Jörg Sesselmann

Empowering Brands with Customer Integration

Classification, Benefits and Success Factors

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Berlin, Germany

"Any customer can have a car painted in any colour he wants, so long as it is black."

– H. Ford, 1909, (Ford, H., 2005, p.33)

Preface

Marketing studies tell a lot about how brands can thoroughly manage and "influence" their perception by customers and audiences through brand communication and experience. However in the age of the empowered customer, brands might not necessarily succeed by tightening control but by loosing it.

While respecting established concepts, marketing professionals and researchers need to constantly develop innovative strategies to create value for both brands and customers. My master thesis explores the trend of customer integration and the value it can create. I feel honored and lucky that it is now widely available as a book.

I'd like to thank Prof. Dr. Baumgarth and Prof. Dr. Boltz for inspiring and overseeing my master thesis as well as Prof. Dr. Kreutzer for recommending it to the Springer BestMasters program. I'd also like to express gratitude to my partner, family and friends for the utmost support, my colleagues at MetaDesign for the inspiration and constant challenge and SpringerGabler for supervising and publishing the book.

Berlin, June 2015

Jörg Sesselmann

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List of Abbreviations

AFOL	Adult fan of Lego
ATM	Automated teller machine
B2B	Business-to-business
B2C	Business-to-consumer
Cf.	Compare
Ed.	Editor
Et al.	And others
FMCG	Fast moving consumer goods
Ibid.	In the same place
PiD	Personal identification
POS	Point of sale

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

The relationship between companies and customers is changing. The long established roles of companies, making products and sending messages, and customers, listening to and buying from them, are constantly merging into more collaborative systems. Popular concepts like co-creation, co-production, mass customization and crowdsourcing are blurring the line between vendors and buyers by integrating customers into the design, production or marketing value creation processes. A development, which is rooted in recent societal and technological changes:

Customers' needs are becoming increasingly heterogenic, fostering the demand for individualized offerings (cf. Hippel, 2005, p.37). A trend that can partly be attributed to an increased independence and self-determination in the working environment of people, which translates into their private life and purchase behavior. Another driver of heterogeneous demand is the society's increased financial and educational wealth which promotes the desire for self-expression through individual products. Furthermore, customer segments characterized by spontaneous, experience-focused, hedonistic purchase behavior have an ever increasing heterogeneous demand for individual products and services (cf. Reichwald/Piller, 2009, p.25)

Apart from societal preconditions, technological trends have contributed to the rise of customer integration. The evolution of information and communication technology as well as the commoditization of personal design and manufacturing tools has not only provided the technical preconditions of customer integration in terms of online platforms (cf. Reichwald/Piller, 2009, p.41), it has also led to an em-

powerment of customers, who now strive to communicate, interact and collaborate with companies.

Technological change has altered the rules of media and communication. While customers once were passive receivers of companies' mass media communication messages, the internet has driven a participatory culture in which customers and companies are equal communicators with equal communicative reach, participating in a dialog (cf. Jenkins, 2008, p.3). Customers' ability to influence brand communication by producing their own media is acknowledged by P&G's former chairman A.G. Lafley, who argues that "[…] consumers are beginning in a very real sense to own our brands and participate in their creation." (Kotler/Keller, 2012, p.159). Furthermore, information technology has fueled the development of brand communities, gatherings of customers who are highly interested and involved with products and brands. These customer groups do not only strive to interact with their favorite companies, they also express the desire to become a part of the brand by participating in the design or marketing of its products and services (cf. Reichwald/Piller, 2009, p.27). The eagerness to collaborate in companies' product design processes is reinforced by the fact that customers are not only increasingly empowered in communication but also in the development of products (cf. Hippel, 2005, p.1). While sophisticated software enables customers to innovate and design their own products to fit their individual needs, affordable manufacturing tools like 3D-printers even allow customers to manufacture their own products at home (cf. Kaur, 2012, p.360-361).

Customers are challenging brands to participate in the design, configuration, production and marketing of products. A trend that, on the one hand, challenges and questions established structures and, on the other hand, offers unforeseen potential. Brands now have to decide, whether and how to engage in customer integration.

1.2   Purpose and Research Question

Customer integration concepts have widely been discussed from an organizational, innovation management and product development perspective, outlining general benefits like the increase of efficiency and effectivity, the reduction of product flops or the generation of new product ideas (cf. Reichwald/Piller, 2009, p.6,9). However, limited research has been conducted on customer integration from a brand management's perspective. There is a lack of knowledge about how customer integration should be implemented to benefit not only product development and innovation management but also brand management and brand equity. Thus, establishing a brand-focused perspective on customer integration is the cornerstone of this thesis.

Research question

How can brands and brand management benefit from customer integration and which are the corresponding success factors?

The thesis provides suggestions for companies on how to handle and leverage customer integration with brand equity in mind. While the existing research on this topic only focuses on single effects or single types of integration, this thesis takes a holistic approach. It considers a variety of branding-relevant forms of customer integration in an exploratory way, in order to provide a comprehensive overview. This includes the classification of different types of customer integration, the exploration of benefits of customer integration for brands and the research of success factors of customer integration from a brand management's perspective.

1.3   Research Approach and Limitations

As a conceptual foundation, a short introduction about principles and objectives of brand management and branding is given. Furthermore, the understanding and scope of the term customer integration is defined.

Thereafter, in order to provide an overview and delimit the different concepts of customer integration, classification criteria are established and compiled into a customer integration classification matrix.

The research question is then investigated using an empirical, qualitative, exploratory multiple-case study approach. First, a literature review summarizes the state of research on customer integration in the context of brand management. Based on the literature review and theories from related areas, a theoretical framework of benefits and success factors of customer integration for brands is developed. This framework is then evaluated during a multiple-case study of three customer integration projects, selected by reference to the classification matrix established beforehand. The analysis thereby follows a deductive research logic, establishing theory first and evaluating it in specific case studies.

Concluding the thesis, the framework of benefits and success factors is updated with the findings of the multiple-case study. Linking theory and practice, key learnings and managerial implications for brand management are derived from the theoretical framework. Since this is an exploratory study, it also provides the scientific community with various new research opportunities that can be explored further.

The multiple-case study research approach has been chosen because it allows an in-depth, holistic study of a specific situation in a realistic context and the establishment of a first hand, explorative understanding of the topic (cf. Yin, 2009, p.4). Furthermore, the approach is particularly suited for exploratory research questions and the research of

contemporary events over which the researcher has no control (cf. ibid., p.13). However, case study research is not suited to reliably establish any causalities or relationships (cf. Murray/Beglar, 2009, p.48). The selection of case studies in this thesis covers various types of customer integration in order to gain a large number of broad insights. However, the small number and diversity of the cases significantly limits the potential of replicating findings and thus the external validity of research. As the multiple-case study includes overall successful cases of customer integration only, positive aspects of the concept are emphasized during research while negative aspects can not be evaluated in the same detail.

In order to increase the overall focus of research, the thesis concentrates on customer integration in B2C (business-to-consumer) markets and tangible goods / product marketing.

2.   Conceptual Foundation

2.1   Brand Management

2.1.1   The Basic Principles of Brand and Brand Management

Traditionally, brands have been described as sets of signs, identifying products or services and as legal objects of protection (cf. Esch, 2012, p.18). Considering the variety of other functions and effects that brands have today, a more contemporary and accurate definition from an effects' and customers' perspective is uses as a foundation for this paper:

> **Brand**
>
> "Brand = a name, term, sign, symbol, a design or a combination of these elements, which is known among relevant customers and which has a differentiating image, in comparison to competing offerings, that leads to the formation of preferences"[1] (Baumgarth, 2008, p.6)

Thus, brands are important means of differentiating a company's offers from competitiors, loyalizing customers, establishing fertile platforms for new offerings and securing long-term competitive advantage (cf. Esch, 2012, p.24). The role of brand management, the corporate practice entrusted with steering brands, is defined as follows:

> **Brand management**
>
> "Brand managers' goal is to build and preserve a strong brand with brand equity as the central performance indicator."[2] (ibid., p.57)

Brand equity is seen as the "added value" an offering or a company gains through its brand in contrast to a similar, unbranded offering (cf. Keller et al., 2012, p.42). From an economical perspective, this added value describes the financial surplus generated by a brand. From a behavioral scientific perspective, it describes the change in perception and reaction of customers to marketing activities of a company, evoked by their brand knowledge (cf. Esch, 2012, p.57). As changed perception and behavior are premises for financial surpluses derived from brands, the behavioral scientific perspective is the relevant view for their evaluation and management (cf. ibid., p.61).

The brand management process for attaining and preserving brand equity encompasses the definition of a brand positioning, the implementation and communication of this positioning and the measurement and improvement of the activities (cf. Keller et al., 2012, p.43).

The elements of a brand positioning are best explained by Aaker/Joachimsthaler's (2009, p.44) brand identity model. As a basis, it encompasses the functional, emotional or self-expressive benefits forming the value proposition of a brand. It is complemented by the brand identity, describing the character and values of a brand in the brand essence as well as the core and extended attributes. These attributes aim to characterize a brand in terms of product features and quality, organization attributes, personality traits and visuals. In order to maximize brand equity, the goal of brand management is the consistent implementation and communication of the brand positioning and the ensurance that an integrated marketing strategy reflects the brand positioning in communication, product, price and distribution decisions (cf. Keller et al., 2012, p.200). Every touchpoint of the brand and its target group should have the best possible brand-fit to empower the brand – a paradigm that should also be used when developing and evaluating customer integration activities.

2.1.2 Evaluating Brands by Customer Based Brand Equity

As explained above, brands can be evaluated by their behavioral scientific impact on customers. This understanding has been shaped by Keller et al. (2012) as the concept of customer based brand equity and is defined as "[…] the differential effect that brand knowledge has on consumer response to the marketing of that brand." (ibid., p.54). Thus, Keller et al. argue that customers with specific knowledge, attitudes or feelings about a brand will act more favorable towards its offerings. For instance regarding the judgement of quality, the response to price increases, the general purchase intention, the perception of advertisements or else (cf. ibid., p.54-55). Customer based brand equity can be operationalized by measuring the customer mindset via a wealth of single indicators and comprehensive models. The models usually contain indicators assessing the knowledge of a brand, the associations connected to it, the attitudes towards it, the relational attachment to it and the behavioral implications the brand evokes (cf. ibid., p.383). After the assessment of several models (cf. Esch, 2012, p.72–78, 641–659; cf. Baumgarth, 2008, p.314–330; cf. Keller et al., 2012, p.66–67), a basic yet comprehensive framework described by Keller et al (2012, p.382–383) has been selected for this thesis. The indicators are used to evaluate the effectivity of branding activities and will thus act as a framework for the evaluation of the benefits and success factors of customer integration activities for brands:

Brand awareness	Brand associations	Brand attitude	Brand attachment	Brand activity

Figure 1: Indicators for the assessment of customer based brand equity (based on Keller et al, 2012, p.382–383)

Brand awareness describes, whether a customer knows a specific brand either when being presented with a stimulus like the brand name or visual brand elements (brand recognition) or when being asked for brands from a specific category (brand recall). It reflects the strength

of the brand in the memory of the individual customer (cf. Keller et al., 2012, p.487–489). High brand awareness does not only increase the position of a brand in the customer's consideration set, it can also have a direct effect on brand attitudes and the sympathy of a brand due to the mere-exposure effect (cf. Esch, 2012, p.73).

Brand associations describes the image which customers connect to a brand. The associations should be favorable for customers, unique to the brand and resembling the brand positioning. Thus, associations should reflect the brand value proposition and the brand attributes like product features, personality and visuals (cf. Keller et al., 2012, p.62–64). A higher intensity and number of associations is considered to be favorable (cf. Esch, 2012, p.67).

Brand attitude describes the qualitative evaluation of a brand, based on the associations connected to it (cf. Keller et al., 2012, p.384). Attitudes can either be rational judgements or emotional feelings about a brand. Judgements are mainly related to the quality of the brand and its products and services, the credibility of the brand, its perceived uniqueness and its consideration in case of purchase (cf. ibid., p.75–76). Emotions on the other hand describe, whether a customer feels general sympathy and trust for a brand (cf. Esch, 2012, p.73) or even connects certain strong, positive emotions like warmth, fun, excitement, security, social approval or self-respect to it (cf. Keller et al., 2012, p.77–78). Keller (cf. ibid., p.498) also includes purchase intention as a measure of brand attitude, describing how likely customers are to buy a product or service of the brand or how likely they are to switch from that brand to a competitor's offering.

Brand attachment describes the feeling of loyalty and thus the strength of the relationship between a customer and a brand. On the one hand, brand loyalty means that customers continuously repurchase a brand. However, it does also describe the emotional attachment that custom-

ers develop towards brands, possibly without ever purchasing its products and services (cf. Esch, 2012, p.74). High levels of brand attachment make customers seek active contact with the brand, give them feelings of security and make them overlook negative experiences, like product flaws, more easily. This type of attachment can arise independent from purchases.

Brand activity finally describes, to which extent customers engage with the brand in terms of using it, talking about it and seeking contact with it (cf. Keller, 2012, p.384). A high level of brand activity means that customers are willing to get involved with the brand in brand communities, actively recommend and promote brands and its products (cf. ibid., p.81).

2.2   Customer Integration

2.2.1   The Basic Principles of Customer Integration

In organizational theory, integration is a process that means to ensure the collaboration of different organizational units (cf. Lawrence/Lorsch, 1967, p.11, cited in: Bruhn/Stauss, 2009, p.6). Hence, customer integration can be seen as the process of integrating the customer, defined as "The actual or prospective purchaser of products or services […]" (AMA, 2013, p.1), as an organizational unit into the company. This derivation is supported by Kleinaltenkamp, who originally described customer integration in the context of B2B (business-to-business) service marketing: "If one looks closely, one notices that vendor companies are often integrating external […] production factors into their value creation processes, with or on which the services are performed. […] the

customer respectively 'his' production factors are thus becoming a part of the value creation process."[1] (Kleinaltenkamp, 1996, p.16).

Recent publications have acknowledged this description for B2C and product marketing: "Customer integration 2.0 is understood as the involvement of the customer into the value creation process by using instruments of the web 2.0."[2] (Fandel/Fließ/Jacob, 2011, p.1), "Customer integration describes the combination of information and knowledge from the customer's domain with internal factors of the vendor company as a precondition of value creation."[3] (Reichwald/Piller, 2009, p.56), "Customer integration is the incorporation of resources from customers into the processes of a company." (Möller, 2008, p.198). While these definitions contain varying delimitations, they all agree on a basic principle of customer integration:

Customer integration

Customer integration is the integration of customers into the value creation processes of a company.

Customer integration can thus be seen as the reimagination of the traditional value-creation process of the sequential value chain which is described by Porter (1986, p.36): "Every firm is a collection of activities

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1   Author's translation from German: "Wenn man also genauer hinsieht, stellt man fest, dass Anbieterunternehmen oft in großem Umfang externe [...] Produktionsfaktoren in ihre Wertschöpfungsprozesse integrieren, mit oder an denen die Leistung erbracht wird. [...] der Kunde bzw. 'seine' Produktionsfaktoren werden damit zu einem Teil des eigenen Wertschöpfungsprozesses."

2   Author's translation from German: "Unter Kundenintegration 2.0 wird dabei die Einbeziehung des Kunden in den Wertschöpfungsprozess unter Nutzung von Instrumenten des Web 2.0 verstanden."

3   Author's translation from German: "Kundenintegration bezeichnet die Kombination von Informationen und Wissen aus der Domäne des Kunden mit internen Faktoren des Anbieterunternehmens als Voraussetzung der Leistungserstellung."

that are performed to design, produce, market, deliver and support its product. All these activities can be represented using a value chain." In Porter's value chain, value is created inside the company with the customers being mere consumers outside the firm (cf. Prahalad/Ramaswamy, 2004, p.6). This system evolved into network organizations in which value is created jointly by companies, their suppliers and business partners (cf. Reichwald/Piller, 2009, p.33). Customer integration describes a further extension of the organization into a value creation system, in which customers are also seen as active value creation partners, being integrated in or completely adopting value creation activities – a new division of labor (cf. Prahalad/Ramaswamy, 1993, p.66).

2.2.2   Delimitation of Customer Integration

A variety of concepts and terms are associated with customer integration due to similar ideas or similar namings, including co-production, co-creation, interactive value creation, crowdsourcing, and co-creation of value. While some of these concepts embody the idea of customer integration, others partly overlap with the concept and some are using associated terms to describe contradicting concepts.

Co-Production, co-creation and interactive value creation embody the basic principle of customer integration. Vargo/Lusch (2006, p.284) describe co-production synonymously to customer integration: "[Co-production is the] participation in the creation of core offerings [like] shared inventiveness, co-design or shared production". However, other authors (cf. Normann/Ramirez, 1993, p.66; cf. Wikström, 1996, p.12-14) use the term for the integration into production (manufacturing and assembling) of products only, not mentioning other areas like product design. In contrast, the concepts of co-creation and interactive value creation emphasize the integration in design (innovation), configuration and marketing of products only, while excluding integration into

the actual production (assembling, manufacturing) phases (cf. Reich-
wald/Piller, 2009, p.51; Ramaswamy/Gouillart, 2010, p.4).

Howe's (2006) concept of crowdsourcing overlapps with customer inte-
gration regarding the process of "[…] a company taking a function once
performed by an employee and outsourcing it […]". However, it does
emphasize the outsourcing to "[…] an undefined (and generally huge)
network of people […]" (ibid.) and thus focuses more on the outsourc-
ing of labor to any possible workforce rather than an interaction with
the specific customers of a product.

Despite a similar naming, the concept of co-creation of value in Vargo/
Lusch's (2006, p.284) service-dominant logic is not congruent with cus-
tomer integration and the related concept of co-creation. Rather than
discussing the integration of customers in the value chain, it argues for a
fundamentally new understanding of the concept of value in economics
itself: The concept abandons the understanding of value being inherent
in products and instead sees value as being created during the usage of
a product or service.

2.2.3   Competitive Advantages of Customer Integration

The integration of customers into the value creation process offers a
wide variety of advantages. While recent findings regarding the benefits
of customer integration for brand equity will be elaborated later in the
theoretical framework of the empirical study, this chapter focuses on
efficiency and effectivity gains in developing and producing new offer-
ings, which have originally been associated with customer integration.

Customer integration can make value creation processes in a company
more efficient by reducing costs and increasing productivity (cf. Bruhn/
Stauss, 2009, p.7). The outsourcing of tasks to customers ultimately re-

sults in cost savings by reducing the amount of work that has to be done inside the company by employees. This is particularly relevant in case of operative production or consumption tasks like the assembling of products or self-servicing activities (cf. Normann/Ramirez, 1993, p.66). But also in product development, cost-to-market is reduced when solution information or readily-developed innovations from customers are integrated into the process (cf. Reichwald/Piller, 2009, p.174). Time-to-market of innovations can also see a productivity increase because the integration of customer innovations reduces the amount of market testing required by internally developed products (cf. ibid., p.173).

Customer Integration can also help to make value creation processes more effective by increasing the quality, customer-fit and differentiation of the final product (cf. ibid., p.89). In the traditional sequential value creation process, products are created based on anticipated customer needs of large customer segments, gathered by market research. This procedure is not only inaccurate as customers' needs are not always explicit, but also limited in considering individual preferences (cf. ibid., p.28). During the integration of customers in product development, the company gains access to implicit needs and knowledge regarding the customers' preferences (cf. Bruhn/Stauss, 2009, p.7). Thus, the company can introduce products with a higher fit-to-market and a lower risk of failure (cf. Reichwald/Piller, 2009, p.47,175). Products developed by customers have not only proven to be economically more successful, but also more "novel" because customers are not innovating incrementally based on existing products but radically based on their needs (cf. Hippel, 2005, p.139).

When customers are integrated into product configuration, the product is customized according to their individual preferences, resulting in an unparalleled customer fit. A major competitive advantage that often results in a "[…] significantly higher willingness to pay […]" (Franke/Schreier/Kaiser, 2010, p.1). Furthermore, customized products allow

companies to tap the so-called "long tail" or niche markets and thereby extend their customer group (cf. Anderson, 2004).

Beyond improving product quality and efficiency, customer integration can become a competitive advantage for its own sake when seen as a key part of an offering: Prahalad/Ramaswamy (2004, p.9) argue that while products can easily be commoditized, interactive co-creation experiences around them can not and thus are sustainable, differentiating benefits for the customer.

2.2.4   Motives of Customers' Engagement in Customer Integration

Customers engage in customer integration because they hope to gain certain benefits from the interaction. These can be attributed to intrinsic, extrensic and social motives.

Intrinsic motives are satisfied by the activity of customer integration itself. This is the case, when the integration experience itself is rewarding, joyfull, playfull and challenges creativity and competence (cf. Reichwald/Piller, 2009, p.88), for instance with an entertainingly designed customization tool. When integrated in development, a significant number of customers simply enjoy to deal with product innovation and are curious about new product innovations and ideas (cf. Füller, 2006, p.640), while others have a need for personal contact and enjoy the social interaction (cf. Bütten, 2009, p.71). Another significant motive is performance: Customers enjoy to test their capabilities and gain knowledge while trying to master difficult, demanding tasks or surpass other customers in a competitive situation like a contest (cf. Büttgen, 2009, p.68; cf. Füller, 2006, p.644).

In contrast, extrinsic motives are satisfied only by the outcome of the integration activity. When customers are dissatisfied by available product choices (cf. Füller, 2006, p.644), customer integration enables them to configure a product to their functional needs or innovate new products which they later can use themselves. Customized products furthermore satisfy hedonistic motives and provide image and social status benefits (cf. Reichwald/Piller, 2009, p.257). Another extrinsic benefit drawn from integration can be a price advantage based on a significant amount of personal contribution or a time advantage resulting in a faster or more flexible service provision (cf. Bütten, 2009, p.70). Apart from that, customers also engage in integration because they "get paid for it" or because they receive recognition for their efforts from other customers or the company which strengthens their self-esteem and reputation. Especially when integrating with strong brands, customers use spillover effects of the brand image to create their desired self-identity (cf. Füller, 2006, p.460–461).

Finally, social motives can also play a role in customers' engagement: Customers might integrate due to altruistic motives of helping others or because they desire to belong to a certain group of people (cf. Bruhn, 2009b, p.89).

3.   Classification of Customer Integration

There is a wealth of different forms and concepts of customer integration. In order to provide a comprehensive overview of the possible characteristics, a classification system is being developed. The classification is based on existing categorization attempts, several concepts describing different forms of customer integration and the analysis of actual cases. The criteria are first reviewed briefly and then assembled into a classification matrix. This matrix serves as a basis for the development of a theoretical framework of benefits and success factors and the selection and discussion of specific case studies in the empirical research part of this thesis.

3.1   Classification Criteria of Customer Integration

Value creation phase: This criterion describes, in which value creation phases customers are being integrated. These phases basically encompass the design, production, marketing, delivery and support of a product (cf. Porter, 1985, p.36).

The *design* phase is where innovation takes place and where products are ideated and developed. It must not be confused with mere visual design of new products. The process can roughly be broken down into an open, creative phase of ideation, a targeted process of developing the product concept / strategy and the realization process of bringing the product to market (cf. Reichwald/Piller, 2009, p.123-126; cf. Kotler/Keller, 2012, p.595). Customers are often being integrated in the *ideation* phase in which their completely new or product-enhancing innovation ideas are collected and where they can participate in the evaluation and selection of new ideas. This type of integration is conducted by Starbucks, who are collecting and evaluating ideas regarding their offerings and retail branches on their platform "My Starbucks Idea" (Starbucks Corporation, n.d.). Fur-

thermore, customers can take on the task of *concept development*, during which definite product concepts, designs and prototypes are being created. A well-known example therefore is Lego "Cuusoo", an online platform where customers can submit and vote for new product concepts – mostly in the form of full prototypes (Lego Cuusoo, n.d. a). The *realization* phase of bringing the product to market contains the technical development of the product, market testing and market launch. Due to technological advances, customers can in certain cases even develop products in such an elaborate way that they are ready for market launch. This is the case, for instance, at Spreadshirt, a company which enables customers to create custom apparel via an online platform. There, customers do not only conceptualize their ideas for printed clothing but setup their products ready for production (Sprd.net AG, n.d.). Market testing and market launch will not be included in the classification, because market testing does integrate customers by definition anyway and market launch refers to communication and sales processes which are part of the marketing phase in this model. The idea of integrating customers into the product design phase is founded on the concepts of open innovation and user-centered innovation. Open innovation is described as "[…] the use of purposive inflows and outflows of knowledge to accelerate internal innovation […]" (Chesbrough, 2006, p.1). The concept states that companies should turn their closed innovation processes into open processes by including information from and sharing their unused ideas with undefined external actors to stimulate innovation (cf. Chesbrough, 2012, p.21). User-centric innovation argues that many innovations nowadays are being developed by lead-users (users with a high probability to innovate) and that companies can easily identify and use these innovations (cf. Hippel, 2005, p.2,127)

The **production** phase comprises all "[…] activities associated with transforming inputs into the final product form." (Porter, 1985, p.36) like the configuration, manufacturing and assembling of products. Customers integrated into *configuration* can customize functional and cosmetic specifications of a standardized product to their individual needs, mostly

operating with predefined options. This is the cornerstone of the popular concept of mass customization, which describes the process of producing individualized products with near mass production efficiency (cf. Reichwald/Piller, 2009, p.226-228). "NikeiD", an online platform where customers can customize shoes, is a popular example (cf. Nike, 2013). In contrast, customers integrated into *manufacturing* and *assembling* are confronted with the operative task of the final assembling of the product or fulfillment of the service itself. This is illustrated by IKEA and Maggi, where customers have to conduct the final assembly of the furniture respectively the preparation of the instant meal (cf. Normann/Ramirez, 1993, p.66; cf. Troye/Supphellen, 2012, p.35). In case of a service, this phase can be described as self-service, for instance when the customer draws cash from a self-servicing ATM (cf. Grun/Brunner, 2003, p.88).

Customer integration in the **configuration** phase is a very popular concept. Thus it will not be included into the classification matrix as a subcategory of production but as a main category preceding production. The **production** phase in the matrix will consequently refer to the *manufacturing* and *assembling* of products only.

Customers can also be included into the **marketing** phase, collaborating in the pricing, communication and sales of products and services as well as in the overall brand management. The product design platform Lego "Cuusoo" for instance asks customers for the price they would pay for a specific product while voting for it and thus integrates them into *pricing* (cf. Lego Cuusoo, n.d. b). In *communication*, customers are invited to design communication and advertising campaigns or become a part of the campaigns themselves as testimonials or actors (cf. Vargo/Lusch, 2009, p.7). Examples therefore are the "Million Voices" campaign by Telekom, which included videos of customers into their TV ads (cf. Deutsche Telekom AG, 2010) and the "2originals" campaign by BMW, during which customers were cast as testimonials to advertise the BWM 1series (cf. BMW Group, n.d.). Moreover, animating customers to create word-of-

mouth in terms of recommending the company and spreading marketing content is another way of integration in communication (cf. Büttgen, 2007, p.20), as seen in the campaign "Mein Burger" by McDonald's, which provided customers with marketing material ready to share on the web (cf. Razorfish, n.d.). At Spreadshirt, customers are even integrated into the sales process as they become owners of their own apparel online shops. In this process, the role of Spreadshirt is reduced to producing and delivering products (cf. Sprd.net AG, n.d.). Besides this, customers are also integrated into *brand management* processes: Apparel manufacturer Spreadshirt has integrated its customers into the development of a new logo via a contest (cf. The Open Logo Project 1.6, n.d.).

The integration of customers into the delivery process would encompass the outsourcing of purely logistic functions of transportation. As this kind of integration has hardly been explored and researched, it will not be included into the classification to further narrow down the focus of the overall analysis.

The support phase comprises all services which maintain or enhance the value of the product after purchase (cf. Porter, 1985, p.36). A common way of integrating customers in this phase are online communities, in which customers support each other in problem solving (cf. Prahalad/ Ramaswamy, 2000, p.81). However, this phase is also not included in the classification as it is rarely mentioned in existing customer integration theory.

Strategic significance: The strategic significance of customer integration describes, whether it is just a tactically used *tool* with a small scope inside the whole portfolio of the activities and offerings of a company or a strategic, fundamental pillar of the company's regular business *strategy*, influencing the majority of its processes and offerings. Threadless, for instance, offers its customers an online platform to showcase, vote for, promote and order printed apparel. Despite production, all value creation activities are

in the hands of customers, putting customer integration at the heart of their business strategy: "You are Threadless. You make the ideas, you pick what we sell, you're why we exist." (Threadless, n.d.). In contrast, Henkel's "Mein Pril. Mein Stil." contest, which allowed customers to design a new label for their detergent Pril, was used as a less significant tactical tool (cf. Pril, 2011).

Duration: The duration of the integration describes the permanence of the activity. Adidas "mi", a service which offers customizable shoes, for instance, is a *permanent* activity, institutionalized in the product portfolio of the company (cf. adidas, n.d.). An integration activity that is conducted in limited timeframes only, for instance within a communication campaign, by contrast is a *temporary* activity.

Scope of participants: The criterion scope of participants describes, whether only individual customers or a community of customers are involved. In an *individual* setting, the activity is conducted between the company and a single individual with the outcome intended for the integrated customer only. In a *community* setting, the activity is conducted between the company and an undefined group of customers with the outcomes of integration activities being shared publicly and made available to all (cf. Fliess et al., 2011, p.15).

Form of interaction: The form of interaction describes, whether integration is conducted *physically* or *virtually*. In the first case, the customer has to be physically present to take part in the integration activity. This includes the personal, face-to-face interaction between the customer and company employees or an automated system like an ATM in a retail branch or other locations of the company (cf. Büttgen, 2007, p.33,36). The latter case describes the interaction between the customer and an interactive medium like an online platform, configurator or toolkit, on which the integration is conducted virtually and autonomously (cf. Füller et al., 2009b, p.72). An example for physical integration is the creation of cus-

tomized chocolate ("Schokokreation") at the Ritter Sport store in Berlin (cf. Ritter Sport, 2013), whereas the McDonald's "Mein Burger" campaign (cf. Razorfish, n.d.) integrates customers virtually.

Customer motivation: As described previously, customers can be motivated to get involved in integration activities by *intrinsic* or *extrinsic* motives. Customers draw intrinsic benefits from integration, when they get involved for the sake of the activity itself because it is rewarding, joyful, playful, challenging creativity or competence. In contrast, extrinsic benefits do not arise from the activity itself but by its outcomes. These outcomes can be a product which better fits the needs of the customer, a monetary reward, a prize in a contest or social status (cf. Reichwald/Piller, 2009, p.88).

Publicness: Customer integration can be conducted in an *open* or *closed* environment. In the first case, the company calls out for participants openly (cf. Reichwald/Piller, 2009, p.51), while in the latter integration is conducted internally behind closed doors. Lego's "Cuusoo" platform, for instance, integrates customers into product development in an open environment, publicly accessible for everyone (cf. Lego Cuusoo, n.d.). Lego's "Architecture" product series however was created integrating a single customer selectively in a closed environment without knowledge of the public, leveraging his ideas (cf. Andersson, 2012, p.20). This practice of discovering innovative product ideas from lead users and selectively integrating these into the company, introduced by Hippel (cf. 2005, p.127), can be described as customer integration in a closed environment.

3.2 Summary: Customer Integration Classification Matrix

The criteria discussed are summarized in the following matrix, allowing the description and delimitation of customer integration activities:

Customer Integration Classification Matrix				
Value creation phase	**Design** Ideation and concept development of products	**Configuration** Customization of products	**Production** Manufacturing and assembling of products	**Marketing** Communication, pricing and brand management
Strategic significance	**Strategy** Customer integration is part of the overall business strategy		**Tool** Customer integration is used as a tactical tool	
Duration	**Permanent** Customer integration is conducted on a long term basis		**Temporary** Customer integration is conducted as a temporary activity	
Scope of participants	**Community** Customer integration is conducted between the company and a group of customers, the outcome of integration is intended for all		**Individual** Customer integration is conducted between company and a single customer, outcome of integration is intended for integrated customer only	
Form of interaction	**Virtual** Customer integration is conducted via an interactive online platform		**Physical** Customer integration is conducted personally or via an automated system at a company location	
Customer motivation	**Intrinsic** Involvement of customer is motivated by the activity itself		**Extrinsic** Involvement of customer is motivated by the outcomes of the activity	
Publicness	**Open** Customer integration is called out and facilitated publicly		**Closed** Customer integration is conducted non-publicly in a closed environment	

Figure 2: Classification matrix for the classification of customer integration activities from a brand management's perspective

4.   Theoretical Framework of Benefits and Success Factors

In this chapter, existing literature regarding benefits and success factors of customer integration for brands is reviewed. Then, as a basis for the empirical case study, a framework of potential benefits and success factors of customer integration for brands is established.

4.1   Current State of Research

4.1.1   Customer Integration in Design

Fuchs/Schreier (2010) examined, how customers perceive companies conducting customer integration in design. In their first experiment, 32 students who themselves were not involved in integration, were presented t-shirts, furniture and bicycles. In addition, they were given written information on whether companies had integrated customers in the product design process or not (cf. ibid., p.22). Across all categories, companies fostering customer integration were perceived significantly more customer oriented, resulting in a more positive image. Though not significant, integration in development and selection of concepts was ranked higher than integration in selection only (cf. ibid., p.23-24). Their second experiment (t-shirts: students, n=9; furniture: students and non students n=158; bicycles: students and non students, n=153) showed that companies integrating customers in design received a better rating in corporate attitude (cf. ibid., p.26–27). Furthermore, participants showed significantly higher intentions to (re)purchase the companies' products, to commit to or bond with the company and to generate positive word-of-mouth (cf. ibid., p.27). Companies integrating customers in creation and selection of new products hereby were rated significantly higher than companies only allowing the selection

of products which suggests that the intensity and freedom in customer integration is a success factor (cf. ibid.). The findings regarding higher valuation, loyalty and bonding were replicated in another study by Fuchs et al. (cf. 2010, p.72), who specifically emphasized that loyalty is not bound to the product but to the brand (cf. ibid., p.78).

While Fuchs/Schreier focused on customers who were just passive observers of customer integration, **Füller (2010)** analyzed, how customer integration alters the product and brand relationships of involved customers. In the empirical study, 727 former participants of customer integration in design (concept development), including the products running shoes, baby carriages, mobile phones and furniture, were surveyed via a questionnaire (cf. ibid., p.3). Results show that the experience of customer integration in the design of a product via virtual platforms has positive effects on brand associations in terms of perceived customer orientation and innovativity, brand trust and word-of-mouth (cf. ibid., p.4), meaning willingness to recommend (cf. ibid., p.2). The outcomes depend on the enjoyability of the experience (the right amount of challenge, control and attention on the platform) and the personal characteristics of the customers, like the interest in novelties and the frequency of web usage (cf. ibid., p.5). Another study from **Füller et al. (2009a)** among 548 customers who had been involved in virtual product design processes, yielded similar results.

In their research, **Ind et al. (2013)** created an online community of 177 participants, who had before been part of other online brand communities of brands like Danone or Sony which integrated customers into the design and marketing (communication) of products (cf. ibid., p.11). Several surveys conducted among the users found that the interaction in online brand communities increased the sympathy and positive attitudes towards the brands. Furthermore, participants reported that they felt closer to the brand since they had participated in the community (cf. ibid., p.16). The authors stress that in order to create a flourishing cus-

tomer integration experience, communities have to allow great freedom and impose little control. Moreover it was found that participants have to feel reciprocity between themselves and the brand, expressed through constant feedback (cf. ibid., p.22).

4.1.2   Customer Integration in Configuration

The research of **Mugge et al. (2009)** provides important insights into the field of customer integration in the configuration of products. They hypothesize that the personalization of products establishes an emotional bond between customers and the product. A questionnaire study with 140 students compared a group who had personalized their bicycles and a group that hadn't (cf. ibid., p.470). Research showed that the owners of a customized bike experienced a stronger emotional bond to the product which is mediated by the amount of mental effort put into the personalization and consequently the self-expressive value that the product gains (cf. ibid., p.472,473). However, it was found that the effort has to be balanced to avoid an overload and confusion of the customer (cf. ibid., p.474). It can be assumed that a customer showing a strong emotional attachment to a product does also show strong attachment to the product brand.

Franke et al. (2010) have also researched the psychological effects of customer integration in configuration in terms of mass customization of products. In an experimental setup, they made a group of 114 students either buy a t-shirt, scarf or cell phone cover from shelf or configure the same product design via a virtual platform (cf. ibid., p.130). When asked to rate the perceived value of the products via price bidding, those who configured the products themselves evaluated their creations significantly higher than those who purchased products from shelf (cf. ibid., p.131). Another experiment showed that the valuation was furthermore related to the subjective amount of contribution they had put into con-

figuring the product (cf. ibid., p.136). It can be hypothesized that if a customer configured product is valued higher, the product and thus also the product's brand will be judged more positively, resulting in a more positive brand attitude.

4.1.3   Customer Integration in Production

Bendapuli/Leone (2003) focus on customer integration in production and its effects on customer satisfaction (seen as an equivalent of brand satisfaction). In their study, 124 students had to read and evaluate projective scenarios, including different situations of customer integration in production. When customers were integrated into the production of a product without having a choice to participate, satisfaction with the company was not increased in comparison to a scenario without participation, given that the product turned out to be better or as good as expected. Satisfaction was even lower in comparison to a no participation scenario, when the product turned out to be worse than expected (cf. ibid., p.22). When customers were given a choice, whether to participate in production or not, they were still less or just equally satisfied with the company in case the outcome product was better or as good as expected. Only in the single case of choice to participate and a worse than expected product, customer integration lead to higher satisfaction than in a no participation scenario (cf. ibid., p.25). In conclusion, integration in production mostly had no positive, but partly even negative effects on brand attitude.

This result is contrasted by **Troye/Supphellen (2012)**, who have examined the effects of customer integration in production on the evaluation of the outcome and input products with an experiment in which 74 participants (students) had to evaluate a meal and the dinner kit from which it was made (cf. ibid., p.38). The participants were divided into a group preparing and tasting the dish and a group just tasting it. When

participants tasted the dishes, which were secretly exchanged with standardized versions of the same mediocre quality, those who were integrated in cooking evaluated the outcome product (meal) as well as the input product (dinner kit) significantly better than those who were not involved (cf. ibid., p.39). A finding which could be replicated with "ordinary consumers" who had an "above median interest in cooking" (cf. ibid., p.43). Thus, brand attitudes in terms of quality and sympathy are assumed to be more positive with customers integrated in production. This effect was, however, limited to the precondition that customers had a general interest in cooking respectively the production activity (cf. ibid., p.44).

4.1.4   Customer Integration in Marketing

In their studies, **Thompson/Malaviya (2013)** researched the effects of customer integration in advertising on communication effectivity and persuasiveness, focusing on the impact on passive customers who are not integrated themselves but who know about the integration of other customers. During their experiment, 316 students were presented a TV ad created by integrated customers and were asked to evaluate their sympathy for the ad and the brand (cf. ibid., p.39). The study shows that the participants who knew that the commercial was created by a fellow customer expressed greater ad sympathy and partially also brand sympathy than the group that was lacking this information. However, it was found that this positive effect only occurred when customers were able to identify themselves with the customer who co-created the ad by including information about this customer in the ad. If there was no congruence between the integrated customer and the recipient, the co-created ad and associated brand were both rated worse than in the scenario of a regular ad, due to skepticism regarding the competence of the customer in creating good ads (cf. ibid., p.36). Furthermore, customers who had high brand loyalty generally rated the co-created ads higher than those with low loyalty (cf. ibid., p.44).

A study on the perception of consumer generated ads by **Ertimur/Gilly (2011)** also shows mixed results on the benefits of customer integration in marketing (communication). The authors analyzed reactions on consumer- and professionally-created ads online and conducted additional in-depth interviews (cf. ibid., p.118). Consumer-generated ads were perceived as credible. However, consumers did only discuss the ad and its quality rather than engage with the brand and its messages. Thus, Ertimur/Gilly conclude that the persuasiveness of consumer generated ads is not superior to company created ones (cf. ibid., p.128).

Jacob/Oetting (2012) have also been researching in the field of customer integration in marketing (communication). Their study aimed to evaluate whether the integration of customers in communication increases the probability of word-of-mouth. Their study included 102 participants who witnessed the launch of a new customer card. While 50% of the participants were integrated into the creation of an accompanying blog platform, the others were just informed about this platform without being involved (cf. ibid., p.551). During a survey, those integrated in marketing (communication) consequently reported a feeling of empowerment and a significantly higher intention to recommend the blog (net promoter score), which in turn appeared to be mediated by the level of perceived empowerment (cf. ibid., p.554).

4.1.5   Relationship Marketing

In a conceptual paper, **Bruhn (2009b)** draws connections between the concept of relationship marketing and customer integration in design and configuration. Referring to the concept of relationship oriented brand management by Eichen (cf. 2010, p.11), he argues that quality relationships between brand and customers should be cultivated to create brand attachment. Bruhn furthermore states that the quality of brand relationships is moderated partly by the quality and strength of brand-

customer interactions (cf. Bruhn, 2009b, p.122). As customer integration is a source of rich, intense interactions, it can be assumed that it is a major driver of brand relationship quality and thus brand attachment.

Liu/Gal (2011) examined, how interactions between customers and companies change the relationship and behavioral intentions of customers. In several experiments, customers were asked to give their advice, opinions or expectations on the description of a company's offers and business concept. A survey showed that those who had given advice felt the highest level of relationship closeness to the company. Relationship closeness in return was found to mediate the likelihood of purchasing products from the company (cf. ibid., p.251). As the provision of advice, opinions and expectations is a basic mechanism of customer integration in design, it can be assumed that the effects and variables are equally valid. Thus, customer integration evokes an emotional bond or attachment to the brand. This effect appears to be stronger when customers are asked for advice, like during customer integration, than for expectations and opinions, like during classical market research.

4.2 Theoretical Framework of Benefits and Success Factors

Based on the literature review, the evaluation of various examples and related marketing and brand management theory, a preliminary framework of benefits and success factors is hypothesized in this chapter. After discussing the single benefits and factors, the findings are summarized in a theoretical framework model.

4.2.1 Benefits of Customer Integration for Brands

The benefits of customer integration for brands are judged according to the behavioral scientific indicators presented before in terms of the

model of customer based brand equity. Based on the literature review, a possible impact of customer integration on the following brand equity indicators can be assumed:

Brand awareness: Customer integration in design and marketing (communication) can increase word-of-mouth of involved customers and thus raise brand awareness among the whole target group (cf. Jacob/Oetting, 2012, p.554; cf. Fuchs/Schreier, 2010, p.27). As involved customers are interacting with the brand intensely during customer integration, it can be assumed that they will also show higher awareness of the brand.

Brand associations: Brands are perceived more customer oriented and innovative if they integrate customers in the design (ideation) and design (concept development) process (cf. Fuchs/Schreier, 2010, p.7; cf. Füller, 2010, p.4). While these associations are generally favorable for every brand, they are particularly relevant for brands which have an innovative, customer oriented, open, collaborative brand identity and positioning.

Brand attitude: Customer integration can affect brand attitude, both in positive and negative ways: Integration in design has been found to elicit sympathy for and trust in a brand and intentions to purchase the brand's offerings (cf. Füller, 2010, p.4; cf. Fuchs/Schreier, 2010, p.26–27). Likewise, integration in configuration can particularly enhance brand quality perceptions and purchase intention (cf. Franke et al., 2010, p.131). Positive and negative changes in quality perceptions through integration in production are ambiguous and moderated heavily by interest in the activity (cf. Troye/Supphellen, 2012, p.43) and the quality of the resulting product (cf. Bendapuli/Leone, 2003, p.22). While Ertimur/Gilly (2011, p.128) found that integration in marketing (communication) has no impact on brand attitude, Thompson/Malaviya (2013, p.36) revealed

positive as well as negative effects, depending on the identification between integrated customers and the wider, passive audience.

Brand attachment: Brand relationship research has found that intense interactions – inherent to customer integration – are enhancing brand attachment (cf. Bruhn, 2009b, p.122). Especially integration in design and configuration have been proven to foster an emotional bond to the brand (cf. Fuchs/Schreier, 2010, p.27; cf. Ind et al., 2013, p.16; cf. Mugge, 2009, p.472; cf. Liu/Gal, 2011, p.251).

Brand activity: An increased willingness to recommend and talk about a brand has been proven for the integration in design and marketing (communication) (cf. Fuchs/Schreier, 2010, p.27; cf. Füller, 2010, p.2; cf. Jacob/Oetting, 2012, p.551).

4.2.2   Success Factors of Customer Integration for Brands

Success factors can be distinguished between macro factors, describing strategic preconditions, and micro factors, describing the operative execution of customer integration. In case no limitations are mentioned, the success factors are assumed to be valid for all discussed types of customer integration.

4.2.2.1   Macro Success Factors

Brand identity: Customer integration activities and the brand identity / positioning of the company should fit together. According to Kotler/ Keller's (2012, p.273) concept of integrated marketing, all marketing activities, including communication, product, price, sales and employees, should be aligned with the core message of the brand to create a consistent, clear image among customers to foster brand equity. Esch (cf. 2012,

p.88, 311) argues that therefore, not only brand communication must be contentually integrated but, more important, the overall business strategy and all management decisions should follow the brand strategy. This ensures that all marketing activities do not only generate spillover effects on the brand image but also that product, pricing, sales and communication strategies resonate with the target group. Thus, customer integration should also fit to the brand identity, specifically in terms of organizational attributes (e.g. innovation versus preservation) and brand personality (e.g. exclusive versus approachable) (cf. Aaker/Joachimsthaler, 2009, p.44). As customer integration is known to strengthen the brand associations "innovation" and "customer orientation", it can be assumed that it is best suited for brands aspiring an innovative, customer oriented image (cf. Fuchs/Schreier, 2010, p.7). Customer integration is an activity which makes brands more approachable, collaborative and open. Consequently, it can be assumed that the activity will tie these values to the brand personality.

Brand orientation: Brand orientation describes, which significance the concept of branding and brand management has inside an organization and how consequently management decisions are aligned and coordinated with brand management and the brand identity (cf. Baumgarth, 2010, p.656). As most customer integration concepts are rooted in product management and product development (cf. Reichwald/Piller, 2009, p.6, 9), these organizational functions will most likely try to control the activities to benefit their needs best. Only if a company is sufficiently brand oriented, brand management will be able to implement customer integration activities in favor of the brand.

Brand involvement: Brands with highly involved brand fans or communities can easily tap into customer integration with these target groups. Brand fans or members of brand communities usually are highly involved and emotionally attached to a brand, and thus try to engage with the brand and create an active relationship (cf. Esch, 2012, p.74).

Hence, they will be likely to engage in customer integration activities. Moreover, Thompson/Malaviya (2013, p.44) argue that customers with high brand loyalty resonate best with customer integrated marketing communication. Furthermore, according to Hippel (cf. 2005, p.27), existing communities dedicated to a specific topic or brand are places where lead-users gather. These highly creative and innovative individuals are valuable participants in customer integration in design activities. Considering brand fans or community members often act as brand ambassadors, trying to convince others of their favorite brand, it can be assumed that they will act as multipliers, attracting further customers to the integration activity (cf. Baumgartner, 2009, p.77).

Customer mindset: In order to resonate with customer integration, customers with a specific mindset are required. Favorable characteristics include a demand for individual products, driven by hedonistic buying behavior, or a high level of creativity and education, enabling customers to get involved into product design, configuration or marketing. In case of integration in production, it has furthermore been suggested that the interest of the target group in the production activity is a precondition of positive effects on brand associations (cf. Troye/Supphellen, 2012, p.44). Customer integration activities conducted via virtual platforms on the other hand require an affinity of the target group to online media. Füller (cf. 2010, p.4) provides evidence for the moderating effect of web usage, novelty seeking and exploratory behavior regarding trust in a brand, perceived customer orientation / innovativity and brand activity during integration in design via virtual platforms.

Target groups can be assessed by their demographic, behavioral or psychographic characteristics, provided by cohort- or lifestyle-typologies. For instance, people belonging to the cohort of the millenials, born between 1979 and 1994, have learned the usage of online media from childhood on and express a very selective and individual purchase behavior due to the abundance they were raised in (cf. Kotler/Keller,

2012, p.219). The sinus milieus by Sinus GmbH (cf. 2011, p.14) segment customers in terms of their social status, determined by wealth/education and basic values, ranging from tradition/preservation to self-fulfillment/exploration. It can be assumed that milieus with more explorative orientations, like for instance the hedonistic, expeditive and performer segments, value the individualism and empowerment provided by customer integration more than very traditional ones. The social status and thus educational level might furthermore moderate the level of complexity that customers are willing to engage in, with, for instance, the hedonistic milieu preferring simple customization options and the expressive, highly skilled and creative milieu aspiring more challenging activities (cf. ibid., p.16).

Product class: According to Murphy/Enis (cf. 1986, p.25), products can be classified by the amount of effort or involvement that customers put into the purchase and the perceived risk connected to it. Convenience or commodity products, like, for instance, fresh produce, batteries or salt, are low regarding effort and risk. It can be assumed that customer integration will have little effect in this category because customers might not want to get involved with products they do care very little about. Furthermore, an eventually achieved effect on brand equity would have little impact, as these products are commonly bought without considering specific brands (cf. ibid., p.25). Preference products like beer, soft drinks or toothpaste are higher on risk and thus bought with specific brand preferences in mind (cf. ibid., p.26). Shopping products like clothing or furniture are both higher on risk and effort and are thus carefully compared and evaluated before the purchase (cf. ibid., p.26). Considering that in both preference and shopping product classes, customers are involved with and reflect brands during the purchase process, it can be assumed that they will also be likely to engage in customer integration with these brands. Due to this important role of brands during the purchase decision process, effects on brand equity are especially valuable in these classes (cf. Esch, 2012, p.340). Specialty products on

the other hand are products with unique qualities and brand images, like wines, sports cars or art, that are not compared or substituted easily (cf. ibid., p.29). Their suitability for customer integration is ambiguous: As these brands rely heavily on brand image, effects of customer integration on brand equity will be valuable, and since customers usually have strong brand attachment towards specialty product brands, they might be open for integration activities. On the other hand, customers might not aspire to interact with a specialty product brand because they value the technical quality, exclusivity and elusiveness of the products that would be diminished if they could influence the design, configuration, production or communication.

Product category: According to the "Mass Customization 500" report by Piller/Walcher (cf. 2012, p.280), comparing 500 customization offerings, customer integration in configuration is very common for personalized media, fashion, apparel, personal look and jewelry: lifestyle products, used for self-expression and identification. Moreover, food and nutrition products representing the FMCG (fast moving consumer goods) category are mentioned frequently. Considering that the least common category is electronics, it can be assumed that products with higher complexity are less suited for integration in configuration. The same assumption can be made regarding customer integration in production: The more complex the production task, the less customers will have the competence to perform them in an enjoyable way. Regarding integration in design, research suggests no significant differences regarding the effects of customer integration with t-shirts, furniture, bicycles (cf. Fuchs/Schreier, 2010, p.29), backpacks, running shoes, baby carriages and mobile phones for kids (cf. Füller, 2010, p.3) and Euro Stoxx 50 companies of different industries (cf. Rohrbeck, 2010, p.128). Considering that marketing and communication are less significantly influenced by the type of product, it can be assumed that there are no limitations regarding product category.

4.2.2.2 Micro Success Factors

Customer benefit: Customer integration activities can emphasize emotional or functional benefits. While functional benefits promise functionally better products or higher product quality, emotional/self-expressive benefits on the other hand focus on eliciting certain feelings. Likewise, a brand's value proposition can emphasize either functional or emotional/self-expressive benefits (cf. Aaker/Joachimsthaler, 2009, p.48–50). To strengthen the intended brand value proposition and to be relevant for the brand's customers, customer integration should align its benefit to the brand's emphasized value proposition: An emotional brand like a lifestyle clothing brand should, for instance, focus on providing emotional integration experiences that cater to self-expression. In contrast, a functional brand should provide a functional benefit to the customer such as a shoe with a better fit.

Freedom: Fuchs/Schreier (cf. 2010, p.27) argue that the level of freedom and intensity of integration in design moderates effects on brand attitude. It has also been found that the online communities in which integration in design is conducted are more active if they grant their users greater freedom and impose less control (cf. Ind, 2013, p.22). Positive effects of integration in configuration were also moderated by the freedom, effort and intensity of the activity (cf. Franke et al., 2010, p.136; cf. Mugge, 2009, p.472). Brand activity, in terms of word-of-mouth created by customer integration in marketing (communication), is also moderated by the level of perceived empowerment (cf. Jacob/Oetting, 2012, p.554). However, it can be assumed that, at a certain point, too much freedom and intensity will result in confusion and overstraining of the participating customers and thus has to be balanced carefully (cf. ibid., p.474). Likewise, if the task to be performed during integration in production is too complex, it might be overcharging and frustrating for the customer.

Brand adequacy: During customer integration, customers significantly influence a brand's products and marketing. While great freedom in doing so has been proven to be a success factor in the previous paragraph, all product qualities and brand elements constituting the brands' success should be preserved from negative influence to prevent the dilution of its image or quality perception. The juice brand Tropicana, for instance, redesigned its packaging, removing the signature "orange with a straw" brand element. As a result, sales declined and the old packaging was reinstated (cf. Elliott, 2009). Lego's service "Designed by Me", integrating customers in design, was closed due to the fact that in the absence of any control, fans designed Lego models that did not live up to the brand's quality standards and values (cf. Lego Digital Designer, n.d.). Research has also highlighted that customer integration in production has negative effects on brand image if its outcome is worse than expected (cf. Bendapuli/Leone, 2003, p.25).

User Experience: Füller (cf. 2012, p.4) argues that, when integrating customers in design via virtual platforms, an enjoyable user experience is a moderator of positive effects on brand perception. It can be assumed that this relationship is also true for other integration activities conducted via virtual platforms. The best possible user experience is characterized as "flow", a "[…] highly enjoyable and intrinsically rewarding 'optimal' experience during which consumers get totally absorbed by the activity and lose any sense of time and space […]" (ibid., p.1). To achieve flow, customer integration has to provide the right balance of control and challenge (ibid.). Although user experience is a concept rooted in digital media, it can be assumed that this success factor is also relevant for customer integration in a physical setting. Especially in customer integration in production, it is important that customers enjoy the experience and do not feel like being employed as a resource only (cf. Grun/Brunner, 2003, p.92).

Publicness: If customer integration is conducted "secretly" with selected customers in the form of interviews and workshops only (cf. Esch, 2012, p.338), the company might generate insights but achieve little impact on the brand perception of their larger customer base. Hence, integration should rather be facilitated openly, involving as many customers as possible (cf. Reichwald/Piller, 2009, p.51).

Communication: In order to further increase the awareness of integration activities in design, configuration or marketing, the projects should be featured or integrated into communication campaigns and existing communication material of the company. Not prominently communicating the customer integration activity can have two major drawbacks: On the one hand, a lack of communication can limit the number of people being aware of the activity and thus limit the number of participants. On the other hand, the effects of customer integration stay limited to those customers involved in the activity, while spillover effects on the brand perception of passively watching customers are not leveraged. The integration into a communication campaign should be facilitated according to the concept of "cross-media communication", whereas different media are linked among each other to guide users from one medium to another (cf. Bruhn, 2009, p.35).

Sharing: As described during the analysis of benefits, various forms of customer integration are able to trigger word-of-mouth. In terms of customer integration via virtual platforms, this effect can probably be increased by providing sharing features. McDonald's, for instance, provides customers participating in their "burger configurator" with pictures and printouts to promote their own creation in online and offline channels (cf. Razorfish, n.d.).

4.2.3   Summary: Framework of Benefits and Success Factors

	Design	Configuration	Production	Marketing
Benefits of Customer Integration for Brands				
Brand awareness	●	–	–	●
Brand associations	●	–	–	–
Brand attitude	●	●	○	○
Brand attachment	●	●	–	–
Brand activity	●	–	–	●
Success Factors of Customer Integration for Brands				
Macro Success Factors				
Brand identity	●	●	●	●
Brand orientation	●	●	●	●
Brand involvement	●	●	●	●
Customer mindset	●	●	●	●
Product class	●	●	●	●
Product category	●	●	●	●
Micro Success Factors				
Customer benefit	●	●	●	●
Freedom	●	●	●	●
Brand adequacy	●	●	●	●
User experience	●	●	●	●
Publicness	●	●	●	●
Communication	●	●	●	●
Sharing	●	●	–	●

● Positive theoretical foundation or specific research results available
○ Ambiguous theoretical foundation or specific research results available
– No theoretical foundation or specific research results available

Figure 3: Framework of benefits and success factors of customer integration for brands

While the success factors could be supported for all types of integration, the theoretical foundation of benefits of customer integration in production for brands is very limited and ambiguous. In order to further increase the focus of this research, integration in production is thus not considered further during the empirical case study analysis and the revision and evaluation of the framework. However, it might be reasonable to reevaluate its potential in a future study with a larger scope.

5. Empirical Case Study Analysis of Benefits and Success Factors

5.1 Multiple-Case Study Design

In order to evaluate the theoretical framework of benefits and success factors of customer integration for brands, a multiple-case study analysis is conducted. During the study, the three cases are first analyzed and evaluated individually, according to the theoretical framework. At the same time, the reasonability of the theoretical framework of benefits and success factors is evaluated. After the individual case study analysis, a cross-case analysis is conducted in order to compare the evaluation of the single case studies. Finally, the theoretical framework is evaluated and revised on the basis of the combined insights generated from the cross-case analysis.

The multiple-case study is designed according to the following catalogue of considerations:

- The study is set up as a holistic, qualitative, exploratory multiple-case study, trying to confirm, disprove or open new perspectives on the theoretical framework established in the previous chapter and thus follows a deductive research logic (cf. Yin, 2009, p.59, 136).
- Following the triangulation method to ensure the best possible construct validity, multiple sources of evidence are used (cf. Yin, 2009, p.41).
- Every source analyzed in the case studies is documented in order to maintain a transparent chain of evidence.
- Considering that the value creation stage is one of the strongest classification criteria, cases are selected to cover all phases defined in the theoretical framework (design, configuration and marketing).
- As the study focuses on evaluating the potential rather than the risks of customer integration, particularly successful cases are used.

- According to Baumgarth (cf. 2008, p.6), a brand can only be considered as such, if it exists as an image in the minds of the customers. For that reason, the multiple-case study focuses on renown brands only.
- The analysis focuses on cases which have been active for a considerable amount of time (in case of longterm activities) or which have been completed already (in case of temporary activities).

5.2   McDonald's "Mein Burger"

McDonald's "Mein Burger": Overview and Classification

Company: McDonald's Deutschland Inc.

Agency: Razorfish GmbH

Project: "Mein Burger"

Timeframe: February–August 2011 (case study focuses on first edition, there were repetitions in 2012 and 2013

Summary: During the "Mein Burger" project, McDonald's integrated its customers into design (concept development) and marketing (communication) of its burgers. On a virtual platform, customers were able to design and name their own burgers via a customization tool by combining about 70 different ingredients. The "product concepts" then entered a contest and could be voted on by other customers, whereby the ten winning concepts were assessed by a jury, consisting of McDonald's managers and external jurors. The five final concepts were then turned into real products and sold in McDonald's restaurants. To promote their concepts, participants could create custom flyers, banners, profile pictures, wallpapers and video-ads that included their pictures and names, to share and promote their burger online and offline. Later in the project, the finalists became actors in an integrated marketing communication campaign in TV, radio and online, documenting the realization of the product concepts in the McDonald's "test kitchen" and promoting the products for sale to a broad audience.

Value creation phase	Design	Configuration	Production	Marketing
Strategic significance	Strategy		Tool	
Duration	Permanent		Temporary	
Scope of participants	Community		Individual	
Form of interaction	Virtual		Physical	
Customer motivation	Intrinsic		Extrinsic	
Publicness	Open		Closed	

Figure 4: Overview and classification of McDonald's "Mein Burger" (logo: Wikimedia Commons, 2009; pictures: Razorfish, n.d.; description: cf. Razorfish, n.d.)

McDonald's "Mein Burger" has been selected as a particularly successful case, combining customer integration in design and marketing.

The following sources of evidence have been used to analyze the case:
- Expert interview with the McDonald's marketing department
- Documentation of the case by the agency Razorfish (Razorfish, n.d. a)
- Press coverage by W&V (Herrmann, 2012) and Horizont.net – an interview with participant Steve Krömer on Horizont.net (Rentz, 2011)
- Press release on the completion of the project by McDonald's (McDonald's, 2011)
- Artifcats: the blog of the participant Steve Krömer (Krömer, 2013) and the "Mein Burger" website (Razorfish, n.d. b)

5.2.1   Evaluation of Benefits

The project has been described as a huge success in terms of reach and interactions by the McDonald's marketing department, the agency and the press (cf. Razorfish, n.d. a; Herrmann, 2012): 116.000 customers designed their own burgers, 1.5 million customer votes were collected, 12.000 customers promoted their burgers with an individual ad campaign and the McDonald's Facebook page was viewed over 1 million times during the day of the jury event. According to the McDonald's marketing department, McDonald's is a very renown brand and the increase of **brand awareness** was no priority. While McDonald's emphasizes its 100% brand recognition ratings in Germany (cf. McDonald's, 2009, p.13), it can still be assumed that the impact and interactions of the campaign have lead to an increased unaided brand recall (cf. Expert Interview McDonald's), which is backed up by above-average levels of ad-content-recall (cf. Herrmann, 2012).

The McDonald's marketing department argues that "Mein Burger" has strengthened the McDonald's brand heritage. Considering that the heritage is later detailed as being an open, approachable restaurant where families as well as businessmen can go to anytime, it can be concluded that customer integration positively affects the **brand associations** "open", "approachable" and "fun".

A positive impact on **brand attitude** can be assumed: The customer integrated marketing communication campaign achieved high likability ratings, which might produce spillover effects on the brand (cf. Herrmann, 2012). Furthermore, the McDonald's marketing department is convinced that as the design of their own burgers is a long-standing demand of McDonald's customers, the sympathy for the brand will rise, now that their wish has been fulfilled. Bearing in mind that the project yielded above average sales results, it can be assumed that purchase intention was also influenced positively, both of participants in the design activity and passive viewers of the communication campaign (cf. ibid., p.A13; Herrmann, 2012).

The McDonald's marketing department emphasizes that long-term **brand attachment,** influenced by customer integration, can hardly be measured. However, it can be argued that at least the highly involved winners of the design activity developed attachment to the brand: Steve Krömer, winner of the contest, for instance, published a myriad of news and reports about the project and McDonald's in general, even years after the end of the contest (cf. Krömer, 2013). Therein, he tended to be very positive towards the brand and to defend it from criticism.

This behavior does not only prove an emotional attachment to the brand, but also depicts a considerable level of **brand activity.** During the design contest, Krömer acted as a multiplier, promoting his burger to his online gaming community of 2.5 million users (cf. Rentz, 2011). In addition to the exceptional example of Krömer, 12.000 other customers engaged with

and started conversations about the brand by creating individual ads to promote their burgers in social media (cf. Razorfish, n.d. a).

In summary, McDonald's "Mein Burger" can be described as a particularly successful case of customer integration in design and marketing in terms of benefits for brand awareness, associations, attitude, attachment and activity. This is underlined by the fact that the project has since been repeated in two consecutive years.

5.2.2   Evaluation of Macro Success Factors

McDonald's **brand identity** is described by the McDonald's marketing department as open, approachable and fun: "[…] a restaurant […], where you can go to as you are, and simply, where you have fun […]"[4]. Considering the collaborative, approachable and open nature of customer integration, a significant fit and thus strategic suitability between brand and customer integration can be assumed. The focus on an emotional benefit – "It is fun, the configurator was fun, […]"[5] – further emphasizes this match.

It can be assumed that McDonald's is a highly **brand oriented** company. The McDonald's marketing department states in the interview that at McDonald's, there was no distinction between products and the brand. McDonald's emphasizes that the products are the brand. The overall confusion about the question during the interview suggests that brand orientation is indeed deeply routed in the company.

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4   Author's translation from German: "[…] ein Restaurant […], zu dem man jederzeit kommen kann, so wie man ist und einfach wo man Spaß hat […].

5   Author's translation from German: "Es macht Spaß, der Konfigurator hat Spaß gemacht […]"

Considering that, according to the McDonald's marketing department and press coverage, customers actively demanded the customer integration activity, it can be said that McDonald's definitely has customers with high **brand involvement,** who could be tapped during the project (cf. Herrmann, 2012). This is furthermore underlined by its high ranking (rank 7) in Interbrand's "Best Global Brands" list (cf. Interbrand, 2012).

During the design integration activity, McDonald's indeed focused on a target group with a distinct **customer mindset**: "Teens" and "twens", specifically students, young working persons and brand fans in general, with a high affinity to digital media (cf. Expert Interview McDonald's; cf. Herrmann, 2012), represent the hypothesized cohort of the millenials. This is reflected in the winners of the contest being a student, a young teacher and an apprentice (cf. McDonald's, 2011). However, the McDonald's marketing department emphasizes the ambivalence of the target groups during the project: While the target group of teens and twens was essential in initially designing the burgers, the integration of the contest-winning customers in marketing via a communication campaign created spillover effects on the broad McDonald's core customers of all ages, who in the end mainly purchased the new products (cf. Expert Interview McDonald's). Lacking more specific information on the participants, the influence of psychographic characteristics can not be evaluated.

In terms of **product class**, McDonald's products can clearly be categorized as preference products, thus confirming the proposed success factor. Similarly, the proposed **product category** food and FMCG, hypothesized for customer integration in design, is confirmed. However, the McDonald's marketing department can not imagine any product categories which are not suited for customer integration.

While all suggested macro success factors could be validated during this case, two new possible factors emerged during the analysis:

Relevance: Throughout the interview, the McDonald's marketing department stressed the fact that customer integration should not be attempted, if there was no existing demand among and relevance for customers. As an example, it was argued that while the wish to design custom burgers had been expressed by customers a lot, a custom-designed dish-detergent bottle as seen during the "Mein Pril. Mein Stil." project by Pril might not be a deeply rooted customer desire.

Corporate Culture: The McDonald's marketing department furthermore stressed that it was crucial to execute the project collaboratively with the support of other organizational functions like product development, operations and corporate communications. Without this support, it would not have been possible to turn the virtual product concepts into real products and to create a tangible experience for customers that does not end on the website. Consequently, a collaborative corporate culture appears to be another success factor of customer integration for brands.

5.2.3   Evaluation of Micro Success Factors

"Mein Burger" mainly addresses emotional **customer benefits**: The McDonald's marketing department, as well as the participants, state that the emotional benefit of fun, evoked by creating a burger on the virtual platform, and the spirit of competition were the main motivation for customers to get involved (cf. Rentz, 2011). The chance of "fame" and social status as a testimonial in the communication campaign were mentioned as another major motivation. Considering that the chance of actually getting to eat the self-designed burger in the end is small, the functional benefits of the project are minor. With "fun" being a main value of the McDonald's brand, a significant fit between emotional

brand benefit and emotional customer integration benefit can be determined, thus strengthening the success factor.

With about 70 different ingredients and about five million possible combinations, the virtual platform gave customers great **freedom** in designing their burgers and thus empowered them significantly (cf. McDonald's, 2011). Customers were not allowed to suggest new ingredients, thus limiting the design freedom. However, the McDonald's marketing department emphasizes how important it is to offer options which can later be realized only in order to avoid frustration among customers. Thereby, McDonald's affirms the hypothesis that a high level of freedom is important but has to be balanced.

According to the McDonald's marketing department, McDonald's products have to offer great quality, taste and looks in order to align with the brand's promises. Quality is secured by limiting the ingredients to a controlled selection. Taste is ensured by a jury event during which the product designs are refined or rejected in case they don't meet the quality standards of a McDonald's product. During the integration of customers in marketing, no important brand elements were changed: Customers were only used as testimonials in an otherwise regular, scripted commercial (see commercial in case study film at: Razorfish, n.d.). Hence, **brand adequacy** is ensured.

The participant Krömer argued that it took considerably long to design his winning burger (cf. Rentz, 2011). However, by testing out the platform of the project's 2013 edition and by conducting a visual analysis, "Mein Burger" is assumed to provide a very good **user experience** (cf. Razorfish, n.d. b). The platform presents the configuration options in a very organized way. The visually rich pictures and animations provide instant feedback and reward during the design process and thus contribute to a "flow"-like experience. The engaging user experience of the tool, in which customers can integrate themselves in an online market-

ing campaign to promote their burger, can furthermore be considered to have catalyzed the word-of-mouth that was generated.

"Mein Burger" has been conducted as an open, public project which affirms the success factors **publicness**.

During the first phase of the project, in which customers could design their own burger, there was no support of an integrated **communication** campaign. Still, the platform became very popular due to the integrated sharing mechanisms. During the second phase, a communication campaign including TV, radio and print advertising was introduced to promote the project to a broader audience (cf. Herrmann, 2012). In contrast to the proposed success factor, a communication campaign was not necessary to engage many participants with the project. However it was essential in leveraging spillover effects to the wider core customer group that was not reached by the online platform and word-of-mouth.

The sophisticated **sharing** functionality, allowing customers to create individual promotion material including their pictures and names, proved to be a significant success factor of the project. The 12.000 individual campaigns that were created, contributed significantly to the popularity of "Mein Burger" (cf. Razorfish, n.d. a).

In addition, a new success factor was discovered:

Sincerity: The McDonald's marketing department emphasizes that in order to avoid frustration and disappointment and with that negative attitudes towards the brand, companies have to act honest and sincere during customer integration. "Mein Burger" lived up to this success factor by offering only design options which could later be realized, making the voting and selection process transparent by not influencing results, by inviting external jurors and by not significantly changing the customers product designs after their submission.

5.3   Lego "Cuusoo"

Lego "Cuusoo": Overview and Classification

Company: The Lego Group

Agency: Elephant Design Ltd.

Project: "Cuusoo"

Timeframe: Launched November 1, 2008, active since

Summary: Lego "Cuusoo" is an online platform operated by Lego's New Business Group, integrating customers in product design. On the platform, customers can publish photos and descriptions of their product concepts. These are added to a concept gallery, where other customers can discover and vote for the designs. When a concept reaches 10.000 votes, it is reviewed by Lego and eventually put into production as a special set, sold in official Lego stores and the Lego online shop. Creators of winning concepts are rewarded with royalty payments of 1% of total net sales of the product. Lego "Cuusoo" was launched in 2008 in Japan only. By 2011, Lego "Cuusoo" was extended into a global open beta with three sets produced already by July 2013. Concepts can be created by single customers or by customer groups. The project is accessible worldwide.

Value creation phase	Design	Configuration	Production	Marketing
Strategic significance	Strategy		Tool	
Duration	Permanent		Temporary	
Scope of participants	Community		Individual	
Form of interaction	Virtual		Physical	
Customer motivation	Intrinsic		Extrinsic	
Publicness	Open		Closed	

Figure 5: Overview and classification of Lego "Cuusoo" (logo: Wikimedia Commons, 2006; pictures: Lego Cuusoo, n.d. d; description: cf. Lego Cuusoo, n.d., 2008, 2012, 2013)

Lego "Cuusoo" has been selected because it still is a project without much public exposure and communication campaign support which nonetheless is rapidly gaining momentum. Furthermore, the product is fairly complex compared to McDonald's "Mein Burger".

The following sources of evidence have been used to analyze the case:
- Expert interview with Lego "Cuusoo" marketing department
- A press release by Lego "Cuusoo" (Lego Cuusoo, 2008)
- Several artifacts, namely the Lego "Cuusoo" website, blog, the Lego website and the Lego progress report 2012 (Lego Cuusoo, n.d., n.d. a, n.d. d, n.d. e, n.d. f, 2012, 2012a, 2013; Lego, n.d.; The LEGO Group, 2012)
- Press coverage by Glenbricker and Fastcompany.com (Glen Bricker, 2013; Kronsberg, 2012)
- A presentation by Lego's Tim Courtney and Peter Espersen (Courtney/Espersen, 2013)

5.3.1   Evaluation of Benefits

Lego "Cuusoo" is already being evaluated internally by its impact on brand equity. The Lego "Cuusoo" marketing department states that Lego is constantly looking for "[…] ways, to develop […] metrics for the brand equity that comes from our fan engagement.". Lego was well aware of possible effects of "Cuusoo" on the Lego brand and thus conducted the beta test of "Cuusoo" in Japan to prevent possible worldwide negative spillover effects in case of failure. Now that it has successfully advanced into global beta status, the Lego "Cuusoo" marketing department argues that Lego "Cuusoo" "[…] provides tremendous brand equity".

The Lego brand can be regarded as one of the most renown brands in the world. Still, it can be argued that "Cuusoo" helped to increase **brand awareness** in terms of bringing the brand back to the top of custom-

ers' minds: The website is reported to have 500.000 unique visitors per month (cf. The LEGO Group, 2012) and receives constant media response: "[…] all it takes is for the video to sit on the Lego YouTube channel […] and within a couple of hours it's spread around the world." (Lego Expert Interview). According to the Lego "Cuusoo" marketing department, these visitors include not only highly involved Lego fans, who are mostly engaged in creating designs, and casual Lego customers, mostly discovering and voting for designs. Among visitors are also completely new target groups that are drawn to Lego "Cuusoo" by product concepts catering to their special interests (cf. Lego Expert Interview). Thereby, "Cuusoo" helps to expand the reach of Lego brand awareness into new target groups, which is underlined by the first four "Cuusoo" sets catering to the "Back to the Future" movie franchise, the "Minecraft" gaming franchise and the science community (cf. Lego Cuusoo, 2013).

In terms of **brand associations**, the Lego "Cuusoo" marketing department argues that "Cuusoo" fosters the perception of the traditional Lego brand values of "open" and "accessible" by literally opening up the brand to customers.

Effects on **brand attitude** are described ambiguously: On the one hand, "Cuusoo" is described as giving people the chance to fulfill their dream to be a Lego designer, possibly inducing positive attitudes about the brand (cf. Lego Expert Interview). On the other hand, the Lego "Cuusoo" marketing department emphasizes that "Cuusoo" often reaps criticism from creators and voters for the rejection of product concepts due to partly intransparent guidelines and the time it takes to turn customer created concepts into real products, which can turn into negative feelings and attitudes towards the brand. Apart from this, the Lego "Cuusoo" marketing department states that "Cuusoo" "[…] is by far a sustainable business […]", underlining the positive effect on purchase intention for customer-created products.

Lego "Cuusoo" can be considered to foster **brand attachment** and **brand activity**: The Lego "Cuusoo" marketing department emphasizes that customers, who were involved in the project, become brand advocates due to the intense interaction with the company. These do not only become attached to the brand but generate a substantial amount of word-of-mouth by promoting their own or other's product concepts. The creators of the "Back to the Future" "Cuusoo"-set even conducted public relations-like activities to gather supporters and press (cf. Lego Cuusoo, n.d. e).

Lego "Cuusoo" can thus be regarded as a successful case of customer integration in design in general and from a brand's perspective. Positive effects on brand awareness, brand associations, brand attachment and brand activity among involved customers have been reported. However, the effects on brand attitude are ambiguous. Furthermore, the impact of Lego "Cuusoo" on the passive mass segment of casual Lego customers has not been evaluated and might be little, due to the fact that "Cuusoo" is not prominently advertised or linked on the company website or catalogue (cf. Lego, n.d.) or in the Lego stores (a visit at the Berlin Lego Store, Tauentzienstraße 20 at July 16, 2013 showed no point of sale promotion besides the products themselves).

5.3.2   Evaluation of Macro Success Factors

Lego's **brand identity** is described in the company's brand framework, which consists of Lego's mission "Inspire and develop the builders of tomorrow", its vision "Inventing the future of play", the values "imagination, creativity, fun, learning, caring and quality" and – among other "promises" – the play promise "joy of building, pride of creation" and the people promise "succeed together" (cf. The LEGO Group, 2012). The brand is furthermore described by the Lego "Cuusoo" marketing department as open and approachable. The strong emphasis on innova-

tion- and creativity-related values as well as the collaborative, open im-
age of the brand can be considered a perfect fit with customer integra-
tion in design, which in turn allows customers to be innovative, creative
and to collaborate with the brand.

According to the Lego "Cuusoo" marketing department, Lego has a very
strong identity that is well understood inside the company, due to strong
brand management. The high level of **brand orientation** at Lego is fur-
thermore emphasized by the Lego "Cuusoo" marketing department's
repeated mentioning of the rigorous brand fit analysis, every "Cuusoo"
set has to pass on it's way to production.

The Lego brand has a considerably large and active brand community,
engaging in events, conventions and the creation of custom Lego mod-
els. Therefore, the success factor **brand involvement** is strengthened.
The Lego "Cuusoo" marketing department explains that the brand
community is a major driver of Lego "Cuusoo's" success, which in turn
would not have been possible without 80 years of building the brand:
Not only does the brand community contribute a significant number
of product concepts to the platform, also does it – and the popularity of
the Lego brand at large – allow news about "Cuusoo" to travel fast and
spread around the world with virtually no advertising expenses.

According to the Lego "Cuusoo" marketing department, "Cuusoo" is
catering to different audiences with certain **customer mindsets**: About
10% are identified as lead users, who create and curate most product
designs on the platform. These are either brand fans, specifically AFOLs
(adult fans of Lego) or other highly creative, skilled customers, using
their deep expertise, like, for instance, a Nasa engineer creating a Lego
set of the Mars rover. The remaining 90% of visitors are those who vote
for product concepts and thereby decide which concepts are consid-
ered for production. These are roughly described as male, 30–35 years
old, with an affinity to online media, to Lego and special interests like

science-fiction, comics or science. While the first segment affirms the hypothesized creativity and education, the second approves the affinity to online media.

Lego sets can be designated as shopping products due to the considerable amount of time and money invested in their purchase. Consequently, the suggested success factor **product class** is strengthened. While no limitations were hypothesized for the integration in design regarding **product category**, the Lego "Cuusoo" marketing department outlines that the complexity of the Lego product brings along certain disadvantages concerning the amount of work and time going into the refinement and adaption of customers' concepts and the associated disappointment of customers when their designs are changed or refused. Lego furthermore argues that while simple products like t-shirts are more accessible to the "crowd", complex products like Lego need skilled lead users to create product concepts which then fuel the engagement of other customers who vote on them. While these issues are not substantially compromising "Cuusoo's" effects on the brand, the hypothesized doubts regarding the suitability of complex products for customer integration in configuration can still be extended to customer integration in design.

As the imagination and creation of new models is the basic principle of the Lego product, "Cuusoo" can be regarded as highly **relevant** and meeting an existing demand. This is underlined by the Lego "Cuusoo" marketing department, stating that customers are literally "chasing" the company with their product proposals. In fact, before Lego "Cuusoo" existed, Lego has continuously put down the suggestions sent in by fans (cf. Courtney/Espersen, 2013).

Lego can be considered to have a collaborative **corporate culture,** thereby strengthening the hypothesis. This is evident due to the fact that all "Cuusoo" projects reaching 10.000 voters are reviewed by a cross-

functional jury of designers, brand managers, production managers, licensing representatives and others (cf. Lego Cuusoo, 2012). The Lego "Cuusoo" marketing department further argues, "[…] that you need support from the top of the organization. You know, you need a culture that promotes fans. That promotes co-creation.".

5.3.3   Evaluation of Micro Success Factors

"Cuusoo" offers the participants whose designs are produced the functional **customer benefit** of a monetary reward in form of 1% of the total net sales of the product and the ability to actually purchase the concept as an official Lego product (cf. Lego Cuusoo, n.d. a). However, royalties can not be regarded as significant (1%) and the design ideas mostly already exist in form of a tangible model by the time of submission. Thus, the emotional benefits of "Cuusoo" are outweighing the functional ones: "Cuusoo" offers the feeling of empowerment by letting people vote for what they want, challenge in promoting their concepts and pride, when they are actually selected: "[…] this dream appeals to all ages. And not just the dream of say, designing and getting produced, but the dream of being able to vote for what you want" (Lego Expert Interview). Hence, "Cuusoo" directly emphasizes one of the core benefit promises of the Lego brand – pride of creation – and strengthens the success factor (The LEGO Group, 2012).

Generally, there is great **freedom** regarding the product concepts that customers can submit to "Cuusoo", as they do not need to use any configurator on the website but directly upload pictures and a description of their models. However, a set of project guidelines and house rules applies, which is enforced by the refusal of non-compliant submissions (cf. Lego Cuusoo, 2012a). While this practice sets no limits to customers' creativity, the Lego "Cuusoo" marketing department argues that customers' freedom should be more limited in order to avoid frustration

and thus negative associations with the brand from the refusal of project ideas at submission or evaluation by the jury after reaching 10.000 votes: "I hope we can more transparently define the scope of what we can make, to help you submit more effective projects." (Glen Bricker, 2013). It can thus be assumed that "Cuusoo's" high level of freedom leads to positive and negative effects, as hypothesized.

Ensuring the **brand adequacy** of customers' product designs is one of the most emphasized ambitions of Lego "Cuusoo". Being asked for the most important advice regarding customer integration for brands, the Lego "Cuusoo" marketing department underlines that you have to "[…] know who you are, know your values […] be true to yourself and who you are as an organization […]" in order to protect the reputation of the brand. To ensure the fit to the values "imagination, creativity, fun, learning, caring and quality" (The LEGO Group, 2012), products have to be suitable for children, positive, clean (cf. Lego Expert Interview) and avoid any violence, sex, politics, warfare and racism (cf. Lego Cuusoo, 2012a). This is enforced by the project guidelines upon submission, a comprehensive brand fit analysis by different company functions including brand management after reaching 10.000 votes and the rebuilding of the product by Lego designers during commercialization to ensure an attractive, buildable and stable product (cf. Lego Cuusoo, 2012). The brand fit of "Cuusoo" products is a constant challenge for Lego because creators (partly older, special interest Lego fans) and the purchasers (regular, young, mainstream Lego customers) have different expectations towards Lego sets (cf. Lego Expert Interview). Overall, it can be concluded that the success factor is strengthened.

For both creators and voters, "Cuusoo" provides an appealing **user experience**. Product designs can easily be submitted after a quick sign-up process, by hitting the "create project" button, naming the project and uploading pictures / a description (Lego Cuusoo, n.d. f). Browsing the website and voting for projects is also appealing due to simple webde-

sign and high quality pictures that are required by the project guidelines (cf. Lego Cuusoo, 2012a, n.d., n.d. d). Therefore, the success factor is strengthened.

Lego "Cuusoo" is publicly accessible from around the world and thus strengthens the success factor **publicness**.

According to the Lego "Cuusoo" marketing department, the team has "[…] not spent a dime on marketing for Lego Cuusoo.", besides few press releases / conferences and YouTube videos depicting the design review process. Following this strategy, "Cuusoo" has managed to draw a significant number of visitors on its website. However, it can be assumed that through these **communication** channels, mainly highly involved Lego fans are addressed. Due to the lack of a communication campaign, POS (point of sale) promotion or a link on the Lego website, it can be assumed that Lego's wider group of core customers has far less knowledge of "Cuusoo" and thus spillover effects are not leveraged. Consequently, the success factor is strengthened.

While not providing any sophisticated **sharing** features like for instance "Mein Burger", "Cuusoo" has built-in common social media sharing functions for facebook and twitter (cf. Lego Cuusoo, n.d. d). Hence, the success factor is strengthened.

The Lego "Cuusoo" marketing department strongly acknowledges the success factor of being **sincere**, honest and transparent towards customers: "[…] you need to know who you are and stick to your values. And you also need to define that up front. And you need to sort of be forthright with people and every time you make a decision on something, just […] be honest when you're telling it". Emphasizing the Lego "Cuusoo" marketing department's statement, "Cuusoo" is openly providing guidelines and very transparently explains the evaluation criteria of concepts which had to be refused (cf. Lego Cuusoo, 2012).

5.4   Nike "NikeiD"

Overview and Classification

Company: Nike Inc.

Agency: R/GA

Project: "NikeiD"

Timeframe: Launched 1999, active since

Summary: "NikeiD" is a service by Nike, which allows customers to configure shoes and accessories via an online platform (which this case study focusses on) or in Nike retail stores. The service was launched in 1999 with a limited product portfolio only. Since then, "NikeiD" has steadily been enhanced and extended into a strategic business area. Customers can personalize a majority of Nike's range of shoes in terms of functional features like width of the shoe or type of sole and visual features like color, material and embroidered personal IDs (PiD). The designs configured via the "NikeiD" builder (configurator) can be saved and shared or ordered for delivery within four weeks. "NikeiD" shoes are sold with a price premium compared to the regular mass product.

Value creation phase	Design	Configuration	Production	Marketing
Strategic significance	Strategy		Tool	
Duration	Permanent		Temporary	
Scope of participants	Community		Individual	
Form of interaction	Virtual		Physical	
Customer motivation	Intrinsic		Extrinsic	
Publicness	Open		Closed	

Figure 6: Overview and classification of Nike "NikeiD" (logo: Wikimedia Commons, 2010; pictures: Nike, 2013c, 2013d; description: cf. Nike Expert Interview; PR Newswire, 2001; Nike, 2013e)

Nike's "NikeiD" has been selected because it is one of the most success-ful cases of customer integration in configuration which has pioneered the field of mass customization. It is the only case in this study which is implemented as a fundamental pillar of the business strategy.

The following sources of evidence have been used to analyze the case:
- An expert interview with the Nike marketing department
- Press releases by Nike and R/GA (R/GA, 2005; PR Newswire, 2001)
- Press coverage by Gizmodo and Fortune Management (Horn, 2013; Cendrowski, 2012)
- Several artifacts from the Nike and "NikeiD" websites (Nike, 2013a, 2013b, 2013c, 2013d, 2013e)

5.4.1   Evaluation of Benefits

Overall the Nike marketing department evaluates the benefits of "NikeiD" for the Nike brand very positively: "So, it does a lot for us as a brand, because it is our key differentiator […] for us, this is a strategic building block in the marketing mix."[6] (Nike Expert Interview). Nike also emphasizes that Nike is actively tracking the effects of "NikeiD" for the Nike brand.

While Nike can be seen as a well-known brand, the Nike marketing de-partment argues that "NikeiD" still creates a lot of awareness through customers sharing their configurations in social media. As "NikeiD" is an integrated sub-brand of Nike, it can be assumed that this **brand awareness** is transferred to the "Nike" brand itself.

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6   Author's translation from German: "Also es tut sehr viel für uns als Marke weil es ist unser Key-Differentiator ist […] für uns ist das ein strategischer Baustein im Marketingmix."

A similar logic applies to the effects of "NikeiD" on the Nike **brand associations**: The Nike marketing department emphasizes that "NikeiD" and Nike are seen as one brand and that "NikeiD", as a particularly innovative service, directly strengthens the perception of Nike as an innovative brand.

Although the Nike marketing department thinks that customer integration in configuration in general, and in case of Nike, can change **brand attitude** in terms of building trust, the fact is not considered to be relevant for Nike because the brand is highly trusted already.

However, Nike emphasizes the significant potential of "NikeiD" in building **brand attachment:** "We think that 'NikeiD' can really trigger, what you finally wish for with customers as a branded company. And the topic brand loyalty, 'NikeiD' is a perfect tool for this."[7] A fact that had already been emphasized by Mark Allen, General Manager of "NikeiD" in 2001: "It's a strong relationship builder between Nike and the customer as well as the customer and the product." (PR Newswire, 2001).

Furthermore, customers are considered to be more likely to talk about a "NikeiD" product, which they configured according to their personality, than about a regular purchase (cf. Nike Expert Interview). It can thus be said that "NikeiD", to a limited amount, promotes **brand activity**.

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7   Author's translation from German: "Wir glauben, 'NikeiD' kann wirklich das auslösen, was man sich als Markenunternehmen bei Konsumenten letztendlich wünscht. Es ist ein perfektes Tool zum Aufbau von Markenloyalität."

5.4.2   Evaluation of Macro Success Factors

The corporate mission describes the Nike **brand identity** as follows: "To bring inspiration and innovation to every athlete in the world (If you have a body, you are an athlete)." (Nike, 2013a). The rational value of innovation is underlined by Nike's positioning as "[…] the world's leading innovator in athletic footwear […]" and the Nike marketing department's emphasis on "product innovation" (Nike, 2013a). By it's famous claim "Just do it." and by emphasizing the capabilities of everyman to be an athlete, the brand further communicates the values of "empowerment" and "confidence" (cf. Nike, 2013a). The Nike marketing department furthermore mentions "performance/rooted in sports" as a part of the Nike identity. "NikeiD" and the concept of customer integration thus have a significant fit with the Nike brand identity: Not only does it empower customers to get involved with the Nike brand but also does it allow customers to configure products which have not existed before – it allows them to innovate. Further affirming the success factor, the Nike marketing department argues that a fit between customer integration and the current business goals / the business reason is key in implementing customer integration and that it should not be conducted to reach out to completely different businesses or target groups.

While no detailed insights on the success factor **brand orientation** are available, the Nike marketing department states that marketing has significant importance in the company. It can thus be assumed that the company is also considerably brand oriented.

Occupying rank 26 on Interbrand's "Best Global Brands" Ranking 2012 (cf. Interbrand, 2012), Nike can be regarded as a renown brand. With its push into services like the running community Nike+, it has furthermore focused its marketing on cultivating a brand community (cf. Cendrowski, 2012). Thus, it can be assumed that Nike has a considerable amount of supporters with high **brand involvement**. The Nike market-

ing department also acknowledges the strength of the Nike brand and its brand community. Further affirming the success factor, Nike argues that the existing brand equity of the Nike brand was key in the success of "NikeiD".

Regarding the **customer mindset**, Nike has defined discrete target groups for each of its business areas, which can commonly be described as young and sporty (cf. Nike Expert Interview), partly in their teen ages and very affine to online media (cf. Cendrowski, 2012). While the Nike marketing department argues that "NikeiD" is an integral part of the Nike brand and therefore targets the overall same target groups, it is also acknowledged that the service caters more to those who feel a need to express themselves. The described customer mindset consequently strengthens the hypothesized success factor.

Shoes can be categorized as shopping products, consequently strengthening the hypothesis of the success factor **product class**. The hypothesis of apparel products being particularly suited for customer integration in configuration is also strengthened due to the fact that "NikeiD" serves exactly this **product category** (cf. Nike Expert Interview).

According to a popular story at Nike, the idea of "NikeiD" was inspired by an employee's son who wondered, why he had to buy ready-made sneakers instead of choosing them the way he wanted (cf. Nike Expert Interview). This simple demand for a personalized shoe is an indication for the **relevance** of "NikeiD". Further reinforcing the success factor, the Nike marketing department argues that customer integration should always provide relevance and value to existing customers instead of trying to win over entirely new target groups with services, that are not congruent with the business reason of the company.

The Nike marketing department states that due to the fact, that Nike is an American company, its **corporate culture** is very open, friendly and sporty. Thus, the hypothesized success factor is strengthened.

5.4.3   Evaluation of Micro Success Factors

"NikeiD" offers customers the emotional **customer benefit** of self-expression. With customized "NikeiD" products, customers can project the values of creativity and individuality onto their own identity and differentiate themselves from customers who are satisfied with mass products (cf. Nike Expert Interview). This benefit is emphasized by the ability to embroider products with a personal "iD", for instance, the customer's name, and by advertising activities like the "PhotoiD" campaign, during which customers could automatically color their "NikeiD" shoes by uploading their personal pictures from the social media service Instagram (cf. Horn, 2013; Nike, 2013e). On the other hand, "NikeiD" also offers a distinct functional benefit: Customers can customize functional features like the width of the shoe or the style of the sole that fit their physiology and training conditions and thus impact their performance as athletes (cf. Nike Expert Interview). Analyzing the "NikeiD" configurator website of the soccer shoe "Hypervenom", for instance, it can be said that significantly more configuration options appeal to the emotional benefit (six options) than to the functional benefit (one option) (cf. Nike, 2013d). Considering that the Nike brand strongly focuses on functional benefits like innovative products and performance, the fit between brand benefit and customer benefit of the customer integration activity is not completely given. Therefore, the success factor would have to be challenged. However, the Nike marketing department also admits that performance and functionality related configuration options of "NikeiD" are not sufficiently developed. Consequently, the hypothesis of the success factor is still strengthened while "NikeiD's" individual case has to be rated lower.

Overall, "NikeiD" offers its customers great **freedom** and a very wide range of configuration options: For instance, in case of the soccer shoe "Hypervenom", six parts of the shoe can be configured in up to eleven different colors and a custom name or sign can be added (cf. Nike, 2013d). The Nike marketing department emphasizes that the large variety of options is the main reason for the success of "NikeiD", compared to other customization offerings. At the same time, Nike acknowledges that there shouldn't be more options to avoid confusion of customers, which strengthens the hypothesized success factor.

Despite the large variety of configuration options, "NikeiD" products always maintain a Nike **brand adequate** quality. This is ensured by excluding the basic structure and brand elements like the Nike logo from customization (cf. Nike Expert Interview) and by refusing embroidered names and messages that contain other brands, sports clubs or inappropriate language (cf. Nike, 2013e)

The "NikeiD" online platform has been awarded with an "Industrial Design Excellence Award" for its **user experience**. According to the production agency R/GA, "NikeiD" was designed to "[…] truly motivate and engage consumers […]" and to create a "[…] fun experience […]" which encourages users to "[…] play with multiple designs." (R/GA, 2005). The Nike marketing department further states that the platform was designed as little process driven as possible to enable customers to build their design freely without distraction. To avoid confusion and to lower barriers, less experienced customers can start the configuration process with pre-defined setups for inspiration (cf. Nike, 2013e). An analysis of the platform has shown that the configuration of products really is very intuitive and creates a "flow"-like experience. This is especially driven by the fact that there is no sign-up required and that the Nike and "NikeiD" websites offer plenty of entry points into the configurator from most product pages (cf. Nike, 2013c, 2013d).

"NikeiD" is publicly available via the Nike and "NikeiD" website (cf. Nike, 2013c), consequently strengthening the success factor **publicness**.

Nike has created special **communication** campaigns like "PhotoiD" to promote "NikeiD" specifically (cf. Horn, 2013). More important, "NikeiD" is seen as an integral part of Nike's marketing mix and thus is included throughout the brand's communication. The Nike marketing department argues that, for instance, when a new product is launched, the "NikeiD" version is introduced and communicated alongside. This is emphasized by Nike including links to "NikeiD" throughout its website via the menu bar, teaser boxes on the homepage and specific "personalize" buttons on product pages (cf. Nike, 2013b).

Nike promotes the **sharing** of customer-configured products with dedicated functions: Customers can save their configurations to a virtual "locker" and share their designs to Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest or via e-mail (cf. Nike, 2013d).

Overall, "NikeiD" is **sincere** and transparent: Configuration options are presented clearly on the online platform and every configuration which is built online can be produced accordingly. Also the criteria for the check of the personal iD embroidered on the shoe are communicated openly (cf. Nike, 2013e). In this case, the concept of customer integration in configuration contains little risk of disappointment or frustration because the configuration process is streamlined and automated to a significant degree.

5.5   Cross-Case Analysis, Evaluation and Revision of the Theoretical Framework

In this chapter, the results of the single case study analyses are gathered, compared and compiled into a multiple-case study cross-case analysis. Thereby, patterns and differences are revealed. According to the exploratory, deductive research approach, the theoretical framework is then being evaluated and complemented on the basis of the combined insights. The comparison of the case studies and the revised theoretical framework are summarized in two separate matrices at the end of the chapter.

The case studies could distinctively be described using the classification matrix, while the framework of benefits and success factors was able to capture, describe and evaluate the significant part of the brand-related benefits and success factors of customer integration, found during the analyses.

The significant part of the theoretically hypothesized benefits and success factors was supported by the evidence generated from the multiple-case study analysis. Several benefits and success factors, however, had to be revised or were added to the framework, due to newly generated insights based on the analysis.

5.5.1   Cross-Case Analysis of Benefits

As all case studies represent renown brands, the potential of customer integration to increase **brand awareness** in terms of making customers familiar with the brand (brand recognition) was limited. However, integration creates word-of-mouth and thus increases the exposure of the brand towards customers, who might recall the brand more fre-

quently as it reaches a more prominent position in their minds. "Mein Burger" excelled in creating brand awareness due to its combination of customer integration in design, targeting new target groups, and a customer-integrated communication campaign leveraging spillover effects on their mass audience. Still, "Cuusoo" creates high awareness among new customer groups and "NikeiD" steadily increases the exposure of its umbrella brand Nike by fostering brand activity. While the evidence for benefits in design and marketing are strengthened, evidence in configuration is newly added to the framework.

The case studies underline that customer integration in all value phases can foster **brand associations** like "open, accessible" ("Cuusoo", "Mein Burger") or "innovative" ("NikeiD"). In case of "Mein Burger", which provided very emotional, entertaining interactions, an impact on "fun" was emphasized. While in case of design, the benefit is strengthened, the benefits for configuration and marketing are added to the framework.

The analysis of **brand attitude** shows that all three types of customer integration can foster brand attitude in terms of sympathy and purchase intention. While "Mein Burger" (design, marketing) and "Cuusoo" (design) both excel in leveraging effects on sympathy for fulfilling customers' long standing demands and wishes, "Cuusoo" also faces minor negative results due to frustrated customers. "NikeiD" is considered to foster trust which is, however, not considered to be relevant for an already highly trusted brand like Nike. Against the background of high sales, all three cases are considered to foster purchase intention. Consequently, the hypothesized benefit of customer integration in design and configuration is affirmed. While the benefit of integration in marketing was assessed ambiguously in the theoretical framework, the multiple-case study now provides positive evidence.

All case studies provide evidence that customer integration can principally foster **brand attachment**. However, in case of "Mein Burger" and

"Cuusoo" (design, marketing), this is only proven for a limited group of customers whose design proposals were realized. In contrast, "NikeiD" (configuration) is said to foster brand attachment for all engaged customers. The benefits of design and marketing are strengthened while evidence for configuration is newly added to the framework.

Effects on **brand activity** are reported for all case studies due to increased word-of-mouth created by involved customers. Again, especially the limited group of customers, whose design proposals were realized and who were integrated into the marketing campaign in the "Cuusoo" respectively "Mein Burger" case studies, show the highest brand activity by actively promoting the project and the brand. Additionally, "Mein Burger" managed to create substantial brand activity among the wider target group of participating customers by providing sophisticated sharing features. While "NikeiD" does promote conversation among customers about their individually created products, and thus brand activity, it does not create advocates as active as "Cuusoo" and "Mein Burger". Therefore, "Mein Burger" is rated highest in terms of fostering brand activity. While the theoretical benefits of design and marketing are strengthened, the benefit in configuration is added to the framework.

5.5.2 Cross-Case Analysis of Macro Success Factors

The **brand identity** of all case studies' brands fits with the values expressed by customer integration: "open", "approachable", "innovative" and "empowering". The importance of brand fit with customer integration was even emphasized during the expert interview of "NikeiD". Consequently, the success factor is strengthened.

The available information suggests that all of the case studies' companies are significantly **brand oriented**, thereby strengthening the success factor.

The analysis has shown that each of the analyzed brands has customers with significant **brand involvement,** thus strengthening the success factor. While Lego's and Nike's customers are forming brand communities that are actively involved with the products, McDonald's brand involvement is rooted mainly in the significant popularity of the brand. Especially in the case of "Cuusoo", where customers are integrated in the design of a complex product, highly involved customers and members of the brand community were deemed essential for the general success of the project because they contributed a significant amount of design proposals. The success factor is thus strengthened for all value phases.

All three case studies target **customers** with a specific **mindset,** congruent to and thus strengthening the hypothesized success factor: "Mein Burger" and "NikeiD" focus on young customers, "NikeiD" and especially "Cuusoo" focus on highly creative customers with a high desire to express themselves respectively with a high affinity to the medium Lego.

The analyzed case studies' products fit the hypothesized **product classes** shopping products ("Cuusoo", "NikeiD") and preference products ("Mein Burger"). Consequently, the success factor is reinforced.

Both the **product categories** food and apparel have been hypothesized to be particularly suitable, which was confirmed by "Mein Burger" and "NikeiD". Furthermore, the hypothesized unsuitability of complex products became evident in the "Cuusoo" case study: The complexity of the product involved the danger of eliciting negative brand attitude due to customers being frustrated because of refused design proposals that were not compliant to Lego's complex standards. However, in case of "Cuusoo", positive effects did still outweigh the risks.

Relevance, one of the most emphasized success factors, was added to the framework during the first case study "Mein Burger". All three case studies' expert interviews provide strong evidence that customer inte-

gration is successful, in general and from a brand's perspective, in case that customers have a long-standing demand to be integrated and empowered in the particular ways. This implies that the implementation of customer integration as a strategic tool in brand management, conducted intentionally to benefit the brand and not triggered by customer demand, should be evaluated very carefully. Even if other success factors are fulfilled, customer integration might fail if it is simply not relevant to customers.

Furthermore, the success factor **corporate culture** has been added during the first case study "Mein Burger". The case study provides strong evidence that an open, collaborative culture, uniting all organizational functions on a project, is key for the success of customer integration as it lowers internal barriers. Furthermore, it enables virtual designs and configurations to be turned into real products, creating a holistic, satisfying experience for customers. The success factor is further strengthened by the two remaining case studies.

5.5.3   Cross-Case Analysis of Micro Success Factors

The success factor **customer benefit** has been strengthened throughout all case studies. Both the Lego and McDonald's brand provide emotional benefits which are mirrored by the respective customer integration projects. The Nike brand strongly emphasizes functional benefits while "NikeiD" caters to emotional, self-expressive needs. However, as Nike has emphasized the need for improvement and stronger congruence, the success factor is still affirmed.

"NikeiD" acknowledges **freedom** of customers in configuring products as a key success factor. "Mein Burger" further strengthens the hypothesis that freedom is key but, to avoid confusion, should be limited to a balanced set of options. Again, "Cuusoo" strengthens the negative side

of the hypothesis: The infinite freedom in proposing designs brings along the risk of frustration and negative brand attitude, which has to be managed carefully by sincere and transparent communication. Thus, the success factor is strengthened for all value phases.

All three case studies strengthen the success factor **brand adequacy** by preventing their core brand elements from being changed, limiting the possible modification of products or verifying the brand adequacy by a jury or audit.

The success factor **user experience** is strengthened by all cases. All online platforms for product design/configuration ("Mein Burger", "Cuusoo", "NikeiD") and integration in marketing communication ("Mein Burger") are designed to be visually rich by displaying high quality images, providing customers with immanent feedback ("Mein Burger"), using simple interfaces ("Cuusoo") or creating a "flow"-like-experience by lowering entry barriers ("NikediD").

As all projects were conducted publicly, the success factor **publicness** is strengthened.

"Cuusoo" has not conducted any **communication** campaigns to promote the customer integration activity. While the project is gaining significant numbers of visitors and awareness among the defined special target groups, significant spillover effects on the brand equity of Lego's core customers and wider audience are not realized. These effects are leveraged by "NikeiD" and "Mein Burger" by integrating the activities into regular marketing communication respectively supporting them by a communication campaign. Thus, the success factor is strengthened as hypothesized.

The integration of **sharing features** is an important catalyst to create word-of-mouth and thus brand activity respectively brand awareness.

While "NikeiD" and "Cuusoo" provide standard sharing features, "Mein Burger" enables customers to create sophisticated individual campaigns, significantly reinforcing word-of-mouth. Thus, the success factor is strengthened.

The success factor **sincerity** was strongly emphasized by the "Mein Burger" and "Cuusoo" case studies and thus was added to the framework. Opening up a brand to customers builds high expectations that have to be managed carefully. Participants expect to be treated as equal contributors to the collaboratively developed products and services. Thus, transparent, honest communication, respectful handling of customers' contributions and managing expectations by clarifying rules up front are key to success. If the promise of integration is disregarded, customers will feel frustrated and deceived, negatively influencing brand attitude, brand attachment and brand equity overall. The case studies have shown that this success factor is particularly important for integration in design and marketing because in these value creation phases, limitations in freedom are commonly small and the activity is implemented in the public eye of a community. For "NikeiD", as an activity conducted between the company and an individual within clear limitations regarding the configuration of products, this factor is less important but still relevant. Consequently, the success factor is added to the framework for all value phases. All three brands are practicing sincere, transparent communication with their customers and are thus rated equally.

5.5.4   Summary: Evaluation of Case Studies

	"Cuusoo" LEGO	"NikeiD" Nike	"Mein Burger" M
Benefits of Customer Integration for Brands			
Brand awareness	+	+	++
Brand associations	++	++	++
Brand attitude	+	+	++
Brand attachment	+	++	+
Brand activity	+	+	++
++ Strong benefit/effect + Medium benefit/effect - No benefit / negative effect			
Success Factors of Customer Integration for Brands			
Macro Success Factors			
Brand identity	++	++	++
Brand orientation	++	++	++
Brand involvement	++	++	+
Customer mindset	++	++	++
Product class	++	++	++
Product category	+	++	++
Relevance [Added during case study]	++	++	++
Corporate culture [Added during case study]	++	++	++
Micro Success Factors			
Customer benefit	++	+	++
Freedom	+	++	++
Brand adequacy	++	++	++
User experience	++	++	++
Publicness	++	++	++
Communication	+	++	++
Sharing	+	+	++
Sincerity [Added during case study]	++	++	++
++ Ideal implementation + Sufficient implementation – No implementation			

Figure 7: Evaluation of the case studies based on the theoretical framework

5.5.5   Summary: Evaluated and Revised Theoretical Framework

	Design	Configuration	Marketing
Benefits of Customer Integration for Brands			
Brand awareness	●	◉	●
Brand associations	●	◉	◉
Brand attitude	●	●	◉
Brand attachment	●	●	–
Brand activity	●	◉	●
Success Factors of Customer Integration for Brands			
Macro Success Factors			
Brand identity	●	●	●
Brand orientation	●	●	●
Brand involvement	●	●	●
Customer mindset	●	●	●
Product class	●	●	●
Product category	●	●	●
Relevance [Added during case study]	◉	◉	◉
Corporate culture [Added during case study]	◉	◉	◉
Micro Success Factors			
Customer benefit	●	●	●
Freedom	●	●	●
Brand adequacy	●	●	●
User experience	●	●	●
Publicness	●	●	●
Communication	●	●	●
Sharing	●	●	●
Sincerity [Added during case study]	◉	◉	◉
● Positive theoretical evidence strengthened ◉ Newly discovered positive evidence			

Figure 8: Evaluated and revised framework of benefits and success factors of customer integration for brands

6.   Conclusion

6.1   Managerial Implications

The initial goal of the study was to provide brand management with insights on what customer integration can do for brand equity, what kinds of brands it is suitable for and what the critical success factors in its implementation are. Thus, the key learnings of the study are summarized in the following guideline, that can be used to evaluate the possible benefits and to decide on whether and how to implement customer integration.

Step 1 | The potential of customer integration to foster brand equity

What can customer integration do for my brand?

- Refresh brand awareness of existing target groups and reach out to special target groups with a high affinity to online media or a highly creative mindset.

- Foster an "innovative", "open", "approachable" and "empowering" brand image.

- Increase brand sympathy, trust and purchase intention.

- Attach customers to the brand (configuration) and create brand ambassadors (design).

- Increase the conversation about the brand.

Step 2 | Strategic checklist

Is customer integration a suitable tool to foster brand equity
for my brand?

☐   Innovation, approachability, openness or empowerment
    are part of the brand's identity.

☐   The overall customer base or at least a group of lead
    users is creative and affine to online media.

☐   The brand is renown and customers are considerably
    involved with it.

☐   The brand's products can be regarded as shopping or
    preference products.

☐   The complexity of the brand's products is reasonably low
    (in case of integration in design or configuration).

☐   Customer integration is relevant for customers; there
    is an existing demand for the integration activity.

☐   Brand Management is a significant function in the com-
    pany and can influence the customer integration activity.

☐   The company has an open, collaborative corporate cul-
    ture that promotes interfunctional projects and customer
    integration in particular.

Step 3 | Operative checklist

What has to be considered during implementation?

☐ The customer benefit offered by customer integration reinforces the fundamental brand customer benefit.

☐ Customer integration allows maximum freedom without confusing customers.

☐ Core brand and product elements are preserved from customers' changes.

☐ Communication with customers is transparent and sincere, rules are defined up front.

☐ The virtual customer integration platform has an engaging user experience, creating a "flow"-like experience (in case of customer integration via a virtual platform).

☐ Customer integration is called out and conducted publicly.

☐ Customer integration is integrated in overall brand communication or supported by a dedicated communications campaign.

☐ Customers can easily share their experiences during customer integration.

Figure 9: Management guidelines for the strategic evaluation and operative implementation of customer integration for brands

6.2　　Summary, Limitations and Directions
for Further Research

The objective of this thesis was to establish suggestions for the strategic planning and implementation of customer integration in favor of brand equity from a brand management's perspective. A classification matrix was established in order to provide an overview of the various concepts of customer integration. By reference to the matrix, customer integration activities can be distinguished by the value creation phase, the strategic significance in the company, the duration, the scope of participants, the form of interaction, the benefit it provides to customers and its level of publicness.

During an empirical, qualitative multiple-case study, a theoretical framework of benefits and success factors of customer integration for brands has been established, evaluated and revised. Therefore, the cases McDonald's "Mein Burger", Lego "Cuusoo" and Nike "NikeiD" have been analyzed. These particular cases were selected in order to cover the three – from a brand management's perspective – most promising value creation phases design, configuration and marketing.

The study underlines that customer integration indeed has the potential to foster brand equity in terms of awareness, associations, attitude, attachment and activity. Research suggests that customer integration should be contentually in line with the brand identity and works best with certain product classes and categories. Furthermore, a duality of customer integration target groups was revealed: While online affine, creative lead users are essential to kickstart customer integration, broad audiences can be reached by spillover effects through accompanying communication campaigns. When implementing customer integration, a customer benefit congruent with the core brand benefit, balanced

freedom in creation, a compelling user experience and a preservation of a brand's core elements is suggested.

The most emphasized success factors however are the least academic – and the most obvious: If the integration activity is not relevant for customers at all, if sincere collaboration is promised but later dishonored or if a company's culture is too inflexible and closed, customer integration can have ambiguous effects on brand equity. A fact that has become evident in several negative examples of customer integration that could unfortunately not be included in this study due to a limited scope of research.

While this thesis has delivered various new insights, it is also subject to certain limitations: The selection of case studies in this research covers various types of customer integration in order to gain a large number of broad insights. However, the small number and diversity of the cases significantly limits the potential of replicating findings and thus the external validity of research. While the broad focus allows the evaluation of various forms of customer integration in one study, it certainly means that several details are generalized. Furthermore, it has to be emphasized that this study does not reliably establish any causalities or relationships. Therefore, results have to be regarded as suggestions rather than rules. The analyzed cases have been selected as particularly positive examples in order to explore the potential of customer integration for brands. As a consequence thereof, negative aspects are underrepresented in the study and should be explored further in future research.

The limitations of this study however open up a variety of new research opportunities. This study could be used as a basis and pilot study for a larger case study, further evaluating the framework with additional positive and negative cases. Using other research approaches like experiments, single relationships or causalities suggested in the framework could be validated.

Customer integration is a highly relevant topic which is rapidly gaining momentum. This is not only underlined by the recent accumulation of research projects but also by the increased number of brands, implementing the concept in practice: Even during the short timeframe of this study, several new cases including Coca Cola's "Trink' ne Coke mit…", Edeka's "Der Edeka Selbermacher", Tic Tac's "Design your pack" and Motorola's "Moto X" emerged.

While nowadays' largest brands are starting to embrace customer integration, smaller companies allow a glimpse into a possible future: For instance, the German beverage brand "Premium Cola" has built a completely open company in which every decision is made collaboratively among a community of supporters. While this might be an outlook towards a new kind of democratic, customer focused logic of business, customer integration might as well prove to be a suitable for particular brands only. For instance, highly aspirational, exclusive brands might in the end discover that their unattainability is not a shortcoming but rather their key success factor.

I hope that this research has contributed to the theoretical and practical discourse about customer integration and that it helps to guide its implementation – especially from a brand management's perspective.

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