approaches, to spur consumer crowdsourcing and -sending. Gamified mechanisms may proof especially useful for intimate relationship states in which monetary incentives are ineffective or even detrimental as consumers tend to apply less exchange-focused norms (Aggarwal 2004). In addition, gamified mechanisms can create unpredictable experiences that dynamically adapt to consumers' evolving skill levels and keep them engaged over extended periods of time (Siebert et al. 2020), making them well suited for more intimate relationship states. Thus, future research could analyze the effectiveness of gamified mechanisms conditional on relationship states. The optimal degree of brand intermediation of these efforts also warrants further investigation.

Outcome-related avenues. The emerging interest in catalyzing relationships and nurturing partnerships suggests that platform-thinking in terms of "buying" and "earning" products, services, and content is still new to most managers. Accordingly, many important questions are yet to be answered. For example, which kinds of brands will be able to create nurturing partnerships and how far can brands venture into the broader category space before they are

stretched too thin? And in turn, up to which point do consumers allow brand flagship platforms to conquer their everyday lives and co-create their identities before responding with reactance to regain sovereignty? Such reactance is one of many (de-)stabilizing processes that may cause relationship states to change over time. While we describe some of these processes, scholars could analyze in detail which specific interventions can transform a relationship into an (un-)desired state.

Finally, while our discussion focuses on offline-born product brands, future businesses will be born into a digital world. Research should explore how our conceptualization extends to these brands and whether they internalize platformized thinking, seek their salvation in the role of platform complementors, or even revert to the more traditional linear approach. As the digital platformization of industries is here to stay, brands will be required to take a stance.

--- Insert Table 3 about here ---

References

Afuah, Allan and Christopher L. Tucci (2012), "Crowdsourcing as a Solution to Distant Search," *Academy of Management Review*, 37 (3), 355–75.

Aggarwal, Pankaj (2004), "The Effects of Brand Relationship Norms on Consumer Attitudes and Behavior," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 31 (1), 87–101.

Albuquerque, Paulo, Polykarpos Pavlidis, Udi Chatow, Kay-Yut Chen, and Zainab Jamal (2012), "Evaluating Promotional Activities in an Online Two-Sided Market of User-Generated Content," *Marketing Science*, 31 (3), 406–32.

Allen, B.J., Deepa Chandrasekaran, and Suman Basuroy (2018), "Design Crowdsourcing: The Impact on New Product Performance of Sourcing Design Solutions from the 'Crowd,'" *Journal of Marketing*, 82 (2), 106–23.

Altman, Irwin and Dalmas A. Taylor (1973), *Social Penetration: The Development of Interpersonal Relationships*, New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

Aral, Sinan and Dylan Walker (2014), "Tie Strength, Embeddedness, and Social Influence: A Large-Scale Networked Experiment," *Management Science*, 60 (6), 1352–70.

Arnould, Eric J. and Craig J. Thompson (2005), "Consumer Culture Theory (CCT): Twenty Years of Research," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 31 (4), 868–82.

Aron, Arthur, Elaine N. Aron, Michael Tudor, and Greg Nelson (1991), "Close Relationships as Including Other in the Self.," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 60 (2), 241–53.

Atluri,Venkat, Miklós Dietz, and Nicolaus Henke (2017), "Competing in a World of Sectors Without Borders," *McKinsey Quarterly*, 54 (3), 1-14.

Banerjee, Shrabastee, Chrysanthos Dellarocas, and Georgios Zervas (2021), "Interacting User-Generated Content Technologies: How Questions and Answers Affect Consumer Reviews," *Journal of Marketing Research*, 58 (4), 742–61.

Bardhi, Fleura and Giana M. Eckhardt (2012), "Access-Based Consumption: The Case of Car Sharing," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 39 (4), 881–98.

Bardhi, Fleura and Giana M Eckhardt (2017), "Liquid Consumption," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 44 (3), 582–97.

Belk, Russell W. (1988), "Possessions and the Extended Self," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 15 (2), 139–68.

Bhattacharya, C.B. and Sankar Sen (2003), "Consumer–Company Identification: A Framework for Understanding Consumers' Relationships with Companies," *Journal of Marketing*, 67 (2), 76–88.

Böttger, Tim, Thomas Rudolph, Heiner Evanschitzky, and Thilo Pfrang (2017), "Customer Inspiration: Conceptualization, Scale Development, and Validation," *Journal of Marketing*, 81 (6), 116–31.

Boudreau, Kevin (2017), "Platform Boundary Choices & Governance: Opening-Up While Still Coordinating and Orchestrating," in *Advances in Strategic Management*, J. Furman, A. Gawer, B. S. Silverman, and S. Stern, eds., Emerald Publishing Limited, 227–97.

Brodie, Roderick J., Linda D. Hollebeek, Biljana Jurić, and Ana Ilić (2011), "Customer Engagement: Conceptual Domain, Fundamental Propositions, and Implications for Research," *Journal of Service Research*, 14 (3), 252–71.

Broekhuizen, Thijs L. J., Oliver Emrich, Maarten J. Gijsenberg, Manda Broekhuis, Bas Donkers, and Laurens M. Sloot (2021), "Digital Platform Openness: Drivers, Dimensions and Outcomes," *Journal of Business Research*, 122, 902–14.

Bughin, Jaques, Tanguy Catlin, and Miklós Dietz (2019), "The Right Digital Platform Strategy," *McKinsey Quarterly*, 2, 1-4.

Constantinides, Panos, Ola Henfridsson, and Geoffrey G. Parker (2018), "Introduction—Platforms and Infrastructures in the Digital Age," *Information Systems Research*, 29 (2), 381–400.

DeLanda, Manuel (2016), *Assemblage Theory*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Epp, Amber M. and Linda L. Price (2011), "Designing Solutions around Customer Network Identity Goals," *Journal of Marketing*, 75 (2), 36–54.

Fournier, Susan (1998), "Consumers and Their Brands: Developing Relationship Theory in Consumer Research," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 24 (4), 343–73.

Füller, Johann, Kurt Matzler, and Melanie Hoppe (2008), "Brand Community Members as a Source of Innovation," *Journal of Product Innovation Management*, 25 (6), 608–19.

Gielens, Katrijn and Jan-Benedict E. M. Steenkamp (2019), "Branding in the Era of Digital (Dis)Intermediation," *International Journal of Research in Marketing*, 36 (3), 367–84.

Granovetter, Mark S. (1973), "The Strength of Weak Ties," *American Journal of Sociology*, 78 (6), 1360–80.

Hagiu, Andrei and Julian Wright (2015), "Multi-Sided Platforms," *International Journal of Industrial Organization*, 43, 162–74.

Hemetsberger, Andrea (2012), "Crowdsourcing," in *The Routledge Companion to Digital Consumption*, R.W. Belk and R. Llamas, eds., London; New York: Routledge, 159–70.

Hoffman, Donna L. and Thomas P. Novak (2018), "Consumer and Object Experience in the Internet of Things: An Assemblage Theory Approach," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 44 (6), 1178–1204.

Holbrook, Morris B. (1999), *Consumer Value: A Framework for Analysis and Research*, London; New York: Routledge.

Howe, Jeff (2006), "The Rise of Crowdsourcing," *Wired*, 14 (6), 1–4.

Howe, Jeff (2008), *Crowdsourcing: How the Power of the Crowd is Driving the Future of Business*, London: Random House.

Hoyer, Wayne D., Rajesh Chandy, Matilda Dorotic, Manfred Krafft, and Siddharth S. Singh (2010), "Consumer Cocreation in New Product Development," *Journal of Service Research*, 13 (3), 283–96.

Hudson, Simon, Li Huang, Martin S. Roth, and Thomas J. Madden (2016), "The Influence of Social Media Interactions on Consumer–Brand Relationships: A Three-Country Study of Brand Perceptions and Marketing Behaviors," *International Journal of Research in Marketing*, 33 (1), 27–41.

Huffman, Cynthia, Srinivasan Ratneshwar, and David Glen Mick (2003), "Consumer Goal Structures and Goal-Determination Processes: An Integrative Framework," in *The Why of Consumption*, C. Huffman, D.G. Mick, and S. Ratneshwar, eds., London; New York: Routledge, 29–55.

Gino, Francesca, & Staats, Bradley R. (2012), "The Microwork Solution: A New Approach to Outsourcing Can Support Economic Development–and Add to Your Bottom Line," *Harvard Business Review*, 90 (12), 92–96.

Gruner, Richard L., Christian Homburg, and Bryan A. Lukas (2014), "Firm-Hosted Online Brand Communities and New Product Success," *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, 42 (1), 29–48.

Iansiti, Marco and Roy Levien (2004), "Strategy as Ecology," *Harvard Business Review*, 82

(3), 68–78.

James, Tabitha L., Jason K. Deane, and Linda Wallace (2019), "Using Organismic Integration Theory to Explore the Associations Between Users' Exercise Motivations and Fitness Technology Feature Set Use," *MIS Quarterly*, 43 (1), 287–312.

Jeppesen, Lars Bo and Lars Frederiksen (2006), "Why Do Users Contribute to Firm-Hosted User Communities? The Case of Computer-Controlled Music Instruments," *Organization Science*, 17 (1), 45–63.

Johnson, Allison R., Maggie Matear, and Matthew Thomson (2011), "A Coal in the Heart: Self-Relevance as a Post-Exit Predictor of Consumer Anti-Brand Actions," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 38 (1), 108–25.

Katz, Michael L. and Carl Shapiro (1985), "Network Externalities, Competition, and Compatibility," *The American Economic Review*, 75 (3), 424–40.

Kelly, Kevin (2016), *The Inevitable: Understanding the 12 Technological Forces that will Shape our Future*, New York, NY: Viking.

Kozinets, Robert V., Kristine De Valck, Andrea C. Wojnicki, and Sarah J.S. Wilner (2010), "Networked Narratives: Understanding Word-of-Mouth Marketing in Online Communities," *Journal of Marketing*, 74 (2), 71–89.

Kozinets, Robert V, Daniela Abrantes Ferreira, and Paula Chimenti (2021), "How Do Platforms Empower Consumers? Insights from the Affordances and Constraints of Reclame Aqui," *Journal of Consumer Research*, (published online March 15).

Kozinets, Robert V., Andrea Hemetsberger, and Hope Jensen Schau (2008), "The Wisdom of Consumer Crowds: Collective Innovation in the Age of Networked Marketing," *Journal of Macromarketing*, 28 (4), 339–54.

Labrecque, Lauren I., Jonas vor dem Esche, Charla Mathwick, Thomas P. Novak, and Charles F. Hofacker (2013), "Consumer Power: Evolution in the Digital Age," *Journal of Interactive Marketing*, 27 (4), 257–69.

Marder, Ben, Adam Joinson, Avi Shankar, and Kate Thirlaway (2016), "Strength Matters: Self-Presentation to the Strongest Audience rather than Lowest Common Denominator when Faced with Multiple Audiences in Social Network Sites," *Computers in Human Behavior*, 61, 56–62.

Martin, Kelly D. and Patrick E. Murphy (2017), "The Role of Data Privacy in Marketing," *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, 45 (2), 135–55.

Maslow, Abraham Harold (1943), "A Theory of Human Motivation," *Psychological Review*, 50, 370–96.

Nambisan, Satish and Robert A. Baron (2009), "Virtual Customer Environments: Testing a Model of Voluntary Participation in Value Co-creation Activities," *Journal of Product Innovation Management*, 26 (4), 388–406.

Novak, Thomas P. and Donna L. Hoffman (2019), "Relationship Journeys in the Internet of Things: A New Framework for Understanding Interactions Between Consumers and Smart Objects," *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, 47 (2), 216–37.

Parker, Geoffrey and Marshall Van Alstyne (2018), "Innovation, Openness, and Platform Control," *Management Science*, 64 (7), 3015–32.

Parker, Geoffrey, Marshall Van Alstyne, and Sangeet Paul Choudary (2016), *Platform Revolution: How Networked Markets are Transforming the Economy and How to Make Them Work for You*, New York: W. W. Norton & Company.

Parmentier, Marie-Agnès and Eileen Fischer (2015), "Things Fall Apart: The Dynamics of Brand Audience Dissipation," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 41 (5), 1228–51.

Payne, Adrian F., Kaj Storbacka, and Pennie Frow (2008), "Managing the Co-creation of Value," *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, 36 (1), 83–96.

Perren, Rebeca and Robert V. Kozinets (2018), "Lateral Exchange Markets: How Social Platforms Operate in a Networked Economy," *Journal of Marketing*, 82 (1), 20–36.

Pieters, Rik, Hans Baumgartner, and Doug Allen (1995), "A Means-End Chain Approach to Consumer Goal Structures," *International Journal of Research in Marketing*, 12 (3), 227–44.

Prahalad, C. K. and Venkat Ramaswamy (2004), "Co-creation Experiences: The Next Practice in Value Creation," *Journal of Interactive Marketing*, 18 (3), 5–14.

Price, Linda and Ember M. Epp (2015), "The Heterogeneous and Open-Ended Project of Assembling Family," in *Assembling Consumption: Researching Actors, Networks and Markets*, R. Canniford and D. Bajde, eds., New York, NY: Routledge, 119–34.

PRNewswire (2020), "Under Armour Enters into Definitive Agreement to Sell the MyFitnessPal Platform to Francisco Partners," *Cision PR Newswire* (October 30), https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/under-armour-enters-into-definitive-agreement-to-sell-the-myfitnesspal-platform-to-francisco-partners-301163499.html.

Ramaswamy, Venkat and Kerimcan Ozcan (2016), "Brand Value Co-Creation in a Digitalized World: An Integrative Framework and Research Implications," *International Journal of Research in Marketing*, 33 (1), 93–106.

Ramaswamy, Venkat and Kerimcan Ozcan (2018), "Offerings as Digitalized Interactive Platforms: A Conceptual Framework and Implications," *Journal of Marketing*, 82 (4), 19–31.

Rangaswamy, Arvind, Nicole Moch, Claudio Felten, Gerrit van Bruggen, Jaap E. Wieringa, and Jochen Wirtz (2020), "The Role of Marketing in Digital Business Platforms," *Journal of Interactive Marketing*, 51, 72–90.

Reinartz, Werner, Nico Wiegand, and Monika Imschloss (2019), "The Impact of Digital Transformation on the Retailing Value Chain," *International Journal of Research in Marketing*, 36 (3), 350–66.

Rochet, Jean-Charles and Jean Tirole (2003), "Platform Competition in Two-Sided Markets," *Journal of the European Economic Association*, 1 (4), 990–1029.

Ruckenstein, Minna and Mika Pantzar (2017), "Beyond the Quantified Self: Thematic Exploration of a Dataistic Paradigm," *New Media & Society*, 19 (3), 401–18.

Schau, Hope Jensen, Albert M. Muñiz, and Eric J. Arnould (2009), "How Brand Community Practices Create Value," *Journal of Marketing*, 73 (5), 30–51.

Schlosser, Ann E. (2005), "Posting versus Lurking: Communicating in a Multiple Audience Context," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 32 (2), 260–65.

Sherman, Alex (2019), "Netflix CEO Reed Hastings Says Subscriber Numbers Aren't the Right Metric to Track Competition," *CNBC* (November 6), https://www.cnbc.com/2019/11/06/netflix-ceo-reed-hastings-subscriber-numbers-are-not-that-important.html.

Sheth, Jagdish N., Bruce I. Newman, and Barbara L. Gross (1991), "Why We Buy What We Buy: A Theory of Consumption Values," *Journal of Business Research*, 22 (2), 159–70.

Siebert, Anton, Ahir Gopaldas, Andrew Lindridge, and Cláudia Simões (2020), "Customer Experience Journeys: Loyalty Loops Versus Involvement Spirals," *Journal of Marketing*, 84 (4), 45–66.

Smith, J. Brock and Mark Colgate (2007), "Customer Value Creation: A Practical Framework," *Journal of Marketing Theory and Practice*, 15 (1), 7–23.

Spaeth, Sebastian, Georg von Krogh, and Fang He (2015), "Research Note—Perceived Firm Attributes and Intrinsic Motivation in Sponsored Open Source Software Projects," *Information Systems Research*, 26 (1), 224–37.

Surowiecki, James (2004), *The Wisdom of Crowds: Why the Many are Smarter than the Few and How Collective Wisdom Shapes Business, Economies, Societies, and Nations*, New York: Doubleday & Co.

Swaminathan, Vanitha, Alina Sorescu, Jan-Benedict E.M. Steenkamp, Thomas Clayton Gibson O'Guinn, and Bernd Schmitt (2020), "Branding in a Hyperconnected World: Refocusing Theories and Rethinking Boundaries," *Journal of Marketing*, 84 (2), 24–46.

Sweeney, Jillian C. and Geoffrey N. Soutar (2001), "Consumer Perceived Value: The Development of a Multiple Item Scale," *Journal of Retailing*, 77 (2), 203–20.

Täuscher, Karl and Sven M. Laudien (2018), "Understanding Platform Business Models: A Mixed Methods Study of Marketplaces," *European Management Journal*, 36 (3), 319–29.

Thompson, Scott A., Molan Kim, and Keith Marion Smith (2016), "Community Participation and Consumer-to-Consumer Helping: Does Participation in Third Party–Hosted Communities Reduce One's Likelihood of Helping?" *Journal of Marketing Research*, 53 (2), 280–95.

Toma, Catalina L. and Jeffrey T. Hancock (2013), "Self-Affirmation Underlies Facebook Use," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 39 (3), 321–31.

Tuli, Kapil R., Ajay K. Kohli, and Sundar G. Bharadwaj (2007), "Rethinking Customer Solutions: From Product Bundles to Relational Processes," *Journal of Marketing*, 71 (3), 1–17.

Statista (2020), "Distribution of Branded and Unbranded Search Volume of Global Brands and SMBs between August 2018 and August 2019," *Statista* (April 21), https://www.statista.com/statistics/1143368/distribution-branded-search-volume-global-brands-smbs/.

Van Alstyne, Marshall W., Geoffrey G. Parker, and Sangeet P. Choudary (2016), "Pipelines, Platforms, and the New Rules of Strategy," *Harvard Business Review*, 94 (4), 54–62.

Vargo, Stephen L. and Robert F. Lusch (2004), "Evolving to a New Dominant Logic for Marketing," *Journal of Marketing*, 68 (1), 1–17.

Von Hippel, Eric (1994), "'Sticky Information' and the Locus of Problem Solving: Implications for Innovation," *Management Science*, 40 (4), 429–39.

Wolf, Gary (2010), "The Data-Driven Life," *The New York Times Magazine*, 28.

Wu, Yue, Kaifu Zhang, and V. Padmanabhan (2018), "Matchmaker Competition and Technology Provision," *Journal of Marketing Research*, 55 (3), 396–413.

Xie, Chunyan, Richard P. Bagozzi, and Sigurd V. Troye (2008), "Trying to Prosume: Toward a Theory of Consumers as Co-Creators of Value," *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, 36 (1), 109–22.

Zhao, Yuxiang and Qinghua Zhu (2014), "Evaluation on Crowdsourcing Research: Current Status and Future Direction," *Information Systems Frontiers*, 16 (3), 417–34.

Zhou, Qiang (Kris), B.J. Allen, Richard T. Gretz, and Mark B. Houston (2021), "EXPRESS: Platform Exploitation: When Service Agents Defect with Customers from Online Service Platforms," *Journal of Marketing*, 002224292110013.

Zhu, Feng and Nathan Furr (2016), "Products to Platforms: Making the Leap," *Harvard Business Review*, 94 (4), 72-78.

Zhu, Feng and Marco Iansiti (2019), "Why Some Platforms Thrive and Others Don't," *Harvard Business Review*, 97 (1), 118–25.

TABLE 1. PROPERTIES OF BRAND AGGREGATION AND BRAND FLAGSHIP PLATFORMS

Property	Brand Aggregation Platform	Brand Flagship Platform
Definition	Platform-brand-owned digital platform that mediates *discrete transactions* between buyers and commercial sellers of branded products	Product-brand-owned digital platform that mediates *versatile interactions* between participants within the brand-related category space
Key goals and activities	Facilitating direct selling of products and services	Multiple goals and activities, for example: creating brand awareness, strengthening consumer relationships, building community, fostering consumer learning, selling products and services
Commercial target function	Facilitate transactions; largely agnostic to product branding	Directly or indirectly drive brand sales and foster brand loyalty
Category scope	Broad: Cross-category generalist	Deep: Within-category specialist
Activity scope	Narrow: Product-focused aggregator of commercial offerings with ancillary services	Broad: Consumer-focused, versatile, and multi-sided network of products, services, and content
Owner	Online-born platform brand Platformized retailer	Offline-born product brand
Role of platform owner	Mediator of commercial transactions	Mediator and supplier of products, services, and content
Roles of platform participants	Largely well defined (buyers and sellers)	Loosely defined (participants can assume many different roles)
Role of product brand	Competes for limited platform space and addresses similar consumption needs as competing offerings	Orchestrates value-creating activities on the platform
Competition	Encourages within-brand and between-brand competition	Aims to avoid within-brand and between-brand competition; focus on complements
Inventory	Internal: None or comparatively limited External: Extensive assortment of (competing) third-party offerings	Internal: Offers own-branded products Possibly external: Offers complements, possibly direct competitor products
User experience	Standardized (category-agnostic); aims for simple product comparison	Individualized (category-specific); aims for optimized consumer category experience
Examples	Amazon Marketplace, Google Shopping, Wish, idealo, JD.com, Alibaba, Zalando	Nike Training Club, adidas Runtastic, ASICS Runkeeper, Bosch DIY & Garden
Related research	Two-sided markets (e.g., Hagiu and Wright 2015; Reinartz, Wiegand, and Imschloss 2019; Rochet and Tirole 2003)	Community building and co-creation (e.g., Kozinets, Hemetsberger, and Schau 2008; Ramaswamy and Ozcan 2018; Siebert et al. 2020)

TABLE 2. KEY CONSUMER GOALS AND PLATFORM BUILDING BLOCKS

Consumer			Platform		
Consumer Goal	Definition	Literature Example	Building Block	Related Features	Literature Example
Commercial exchange	Finding the best-matching offering or exchange partner	Perren and Kozinets (2018)	Transaction block	Product/service marketplace, complaint handling	Hagiu and Wright (2015)
Social exchange	Engaging in social interaction	Schau, Muñiz, and Arnould (2009)	Community block	Community forums, social sharing	Ramaswamy and Ozcan (2016)
Self-improvement	Competing and comparing to live up to one's full potential	Ramaswamy and Ozcan (2018)	Benchmarking block	Tracking, measurement, benchmarking	Labrecque et al. (2013)
Epistemic empowerment	Spreading and gaining knowledge to make informed decisions	Kozinets, Ferreira, and Chimenti (2021)	Guidance block	P2P route planning, "how-to" videos, customer feedback	Kozinets, Ferreira, and Chimenti (2021)
Creative empowerment	Inspiring or being inspired by something new or curious	Albuquerque et al. (2012)	Inspiration block	Decoration videos, tools for exploration and experimentation	Füller, Matzler, and Hoppe (2008)

TABLE 3. RESEARCH AGENDA

Topic Area	Research Questions	Classification
Decision-related		
Individual building blocks	How can brands incorporate different types, sources, and presentation modes of inspirational content? How should brands elicit and leverage consumer inspiration? And to what degree does inspirational content foster more intense crowdsending?	Emerging area, new key challenge, evergreen
	How can brands mitigate possible negative platform experiences when consumers are not progressing or even regressing as part of self-tracking through the benchmarking block?	
	How can brands provide guidance on the platform while mitigating the risk of harmful outcomes (e.g., eating disorders from meal recommendations, injuries from a mismatched workout plan)?	
	How to steer consumers from a brand community to an interest community?	
Assembling building blocks	How do building blocks interact with each other? And how to make products, services, and content searchable and engaging so that building blocks become better connected and provide networked value?	New key challenge
	How do existing brand associations and attitudes affect the optimal assemblage of building blocks?	
	Which building blocks are required to elicit a specific relationship state and which are optional?	
Third-party integration	How do insights from brand extensions, co-branding, and co-opetition transfer to value-creation extensions through third-party integration?	Niche area
	Which parts of the value creation should brands "make" versus "buy"?	
	Which circumstances (e.g., brand strength, market concentration) promote opening-up to competitors?	
	How much competition between suppliers, and between suppliers and the brand, is optimal?	
	How to identify suitable third-party partners? Should brands enter exclusive contracts only? And how can the brand ensure that brand values and standards are reflected by third parties?	
Consumer integration	How relevant is the size and makeup of the existing customer base for brands that platformize?	Emerging area
	Which parts of the value creation should brands "make" versus "earn"?	
	How can brands acquire new consumers beyond its existing customer base?	
	Which consumer characteristics determine their willingness to engage in intense crowdsending? How to identify and target these consumers?	
	How does compensation of consumer-created value affect the platform and its consumer-relationships?	
Branding	Does the joint creation of consumer experiences on flagship platforms diminish brands' importance and dilute their image? And does the shift away from product-centricity harm especially traditional manufacturing brands? Is this development moderated by the intensity of crowdsourcing and -sending increasing the relevance of the brand in high intensity contexts?	New key challenge
	How does our knowledge from brand extensions and co-branding transfer to platformized brands? Specifically, how is brand positioning in this context being impacted?	
	In which direction and how far can brands expand into a category space without harming their reputation? And how can brands mitigate this through careful platform-rebranding?	
	How prominently should the brand be featured in interactions with consumers, among consumers, and between consumers and third parties?	

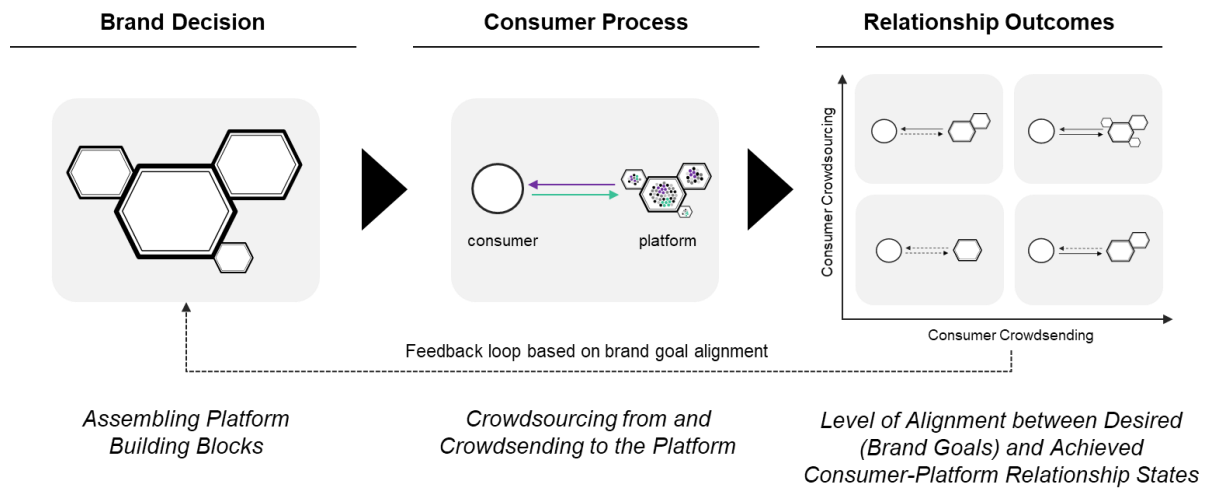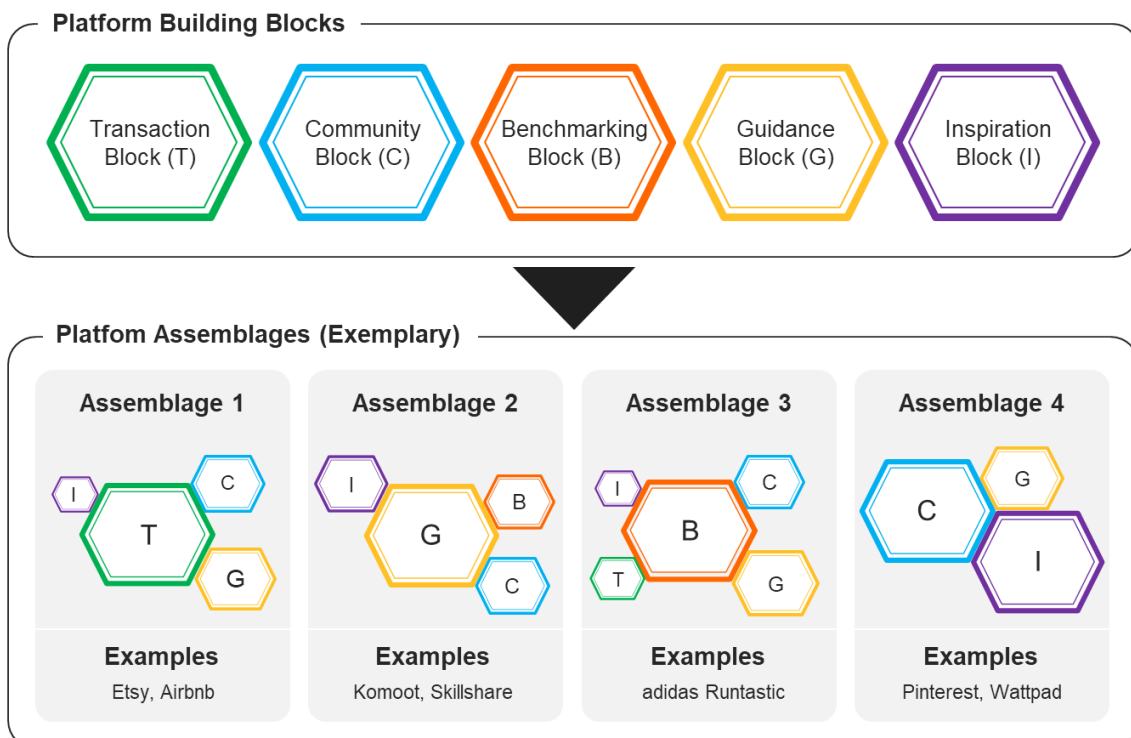|		
Process-related		
Consumer governance	How much empowerment versus restriction is optimal under which relationship state? How does this vary by building block?	Emerging area
	Which individual consumer-supplier relationships occur as part of the platforms subassemblages? How do they affect the platform at large?	
	How do brand flagship platforms affect collectives (e.g., families) rather than individual consumers? Should the platform account for collectives in their value creation process? Should they focus on providing solutions for individuals or collectives?	
	How open does the platform need to be to engage consumers but not hurt own brand goals?	
Third-party governance	How much openness versus restriction is optimal under which relationship state? How does this vary by building block?	Emerging area
	How to shield platforms against "hostile takeovers" or third parties acquiring new customers through the platform and then defecting with them? Is the threat of hostile takeovers less pronounced in more intimate consumer-platform relationships?	
	How should the platform brand mitigate adverse effects through service failures by third-party brands?	
Fostering consumer interactions	How can game design inform the creation of mechanisms to foster interactions? How effective are gamified mechanisms in fostering consumer interactions depending on the relationship state?	New key challenge
	How to transform consumers from passive crowdsourcers to active crowdsenders? Which crowdsending activities are more and less rewarding for consumers? Are there consumer segments motivated by distinct factors that increase their engagement in crowdsending?	
	Which boundaries should the platform obey to avoid feelings of intrusiveness or exploitation?	
	What detrimental consequences could fostering consumer crowdsourcing and -sending activities have on consumer behavior and well-being?	
Outcome-related		
Individual relationship states	Which brands specifically are able to evolve to providing nurturing partnerships? And how far can brands venture into the broader category space before they are stretched too thin?	Emerging area, evergreen, niche area
	How far can a platform advance the relationship before consumers respond with reactance? How to identify consumers that are receptive to a nurturing partnership? And which consumer characteristics predict this receptiveness?	
	How can brands intervene to elicit the desired relationship state? Which brand factors (e.g., brand strength, positioning) influence which relationship state(s) manifest?	
	Can brands develop a market to evolve instrumental ad-hoc relationships towards relational states?	
Relational outcome measurement	How can we measure relational outcomes and the role of the platform in consumers' goal pursuit?	Evergreen
	How do we need to extend existing brand attitude scales?	
	How can we use behavioral big data to infer consumers' goal pursuit and relationship state?	
	How can brands measure and attribute customer engagement value?	
Monetization	How can platforms monetize relationships without scaring off consumers?	Evergreen
	How does monetization affect relationships with consumers?	
	When should brands employ subscription models over pay-per-use?	
	What is the monetary value of the data and insights generated through the platform?	
	How do customer privacy rules play out? How should privacy be balanced with monetization goals? How does this vary by relationship state?	
Business model transformation	Does the conceptualization extend to born-digital brands? Are they born with a platform mindset or do they revert to a pipeline approach?	Evergreen
	Which brand, company, and market characteristics determine a successful brand platformization?	
	Which brands should platformize and to what degree? And which brands should assume a platform complementor role?	
	How to transform: with a "big bang" or gradually over time? And what are contingency factors?	

FIGURE 1. DECISION-PROCESS-OUTCOME FRAMEWORK FOR THE CREATION OF BRAND FLAGSHIP PLATFORMS

Brand Decision

Consumer Process

Relationship Outcomes

Assembling Platform Building Blocks

Crowdsourcing from and Crowdsending to the Platform

Level of Alignment between Desired (Brand Goals) and Achieved Consumer-Platform Relationship States

FIGURE 2. USING THE BUILDING BLOCKS TO ASSEMBLE DIFFERENT PLATFORM TYPES

Platform Building Blocks

Transaction Block (T)

Community Block (C)

Benchmarking Block (B)

Guidance Block (G)

Inspiration Block (I)

Platfom Assemblages (Exemplary)

Assemblage 1

Examples
Etsy, Airbnb

Assemblage 2

Examples
Komoot, Skillshare

Assemblage 3

Examples
adidas Runtastic

Assemblage 4

Examples
Pinterest, Wattpad

FIGURE 3. CONSUMER-PLATFORM RELATIONSHIPS AND BRAND OUTCOMES

Intensity of Consumer Crowdsourcing (vertical axis, High / Low)

Capitalizing Relationship ("warm loyalty")
consumer — platform
- *Experience:* self-expansion
- *Focus:* project-centric
- *Key building blocks:* guidance

Nurturing Partnership ("hot loyalty")
consumer — platform
- *Experience:* self-extension & self-expansion
- *Focus:* identity-project centric
- *Key building blocks:* community, benchmarking, guidance, inspiration

Ad-Hoc Relationship ("cold loyalty")
consumer — platform
- *Experience:* instrumental
- *Focus:* product-centric
- *Key building blocks:* transaction

Catalyzing Relationship ("warm loyalty")
consumer — platform
- *Experience:* self-extension
- *Focus:* project-centric
- *Key building blocks:* community, inspiration

Intensity of Consumer Crowdsending (horizontal axis, Low / High)

FIGURE 4. MANAGERIAL NOVELTY AND CURRENT RELEVANCE OF TOPIC AREAS (MANAGER SURVEY)

Novelty (vertical axis, High / Low)

Emerging areas
- Nurturing
- Catalyzing
- Consumer integration
- Benchmarking block
- Guidance block
- Business model transformation
- Consumer governance
- Third-party governance

New key challenges
- Fostering consumer interactions
- Assembling building blocks
- Branding
- Inspiration block

Niche areas
- Third-party integration

Evergreens
- Monetization
- Community block
- Capitalizing
- Transaction block
- Relational outcome measurement
- Ad hoc

Legend:
- ● Decision-related
- ▨ Building blocks
- ▲ Process-related
- ■ Outcome-related
- ▥ Relationship states

Current Relevance for the Brand (horizontal axis, Low / High)