# An Exploration of whether Leinster Rugby Fans are Representative of a Brand Community

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MSc in Marketing

Submitted to the National College of Ireland

August 2018

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# Abstract

In the world of the sport, increasingly the economic interests prevail over other interests of the emotional type. Sports organisations must manage their resources efficiently, and just one of these resources is the brand. Fans are increasingly recognised as a crucial element of sports brands, as such, clubs and teams must understand that their fans can enhance the brand equity of the team. One way organisations are exploring this development is through investigating the presence of brand communities around sports organisations. There is an abundance of marketing literature surrounding the topic of brand communities, however the sport field is only in the beginning stages of applying this idea and as a result brand communities within sport is not a topic that is well understood.

This study seeks to explore the topic of a brand community in detail, to understand its definition, development, and characteristics, so that these findings may supplement further investigation into brand communities in sport. Leinster Rugby, a provincial Irish rugby union team form the basis of this research, which seeks to identify whether or not Leinster Rugby fans are representative of a brand community.

This research project involves six in-depth interviews coupled with participant observation to explore Leinster fans relationship with the brand and other fellow fans. Through analysis of the primary data and consideration of the brand community literature it was found that Leinster Rugby fans do exhibit the characteristics of a brand community. Additionally, this research finds that fans attitudes towards brand communities are mixed, which suggests further research in this area is necessary.

# Acknowledgements

I would firstly like to thank my supervisor Jason Healy for his support throughout this research project. Jason was very generous with his time and also offered constructive feedback which was a great help to me.

I would also like to express my gratitude to Ken Boyle, Colm Murphy, and Jack Kennedy for all the support they showed me, not only throughout this research project but the MSc as a whole.

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# Chapter 1 - Introduction to the Study and Research Topic

## 1.1 Background to the Study

This study aims to identify the most common characteristics and practices associated with brand communities and explore whether Leinster Rugby fans conform to these characteristics. This study involves the use of ethnographic research methods online and offline to explore the consumer behaviour of Leinster Rugby fans, and assess whether or not they are representative of a brand community as presented by the literature.

### 1.1.1 Leinster Rugby

Leinster Rugby is one of four provincial Rugby union teams in Ireland along with Munster, Ulster and Connacht. Over the past few decades Leinster's grasp on professionalism has had its ups and downs (Costello, 2018). Leinster Rugby has also been involved in a brand building exercise over recent years, which has been helped by the calibre and profile of the players it has had on its books, including Ireland captain Brian O'Driscoll (O'Keeffe & Zawadzka 2010). Rugby does appear to have been significantly connected to the national habitus of Ireland during the post-war period and plays a large part in the Irish identity (Maguire & Tuck 2005).

### 1.1.2 Branding

Branding is a broad and varied topic with scope for further research, which presents an opportunity to conduct innovative and creative analysis to garner fresh data and information for the purpose of this thesis.  Brands are viewed as a major enduring asset of a company, outlasting the company's specific products and facilities (Kotler et al. 2008). As such, brands must be carefully developed and managed.

Brands are undoubtedly a vital element in the relationship between a company and the consumer (Kotler et al. 2008). Excellent brand management allows a firm to compete more effectively in the market through developing an attractive image linked to its value proposition and business strategy (Aaker & McLoughlin 2010).

Successful brands establish emotional and sometimes personal relationships with their customers, which can achieve increased consumer trust in purchase decisions and garner greater loyalty (Biscaia, et al. 2013). Powerful brands build brand equity, which is the positive differential effect that brand knowledge has on customer response to the product or service (Kotler et al. 2008).

### 1.1.3 Brand Equity

Aaker & McLoughlin (2010) define brand equity as the set of assets and liabilities linked to the brand; namely, brand awareness, brand loyalty and brand associations. Each of these assets can create competitive advantage for an organisation, and each needs to be managed as such.

### 1.1.3.1 Brand Awareness

Brand awareness is the degree of consumer awareness of a brand and its related marketplace offerings and can be a key strategic asset for an organisation given that consumers are bombarded everyday with an ever-increasing number of marketing messages (Aaker & McLoughlin 2010).

### 1.1.3.2 Brand Associations

Brand associations can be described as anything that is directly or indirectly linked in the customers' memory to the brand. Brand associations often reflect the strategic position of the brand (Aaker & McLoughlin 2010). Researching a brand's associations is imperative for brand managers seeking to effectively manage a brand (Ross et al. 2006).

### 1.1.3.3 Brand Loyalty

The value of a strong brand is its ability to capture consumer loyalty (Aaker & McLoughlin 2010), and brands succeed in the marketplace because they deliver unique and reliable benefits which can create deep connections with customers.

Some of the benefits of brand loyalty to the company include reduced marketing costs, barrier to entry for new companies, and also provide time to respond to competitive moves by other rival companies (Aaker & McLoughlin 2010).

Aaker & McLoughlin (2010) also discuss how competitors may duplicate or surpass a product or service, but they still face the task of making customers switch brands. When customers become loyal to a certain brand, and are passionate about its products/services, this often inspires people to come together to appreciate this shared admiration as a group. Such groups are known as Brand Communities.

### 1.1.4 Brand Communities

Muniz & O'Guinn (2001) define brand communities as a specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relations among admirers of a brand. In brand communities, people form enduring social bonds around brands. These social bonds add value by sustaining a common identity or experience (Arvidsson & Caliandro 2016). Brand communities form when consumers interact with one another about or in relation to the brand, thereby realising value beyond that which a firm creates or anticipates (Schau et al. 2009). Arvidsson & Caliandro (2016) discuss how brand communities are integral parts of a circuit of value. Participants derive linking value in the form of common knowledge and common identity (Cova 1997). Some examples of popular brand communities today include Apple (Ozboluk & Dursun 2017), and Harley Davidson Motorcycles (Fournier & Lee 2009). Brand communities offer a fresh and effective opportunity to build brands in the present-day marketing environment, and many other opportunities that marketers would do well to take advantage of (Algesheimer et al. 2005).

### 1.1.5 Sports Marketing and Branding

Sport is an important facet of global human culture. People around the world enjoy playing, watching and participating in various sports. In the world of the sport, in which increasingly the economic interests prevail over other interests of emotional type, organizations are trying to compete in a competitive market, and in order to do

that, must try to manage its resources efficiently. Just of one of these resources is the brand (Villarejo-Ramos & Martín-Velicia 2007).

Further to this, sport can be described as a significant economic sector, and is an important contributor to economic activity and wealth creation (Ratten & Ratten 2011). The increasing commercialisation of sport is leading to increasing investment of resources into marketing and branding as sporting organisations recognise the potential benefits of adapting brand marketing principles and practices to help in the creation of favourable brand associations in order to attract consumers and build the sports brand's value (Ross et al. 2006).

However, marketing research into sports brand management is still in the developmental stage and the practice of managing a sporting organisation as a brand is an emerging paradigm in the sports marketplace (Ross et al. 2006). According to (Biscaia et al. 2013), the literature on sport brand equity has received increasing amounts of attention by scholars in the past decade, and it finds that building brand equity may be crucial to attracting fans and sponsors and ensuring long-term success for sport organisations in an increasingly commercialised and competitive marketplace (Aaker & McLoughlin 2010; Biscaia et al. 2013). One strand of sports brand marketing research that has emerged over the past decade focuses on examining whether brand communities appear around sports organisations.

### 1.1.6 Brand Communities in Sport

Only some brands, such as sports brands, generate sufficient emotions to induce consumers to converse with others on that brand over an extended period of time (Popp & Woratschek 2015). Central to this is the continued support and commitment of fans (Meir & Scott 2007). Fans are increasingly recognised as a crucial element of sports brands (Healy 2012; Pongsakornrungsilp & Schroeder 2011). As such, researchers claim that it is essential for clubs or teams to better understand their fans as a loyal fan can enhance the brand equity of a team (Kaynak et al. 2008).

Sport marketing researchers are beginning to explore the dynamics of fans' identification with sports teams or fan groups in order to help sports marketing practitioners with the challenge of providing for sports fans' expectations. One

development within the literature attempts to achieve this through exploring the presence of brand communities around sports organisations such as football teams like Liverpool FC (Healy 2012; Healy & McDonagh 2013; Pongsakornrungsilp & Schroeder 2011).

### 1.1.6.1 Brand Communities in Rugby Union

Like many other sports, rugby union is increasingly commercialised and marketized (Harris & Jenkins 2001; Canada 2018), even though the sport only became professional in 1995 (BBC Sport 2005). Since professionalisation, various studies have begun to create a field of study into marketing in rugby union and there has been research into areas including sponsorship of rugby union and fan attraction factors. Garland et al. (2004) find that rugby fans place heavy emphasis upon live sports action and general atmosphere as key motives for their spectatorship.

Moreover, Thomas (2014) suggests that the tribalism involved in rugby union is palpable, and the events themselves are culturally bound. However, marketing research focusing on rugby union is still under-developed. For example, as noted in section 1.1.6, brand marketing researchers have identified the existence of brand communities around brands in sports other than rugby. However, a review of the literature indicates that little research has been conducted into the presence of brand communities among rugby union organisations.

O'Connor (2013) briefly mentions the possibility that Leinster Rugby fans are an example of a brand community. However, that study does not directly investigate whether Leinster Rugby fans are an example of a brand community through comparing primary evidence with the theory of brand communities (Muniz & O'Guinn 2001). Therefore, the present study identifies that there is an opportunity for further research and investigation.

**1.2 Justification for Research**

**1.2.1 Research Gap: Leinster Rugby Fans as a Brand Community**

While research on Leinster Rugby fans has been previously carried out, including an investigation into the motivations of fans (O'Connor 2013), no research has sought to directly explore the Leinster fan group and their behaviour for evidence of similarities to what Muniz & O'Guinn (2001) refer to as a brand community. This creates an opportunity for further research to explore whether the characteristics of brand communities are present among fans of Leinster Rugby, with a particular focus on the perspectives, behaviours, opinions, and experiences of Leinster Rugby fans themselves. In order to begin to fill this research gap, the present study has the following research objectives.

**1.3 Research Objective**

To explore whether Leinster Rugby fans are representative of a Brand Community.

This objective will be fulfilled through answering the following research questions.

**1.4 Research Questions**

- RQ1 What are the key characteristics of a brand community according to marketing research literature?
- RQ2 Do Leinster Rugby fans display the characteristics of a brand community?
- RQ3 Do Leinster Rugby fans consider themselves to be part of a brand community?

## 1.5 Primary Research Methods

Healy & McDonagh (2013) use ethnographic research methods for a similar study exploring the behaviour and experiences of English Premier League soccer fans. Therefore, given the similarity between the two sets of research subjects, both sports fan groups based in the British Isles, this study uses ethnography. Also, according to Muniz & O'Guinn (2001), in order to have an understanding of brand communities, it is necessary to observe their enactment in everyday life, and one ideal methodological approach used in the study of brand communities in various research publications is ethnography.

## 1.6 Summary of Thesis Structure

Chapter two provides a summary of the result of a review of the marketing literature related to sports brands, sports fans, branding, and brand communities.

Chapter three presents a detailed explanation of the present study's research methodology including a description of the critical appraisal of the variety of other research methods considered prior to selection of ethnography.

Chapter four details the main findings of analysis of the primary data collected using the methods outlined in Chapter three.

Chapter five contains a detailed comparison between the findings of the present study's primary research and extant literature for similarities and differences.

Finally, Chapter six provides the present study's main conclusions, recommendations and limitations.

# Chapter 2 - Literature Review

## 2.1 Chapter Introduction

This chapter provides an in-depth look at the current literature on the topic being researched. As this study is seeking to explore the defining characteristics of brand communities, and also the presence of brand communities in sport, extensive research will be conducted into the area of brand communities as well a consideration of the literature dealing with brand communities in sports organisations. This chapter opens with a summary of literature on consumer-brand relationships.

## 2.2 Consumer – Brand/Company Relationships

The importance of an effective branding strategy to an organization is paramount. This can be seen by recognizing some of the benefits that Keller (2009) suggests are created from having a strong brand.

- Improved perceptions of product performance
- Greater customer loyalty
- Less vulnerability to competitive marketing actions
- Increased marketing communication effectiveness
- Additional licensing and brand extension opportunities

Keller (2009) also finds that there are a number of different relationships that a consumer may have with an organisation. A Consumer–Company relationship deals with what consumers know and feel about the company behind the brand and how it treats their consumers. The second type of relationship is a Consumer–Consumer relationship.

This relationship is based around the amount of interaction that occurs among consumers, such that they can learn from and teach others, as well as express their loyalty and observe the loyalty of others (Keller 2009). The third relationship Keller (2009) discusses is the Company–Brand relationship which is about how the company is viewed as a brand steward and ensuring that the brand lives up to its promise. Finally, there is a Consumer–Brand relationship.

This type of relationship illustrates how much and how often consumers use the brand in question, and also how strongly they feel attached to it.

Muniz & O'Guinn (2001) also find these relationships to be important, namely the Consumer-Brand relationship and the Consumer-Consumer relationship when they conclude that members do feel an important connection to the brand, but more importantly, they feel a stronger connection toward one another. Members feel as though they "sort of know each other".

This is an example of a triangular social constellation, rather than dyadic, which is a central facet of brand communities. This also echoes Cova (1997)'s assertion that "the link is more important than the thing." This would suggest that the triangular social constellation which is necessary for the development of brand communities is an important part of an organisation's branding strategy. Through this triangular connection consumers feel to the brand, and also other consumers, Schau et al. (2009) assert that consumers can co-create value, co-create competitive strategy, collaborate in the firm's innovation process, and even become endogenous to the firm.

## 2.3 Consumer Co-Creation

Pongsakornrungsilp & Schroeder (2011) suggest that consumers collectively co-create value through consumption practices which mirrors the assertion of Schau et al (2009) that consumers can collaborate in the firm's innovation process, and also co-create competitive strategy.

Co-creation refers to the processes by which both consumers and firms collaborate, or otherwise participate, in creating value (Pongsakornrungsilp & Schroeder 2011). The authors proceed to state that consumers play dynamic roles in the value co-creation process. Consumers co-create value for themselves, for brand communities and for organisations by acting as providers and beneficiaries.

This suggests that through the triadic connection between consumer, consumer and brand, an opportunity for consumers to co-create value lies in the participation of brand communities.

Brand communities are participants in the brand's larger social construction and may form around any brand, however, they are most likely to form around a brand with a strong image, a rich and lengthy history and a competitive market environment (Muniz & O'Guinn 2001).

To understand better the extent to which brand communities can offer a competitive advantage to firms, research was conducted into the definition, characteristics and development of brand communities, which is discussed in the next section.

## 2.4 Brand Communities

### 2.4.1 The Emergence of Brand Community Theory

In today's marketing environment, developing and sustaining competitive advantage on the basis of product differentiation has become increasingly difficult given the certainty that competitors will attempt to imitate the current product, and invest in new technology to produce a superior version. McAlexander et al. (2002) suggest that one way to avoid this rat race is to redefine the terms of competitive advantage.

Differentiating on the basis of ownership experience can enhance customer-centered relationships, as customers who are highly integrated in a brand community are emotionally invested in the welfare of the company and desire to contribute to its success. This idea is echoed by Algesheimer et al. (2005) when it is asserted that in cluttered and hostile marketing environments, many marketers believe that the facilitation and development of brand communities is both cost effective and powerful.

Muniz & O'Guinn (2001) define brand communities as a specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relations among admirers of a brand. A brand community provides a medium through which consumers have the opportunity to share their opinions, thoughts, feelings and experiences. Brands are constructed based on consumers' insights and experiences (Constantin et al. 2014). It is also critical to note that communities are no longer restricted by geography. A community was generally thought of as a place initially, however this notion has overflowed these restrictions and spilled out into a broader field of meaning (Muniz & O'Guinn 2001).

### 2.4.2 Brand Communities as a Source of Competitive Advantage and Oppositional Brand Loyalty

Muniz & O'Guinn (2001) also discuss the competitive advantage which may lie in the facilitation of brand communities when it is claimed that brand communities can form around any brand, but usually those who face threatening competition in a hostile marketplace see the development of brand communities more consistently. Through opposition to competing brands, brand community members derive an important aspect of their community experience, as well as an important component of the meaning of the brand. This serves to delineate what the brand is not, and who the brand community members are not. This idea is mirrored by Thompson & Sinha (2008) as they find that not only can the consumer co-create value and collaborate in the firm's innovation process, but they found that brand communities have been cited for their potential to engender a sense of oppositional loyalty toward competing brands.

### 2.4.3 Organic Brand Communities, Brand Created Brand Communities, and the Creation of Value

Although the literature suggests that brand communities form more often in hostile market environments where there are competing brands, brand communities can often form without the firm even intending for them to. Schau, et al. (2009) conclude that brand communities can arise simply when consumers realise value beyond that which a firm creates or anticipates.

Research on the topic of brand communities also communicates the idea that the facilitation and development of brand communities can have a more positive effect for a brand over more traditional marketing strategies. Berry (1995) illustrates how relationship marketing stresses attracting, maintaining, and enhancing long-term customer relationships instead of focusing on individual transactions, as such long-term relationships provide a competitive advantage for the firm. That said, it is not always efficient to maintain one-on-one relationships with customers as time spent developing the relationship can take away from time spent actually serving the customer.

Therefore, brand communities are capable of carrying out important functions on behalf of the brand, such as sharing information, perpetuating the history and culture of the brand, and providing assistance to customers with less allocation of resources provided from the firm (Muniz & O'Guinn 2001). It is suggested that brand community managers should focus on developing trust, reliability, and honesty without neglecting an appropriate way of control that would allow the co-creation of quality content in the community (Dos Santos et al. 2016). It is clear that the literature supports the idea that brand communities can offer many benefits for organisations and may be worth investing resources to stimulate their development.

### 2.4.4 Brand Community Risks

The literature does however provide some research to suggest that there may be an inherent risk in the development of brand communities. An increasing number of studies have recognized that increasing the size of the brand community is not necessary to achieve greater benefits and may, in fact, have negative effects in some cases. Bellezza & Keinan (2014) conducted research which examines how core consumers of selective brands react when non-core users obtain access to the brand and investigates the conditions under which these non-core users enhance rather than dilute the brand image. Their findings suggest that there is a trade-off in managing symbolic and exclusive brands. It is concluded that brand managers need to generate growth by extending the customer base to new segments and new markets. However, this increased popularity and prevalence can paradoxically hurt the brand and threaten its symbolic value" (Bellezza & Keinan, 2014).

Another dark side of a brand community which can be encountered includes when members who more strongly identified with the community become more likely to engage in intergroup stereotyping which can lead to active derogation of the out-group (Hickman & Ward 2007).

There are also instances where brand community members have disagreed with the owners of brands, as was the case when Liverpool FC fans boycotted the club's official jersey in order to wear a fan protest jersey to show objection to continued ownership of the club by two men who fans disliked (Healy & McDonagh 2013).

### 2.4.5 How Brand Communities Create Value

Critical relationships include those between the customer and the brand, between the customer and the firm, between the customer and the product in use, and among fellow customers (McAlexander et al. 2002). Through the triadic connection between consumer, consumer and brand, an opportunity for consumers to co-create value lies in the participation of brand communities. This is just one of the examples of value which is created in the development of brand communities as customers are in the position to co-create competitive strategy, collaborate in the firm's innovation process, and even become endogenous to the firm (Schau, et al. 2009).

Moreover, Thompson & Sinha (2008) find that higher levels of participation by consumers increase the likelihood that a person will adopt a new product from the preferred brand and accelerate the time to adoption. Brand managers, in turn, can draw on the meanings that participating consumers create to add dimensions of value to the brand (Arvidsson & Caliandro 2016). In order to generate a sense of shared interests, online brand communities can also create value, but should include a wide range of interests that have a direct connection with the brand (Brown et al. 2007).

### 2.4.6 Brand Communities and Loyalty

Wang & Ding (2017) find that a firm-initiated brand community could facilitate new product success. Therefore, many firms have started to make significant investments to facilitate a firm-initiated brand community. When members feel an important connection to the brand, they feel a stronger connection toward one another. Members feel that they "sort of know each other" at some level, even if they have never met (Muniz & O'Guinn 2001). This community feel exerts pressure on members to remain loyal to the collective and to the brand (Muniz & O'Guinn 2001). Moreover, this consumer participation and value co-creation reduces the likelihood that a person will adopt a product from a competing brand and increases the chances of consumer staying loyal to the brand.

Although there are a number of ways brand communities create value for organisations it is difficult to identify why and how brand communities arise. For this reason, the characteristics of brand communities as stated by Muniz & O'Guinn (2001) were researched in detail and will be discussed in the next section.

**2.4.7 Characteristics of Brand Communities**

Muniz & O'Guinn (2001) find that brand communities exhibit three traditional markers of community: shared consciousness, rituals and traditions, and a sense of moral responsibility. For the purpose of this research, these three markers of brand community characteristics are focused on in this section of the chapter. These three markers and the characteristics that lie therein will be discussed and contrasted with supplementary research in order to understand the characteristics of a typical brand community. In doing so, research can be conducted into different groups of consumers in order to identify whether or not they conform to the characteristics found in this research. The characteristics of a brand community are summarised in Fig 2.4.7.
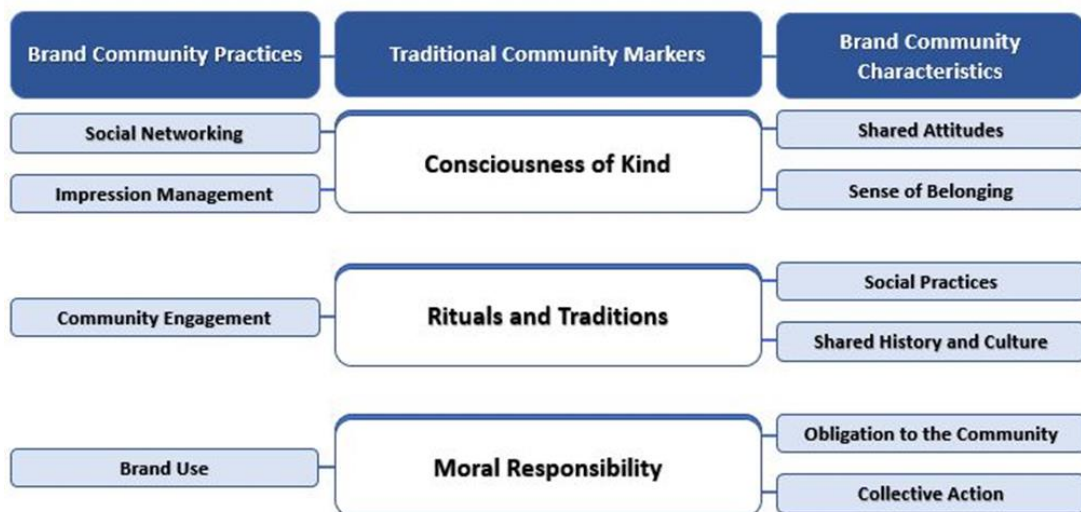


Fig 2.4.7 Characteristics of Brand Communities
(Schau et al. 2009; Muniz & O'Guinn 2001)

### 2.4.7.1 Consciousness of Kind

Muniz & O'Guinn (2001) suggest that consciousness of kind is the intrinsic connection that members feel toward one another, and the collective sense of difference from others not in the community.

Consciousness of kind is shared consciousness, a way of thinking about things that is more than shared attitudes or perceived similarity. This connection that members of brand communities feel as suggested by Muniz & O'Guinn (2001) can also be seen when Arvidsson & Caliandro (2016) assert that in brand communities, people form enduring social bonds around brands that add value by sustaining a common identity. Therefore, consciousness of kind could be further categories to shared attitudes, and sense of belonging, as can be seen in Fig 2.4.7.

A key characteristic of consciousness of kind is oppositional brand loyalty (Muniz & O'Guinn 2001). Oppositional brand loyalty, which was previously discussed in section 2.4.2 with regards to the research conducted by Thompson & Sinha (2008) is a key social process involved in perpetuating consciousness of kind. Through opposition to competing brands, brand community members derive an important aspect of their community experience, as well as an important component of the meaning of the brand. This serves to delineate what the brand is not, and who the brand community members are not (Muniz & O'Guinn 2001).

### 2.4.7.2 Rituals and Traditions

The second marker of community according to (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001) are Rituals and traditions. Rituals and Traditions perpetuate the community's shared history, culture, and consciousness, and can also be seen as sets of social practices which seek to celebrate and inculcate certain behavioural norms and values. Rituals and traditions represent vital social processes by which the meaning of the community is reproduced and transmitted within and beyond the community and could be further categorised into characteristics such as social practices, and shared history and culture (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001).

### 2.4.7.3 Moral Responsibility

The third marker of community is a sense of moral responsibility, which is a felt sense of duty or obligation to the community as a whole, and to its individual members (Muniz & O'Guinn 2001). This sense of moral responsibility is what produces, in times of threat to the community, collective action. Moral responsibility contributes to group cohesion (Muniz & O'Guinn 2001). Moral responsibility need not be limited to punitive strictures concerning life and death matters, but rather every day, but nonetheless important, social commitments.

Protection of the community during times of threat is one facet of moral responsibility in action. Another is the assistance community members provide to one another in use of the brand and in their membership of the brand community (Muniz & O'Guinn 2001). Brand communities represent an important information resource for consumers. Community members can more easily turn to one another in an established collective for information on the brand or its products or services. Communities can also display moral responsibility in exerting pressure on members to remain loyal to the collective and to the brand (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001).

### 2.4.8 Brand Community Practices

Schau et al. (2009) conducted research in order to identify a common set of value-creating practices in nine different brand communities. Schau et al. (2009) justified their research by stating that a revolution in both marketing thought and practice is at hand, and that cocreation will ultimately induce firms to collaborate with customers to co-create the entire marketing program. As such, co-creative actions have not been clearly identified and categorized in a uniform or generalizable way, nor has the nature of their value creation been revealed. In essence, we know that value is co-created, but we do not know how, which makes replicating successful cocreation strategies within a product category and even within the firm difficult and transferring successful practices from one product domain to another nearly impossible.

Their aim was to compile an exhaustive list of practices common to the brand communities studied and to situate those practices in the context of prior research. Schau et al (2009) find that there are 12 value-creating practices which are consistent in the nine brand communities studied, which they then further organise into four thematic categories. These categories are Social Networking; Impression Management; Community Engagement; and Brand Use.

### 2.4.8.1 Social Networking

The first category of practices Schau et al (2009) identified were Social networking practices. These are practices that focus on creating, enhancing, and sustaining ties among brand community members. These practices highlight the homogeneity of the brand community, or the similarities across brand community members and their normative behavioural expectations of themselves and one another.

These practices operate primarily in the intangible domain of the emotions and reinforce the social or moral bonds within the community. These social networking practices could also be viewed in a similar light to how Muniz & O'Guinn (2001) describe one of the characteristics of brand communities as Consciousness of Kind. Schau et al (2009) remark that these social networking practices reinforce the social bonds within the community, which can be compared to (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001) suggesting that consciousness of kind is the intrinsic connection that members feel toward one another. Therefore, it can be suggested that Social Networking practices which allow for co-creation of value are consistent with the findings of Muniz & O'Guinn (2001) in that they fall under the Consciousness of Kind characteristic as displayed in Fig 2.4.7.

### 2.4.8.2 Impression Management

The second category of practices recognised by Schau et al. (2009), are Impression Management practices, which are those practices that have an external, outward focus on creating favourable impressions of the brand, brand enthusiasts, and brand community in the social universe beyond the brand community.

Impression Management includes brand community members acting as altruistic emissaries and ambassadors of good will. Similarly, these practices can also be linked back to Muniz & O'Guinn (2001)'s characteristics of brand communities.

Muniz & O'Guinn (2001) state the third marker of community is a sense of Moral Responsibility, which is a felt sense of duty or obligation to the community as a whole, and to its individual members. This sense of moral responsibility is what produces, in times of threat to the community, collective action, and this is mirrored in the impression management practices as their primary reason for being is to create favourable impressions of the brand and community members act on this through a sense of moral responsibility to the brand. This theory link is displayed in Fig 2.4.7.

### 2.4.8.3 Community Engagement

Thirdly, Schau et al. (2009) identify community engagement practices as those that reinforce members' escalating engagement with the brand community. This set of practices emphasizes and safeguards brand community heterogeneity, or the distinctions among brand community members and subsets of members.

As previously mentioned Muniz & O'Guinn (2009) find that rituals and traditions perpetuate the community's shared history, culture, and consciousness, and can also be seen as sets of social practices which seek to celebrate and inculcate certain behavioural norms and values. This can also be linked to what Schau et al. (2009) describe as Community Engagement in that brand use is secondary to communal engagement.

### 2.4.8.4 Brand Use

Lastly, Brand Use practices are identified by Schau et al. (2009) as specifically related to improved or enhanced use of the focal brand. People see themselves as they imagine others see them. Since what others see includes a person's clothing, it stands to reason that Leinster fans will engage with the brand to help determine the perceived self (Solomon, et al. 2006).

This idea is mirrored by (Belk 1998) who discusses how our possessions are a major contributor to and reflection of our identities. Muniz & O'Guinn (2009) describe Rituals and Traditions as conventions that set up visible public definitions. It is this description that allows for Brand Use Practices to fall under the same characteristic as Rituals and Traditions as suggested by Muniz & O'Guinn (2009) and shown in Fig 2.4.7.

## 2.5 Emergence of Brand Community Theory in Sport

Although marketing and branding aspects are becoming increasingly important in the sport industry, research lags behind this development, at least in Europe (Ferrand and Pages 1999). Teams and their management have to realise the relevance of their brand in economic success (Bauer, et al. 2005). Gladden and Milne (1999) posit that the brand is an important success factor for professional sport clubs. One of the reasons for this as suggested by Gladden et al. (2001) is as athletic success may be fleeting, a focus on commitment to customers doesn't have to be. The co-consumption of sports and brands often brings people together (Bale 2003; Bouet 1966), and while brand communities are a popular research topic in the business literature, the sport field is only in the beginning stages of applying this idea. As such, the impact of such communities with sport brands is not well understood (Hedlund 2011).

## 2.6 Literature Review Summary

Having conducted rigorous research into the existing marketing literature surrounding brand communities and brand communities in sport, a set of characteristics of brand communities was developed with reference to the research of Muniz & O'Guinn (2001) and Schau et al. (2009) which can be seen in Fig 2.4.7. Sport marketing literature was also considered and investigated revealing a need for further investigation into the area of brand communities in the sports industry and particularly whether sports fans can be considered a brand community.

# Chapter 3 - Methodology

## 3.1 Chapter Introduction

According to Graue (2015), research is conducted in order to either analyse an already examined phenomenon, or further or approach a completely new one. This research thesis is aimed at exploring the characteristics of brand communities as presented by the marketing literature and investigating whether Leinster Rugby fans are representative of these characteristics.

Previous studies have been conducted into brand communities in sport, (Healy 2012), but there is little research available on the presence of brand communities in Rugby Union. Johnston (2014) asserts that research is about generating knowledge about the world, a fitting description as it explains how the researcher is looking to understand something new through the gathering of new data and insights.

This chapter provides a discussion of the various research methods behind this study and includes an overview of the research aims and objectives. It also provides a justification for the chosen research methodology, including reasons why other research methods were considered but deemed inappropriate. Limitations of the research methods will also be discussed followed by a description of the confidentiality, anonymity and ethics considered for this research.

## 3.2 Research Aims and Objectives

### 3.2.1 Research Objective

The overall research objective of this project is to investigate whether Leinster Rugby fans are representative of a brand community. As previously discussed there has been much research conducted into the area of brand communities, however brand communities in sport is an area which exhibits opportunity for further research, especially in the area of rugby union. It is for this reason the objective of this research was to identify the key characteristics of a brand community and investigate whether Leinster Rugby fans exhibit these characteristics as proposed by Muniz & O'Guinn (2001). To fulfil this research objective, the following research questions will be answered.

### 3.2.2 Research Questions

To effectively fulfil the research objective, a number of research questions must be answered. These research questions are detailed below:

- RQ1 What are the key characteristics of a brand community according to marketing research literature?
- RQ2 Do Leinster Rugby fans display the characteristics of a brand community?
- RQ3 Do Leinster Rugby fans consider themselves to be part of a brand community?

To conduct the research necessary to answer the above research questions, research philosophy and design was something that that was considered and will be discussed in the following section.

### 3.3 Research Philosophy

Saunders et al. (2009) define research as something that people undertake in order to find out things in a systematic way, thereby increasing their knowledge on a given subject. Johnston (2014) suggests that everyone is engaged in the research process through attempting to find solutions to problems which are perceived. Quinlan (2011) notes that any research project is underpinned by a philosophical framework, which is defined as 'the worldview within which the research is situated.'

Further to this, the difficulty in conducting research is heightened by the complex classification of research philosophies surrounding epistemology, ontology, axiology and doxology and the quantitative-qualitative dichotomy debates (Mkansi & Acheampong 2012). With this is mind, Kapoulas & Mitic (2012) suggest it is critical for researchers to truly understand the nature and character of their inquiries, to ensure they adhere to suitable methodologies. This is mirrored by Hartono (2008) when it is observed that designing research involves a number of related stages of research design and execution, coupled with a rigorous rationale for same.

Burrell & Morgan (1979) find that the research process can be determined into three stages consisting of first determining the most suitable paradigm, followed by the selection of research methodology and finally choosing the research method to collect and analyse the data.

### 3.3.1 Ontology -vs- Epistemology

Saunders et al. (2009) discuss how the research philosophy adopted contains important assumptions about the way in which the researcher views the world. Two of the major ways of thinking about research philosophy are Ontology and Epistomology.

Both contain differences which will influence the way in which the researcher will think about the research process. Saunders et al. (2009) use the research onion to illustrate that ontology and epistemology are the outer layers and wrap around methodologies and methods as can be seen in Fig 3.3.1.
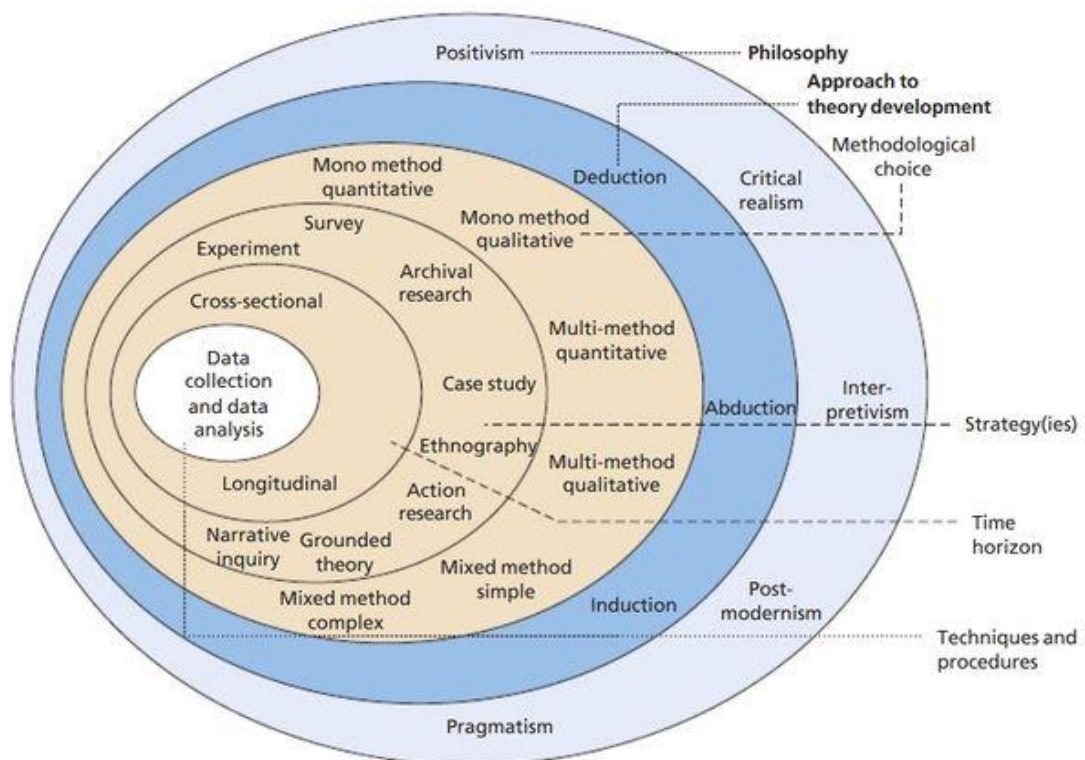


Fig 3.3.1: Research Onion – Saunders et al. (2009)

Easterby-Smith et al. (2012) use different imagery by representing ontology and epistemology through a tree trunk. Ontology is concerned with the nature of reality and thus raises questions of the assumptions researchers have about the way the world operates and the commitment held to particular views (Saunders et al. 2009). Brand (2009) discuss how ontology relates to ''assumptions which concern the very essence of the phenomena under investigation''.

According to Brand (2009) epistomology concerns the issue of how it is possible to know things. Epistemology considers broader, more philosophical issues relating to the nature of knowledge (Cunliffe 2010). Further to this, Bryman and Bell (2011) define epistemology as 'the question of what is (or should be), regarded as acceptable knowledge in a discipline.' Cunliffe (2010) discusses how Ontology and Epistomology are often conflated but are different nonetheless. Epistemology considers broader issues relating to the nature of knowledge, while Ontology is concerned with the nature of reality.

Due to the nature of the research topic, an epistemological approach was adopted by the researcher as the research topic deals with subjective meanings and social phenomena associated with relationships between consumers and brands, more specifically, Leinster Rugby fans and the Leinster Rugby Brand. Saunders et al. (2009) refer to two commonly used epistemological considerations in research and these are positivism and interpretivism, which will both be discussed in detail in the following section.

### 3.3.2. Positivism -vs- Interpretivism

### 3.3.2.1. Positivism

Brand (2009) asserts that positivism is the mode of thought that most naturally falls first for discussion in any review of research paradigms. Xinping (2002) claims that positivist research has become an accepted paradigm throughout scientific research.

Easterby-Smith et al. (2012) discuss how having a positivistic approach to research suggests that the world is external and therefore should be measured by objective methods, a suggestion that is also made by Henderson (2011); "the assumptions of

positivism are that truth is an independent part of a whole, and that scientific research is objective/value-free."

Xinping (2002) details how positivist research advocates identifying the problems, putting forward theoretical hypotheses, and then using methods such as experimentation or investigation to test and verify hypotheses. Brand (2009) also illustrates this in discussing how experimentation and verification of hypotheses forms the basis of positivism.

Furthermore, Xinping (2002) goes on to discuss how positivism attaches importance to explaining matters by means of clear data, specific facts, and observable actions. It is argued that positivism tends to be used in research which will have an emphasis on quantifiable observations that lend themselves to statistical analysis (Saunders, et al. 2009). Dealing with specific data and facts is the most appropriate approach for this research given its nature and for that reason interpretivism was also considered.

### 3.3.2.2 Interpretivism

Saunders et al. (2009) state that interpretivism advocates that it is necessary for the researcher to understand differences between humans in our role as social actors. This emphasises the difference between conducting research among people rather than objects and this point is also made by Brand (2009) through discussing how Interpretivism assumes all meanings are contextual. Kapoulas and Mitic (2012) discuss how positivism helped test the truthfulness of observations and assumptions that have emerged in marketing, and how the interpretivist approach helped to contribute to gaining a better understanding of the phenomena in building new theories and knowledge.

Bryman (2004) notes that adopting the interpretive paradigm naturally leads to qualitative research methods, an idea that can also be seen in the writing of Saunders et al. (2009) when it is declared that data collection techniques most often used include the use of small samples, in depth investigations, and an overall qualitative approach to research as opposed to quantitative.

In summary, critical appraisal of the effectiveness of using either positivism or interpretivism as the overall research philosophy for this project has been carried out. It was found that positivism as an approach tends to have an emphasis on quantifiable observations that lend themselves to statistical analysis, while interpretivism deals with smaller samples and in-depth investigations to understand differences between humans in our role as social actors. Due to the nature of this research project and given that the main objective is to understand how people relate to and communicate with each other and with brands, Interpretivism is chosen as the appropriate research philosophy. As previously mentioned Interpretivism more often involves the use of qualitative research methods as opposed to quantitative methods. Both of these approaches will be discussed in detail to illustrate the reasons why qualitative methods are more suitable for this research project.

### 3.3.3 Deductive and Inductive Approaches to Research

Saunders et al. (2009) discuss how a deductive approach to research involves the development of a theory and hypothesis, then the design of a research strategy to test the hypothesis; whereas an inductive approach involves the collection of data and the development of theory as a result of the data analysis. Deduction as an approach lends itself more to positivism, and induction to interprevistism. As mentioned in the previous section an interpretivist approach was undertaken in this research project as interpretivism deals with smaller samples and in-depth investigations to understand differences between humans in our role as social actors. With this in mind, it was clear that an inductive research approach should be taken as Induction emphasis gaining an understanding of the meanings humans attach to events through the collection of qualitative data, and a realisation that the researcher is part of the research process (Saunders et al. 2009).

## 3.4 Research Purpose

As discussed previously, Burrell & Morgan (1979) argue that the research process can be determined into three stages consisting of first determining the most suitable paradigm to underpin the research, followed by the selection of research methodology and finally choosing the research method to collect and analyse the data. Having considered the philosophical framework of the research, it is necessary to select the most suitable methodology for this study in order to fulfil the research aims and objectives.

Saunders et al. (2009) encourage the consideration of a research purpose in terms of the question to be answered and research objectives to be fulfilled. The classification of research purpose most often used in the research methods' literature is the threefold one of explanatory, descriptive and exploratory.

## 3.4.1 Explanatory Research

Studies that establish causal relationships between variables are described as explanatory research or can also be termed Causal research. The emphasis with this research method is on studying a situation to explain the relationships between variables (Saunders et al. 2009).

## 3.4.2 Descriptive Research

Reiss (2011) notes that descriptive research models are primarily about using statistical methods to characterize features of the joint distribution of data. This approach ideally uncovers interesting facts, trends, practices, and puzzles that can help shape existing marketing theories or prompt new models. Robson (2002) states that the object of descriptive research is 'to portray an accurate profile of persons, events or situations.' According to Saunders et al. (2009) it is necessary to have a clear picture of the phenomena on which you wish to collect data prior to the collection of the data when adopting a descriptive research approach.

### 3.4.3 Exploratory Research

De Langhe & Schliesser (2017) describe how explorative research aims to carve out a new niche, and to successfully connect as many processes as possible that were previously unconnected or did not even exist. This idea is mirrored by Robson (2002) when it is asserted that an exploratory study is a means of finding out 'what is happening; to ask questions, and to assess phenomena in a new light'. Saunders et al. (2009) explain that in using an exploratory research approach, the focus is initially broad and becomes progressively narrower as the research progresses.

Of the research purposes proposed in this section, the researcher utilises an exploratory approach as the research is exploratory by design, given that little is known about the social phenomenon under investigation. Leinster Rugby fans have not been researched by many marketing studies (one of few examples includes O'Connor (2013)), meaning an exploratory research approach is necessary as the researcher is aiming to ask questions and assess a phenomena in a new light (Saunders et al. 2009).

### 3.5 Quantitative -vs- Qualitative Methodologies

As discussed previously, an interpretivist research philosophy is adopted for the present study, which therefore lends itself to the use of qualitative methods for data collection for a number of reasons including the fact that Bishop (2014) discusses how quantitative approaches are traditionally associated with positivist epistemologies, while qualitative approaches are traditionally associated with interpretive epistemologies. A summary of the strengths and weaknesses of quantitative and qualitative research methods is detailed by Choy (2014) and is displayed in Fig 3.5. A brief synopsis of quantitative and qualitative research methods is discussed in the following two sections to clarify why qualitative methods were most suitable to the research in question.
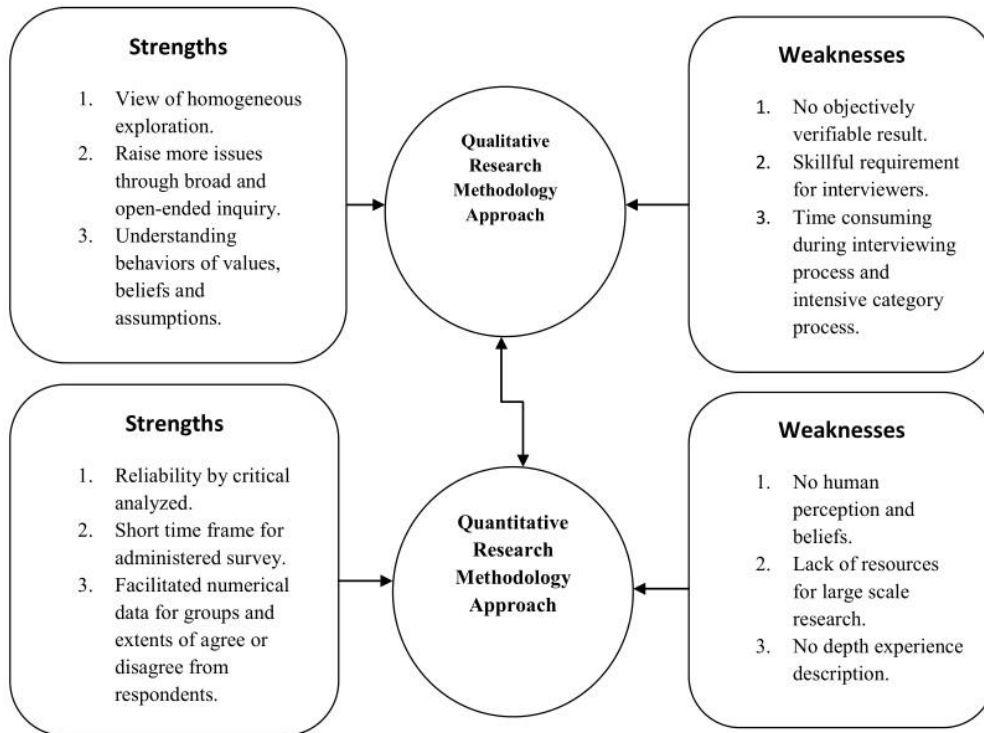
Fig 3.5 Quantitative -vs- Qualitative (Choy 2014)

### 3.5.1 Quantitative Research Methods

Quantitative is predominantly used as a synonym for any data collection technique or data analysis procedure that generates or uses numerical data (Saunders et al. 2009). Quantitative approaches are traditionally associated with positivist epistemologies (Bishop 2014). Positivism attaches importance to explaining matters by means of clear data, specific facts, and observable actions through numerical or statistical findings (Xinping 2002).

Given the nature of the research at hand and keeping in mind the purpose of the research being to ask questions and assess a phenomenon in a new light (Saunders, et al., 2009), quantitative research methods could not provide the data necessary to answer the research questions stated in section 3.2.2.

### 3.5.2 Qualitative Research Methods

Qualitative research is described by Morgan and Smircich (1980) as an approach rather than a particular set of techniques, and its appropriateness derives from the

nature of the phenomenon to be explored. Gummesson (2005) describe qualitative research as "a conscious search for meaning and understanding".

This study is qualitative because the research objectives require exploring the behaviour of Leinster Rugby fans and also fans' own opinions and perspectives on their behaviour and experiences as rugby fans; opinions which are anticipated to be potentially filled with subjective interpretations on the fans' part, but also requiring interpretation and understanding by the primary researcher of these opinions, which is a research goal that is effectively satisfied through adoption of qualitative research methods, as displayed in similar studies of sports fan opinions (Healy 2012).

## 3.6 Sampling Methods

Saunders et al. (2009) discuss how in order to answer any research questions or fulfil research objectives, it would be impossible to either collect or analyse all the data available due to time, access and money restrictions. Sampling techniques provide a range of methods that enable the researcher to reduce the amount of data needed to be collected by considering only data from a sub-group rather than all possible cases to allow the researcher to make an inference about a population. There are various sampling techniques available, as summarised on Fig 3. In general, sampling techniques can be divided into two types consisting of probability or random sampling, and non- probability or non- random sampling (Taherdoost 2016).
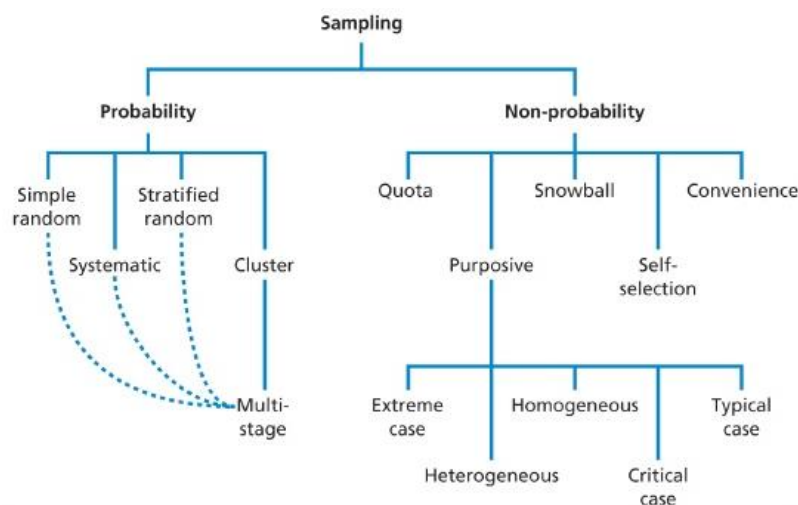


Fig 3.6: Sampling Methods – Saunders et al. (2009)

### 3.6.1 Probability (Random) Sampling

Probability sampling means that every item in the population has an equal chance of being included in the sample (Taherdoost 2016). Saunders et al. (2009) note that probability sampling is most commonly associated with survey-based research strategies where there is a need to make inferences from a sample about a population to answer research questions. There are a number of different sampling methods within probability sampling and these are detailed below:

- Simple random sampling which means that every case of the population has an equal probability of inclusion in sample.
- Systematic sampling is where every certain number of cases after a random start a case is selected to be included in the sample.
- Stratified random sampling is where the population is divided into strata and a random sample is taken from each subgroup.
- Cluster sampling is where the whole population is divided into clusters or groups and a random sample is taken from these clusters.
- Multi-Stage sampling is a process of moving from a broad to a narrow sample, using a step by step process.

(Taherdoost 2016)

### 3.6.2 Non-Probability (Non-Random) Sampling

Non-Probability sampling is often associated with case study research design and qualitative research (Taherdoost 2016). To answer research questions and meet objectives, it may be necessary to undertake an in-depth study that focuses on a small number of cases for a particular purpose, as this would provide the researcher with an information-rich study and theoretical insights (Saunders et al. 2009).

Non-Probability Sampling therefore offers greater efficacy for the present study given that a qualitative research approach is adopted. There are a number of different non-probability sampling methods and these are detailed below:

- Quota sampling is a non-random sampling technique in which participants are chosen on the basis of predetermined characteristics so that the total sample will have the same distribution of characteristics as the wider population (Davis 2005).
- Snowball sampling is a non-random sampling method that uses a few cases to help encourage other cases to take part in the study, thereby increasing sample size (Taherdoost 2016).
- Convenience sampling is selecting participants because they are often readily and easily available. Typically, convenience sampling tends to be a favoured sampling technique among students as it is inexpensive, and an easy option compared to other sampling techniques (Ackoff 1953).
- Purposive or judgmental sampling is a strategy in which particular settings persons or events are selected deliberately in order to provide important information that cannot be obtained from other choices (Maxwell 1996).

### 3.6.2.1 Purposive Sampling

Having considered many other forms of sampling to adopt for this research product it is decided that a purposive sampling approach is adopted. Saunders et al. (2009) tell us that purposive sampling enables researchers to select cases that will best enable them to answer their research questions and to meet their objectives. Moreover, this form of sample is often used when working with very small samples to select cases that are particularly informative and relevant to the study (Neuman 2005).

### 3.7 Data Collection

In order to collect data relevant to answer the proposed research questions of this project a number of data collection methods were considered. As discussed, qualitative research methods are chosen to be used in the process of this research given that they are particularly useful for revealing the rich symbolic world that

underlies needs, desires, meanings and choice (Kozinets 2002). Further to this, the most popular qualitative methods are focus groups, interviews, and "market-oriented ethnography". The most suitable methods of collecting data for this research project are the use of in-depth interviews, as well as participant observation, specifically netnography.

### 3.7.1 In-Depth Interviews

An interview is a purposeful discussion between two or more people that can help researchers gather reliable data that are relevant to answering research questions and fulfilling research objectives (Kahn and Cannell 1957). Collis and Hussey (2003) assert that it is impossible to treat people as being separate from their social contexts and they cannot be understood without examining the perceptions they have of their own activities. This gives us an insight into why interviews are necessary to gather rich qualitative data. There are a number of different types of interviews including standardised and non-standardised. Fig 3.7.1 outlines various interview approaches. Within the non-standardised types, semi-structured interviews are also known as 'qualitative research interviews' (King 2004), and the researcher will have a list of themes and questions to be covered, and that data will be recorded by audio-recording the conversation (Saunders et al. 2009). Due to the nature of data that can be collected from semi-structured interviews, it is decided that this data collection method is used by the researcher.

Six in-depth, one-to-one interviews were conducted with Leinster Rugby fans, utilising questions which pay particular attention to the participant's opinions, feelings, emotions and experiences. As mentioned data will be recorded by audio-recording the conversation, and transcription of the interviews is completed immediately after the interviews in the present study. Transcribing the interviews immediately after the interview maximised the likelihood that the interviewer would remember the tone and interpreted meanings of what the interviewee had to say, which would benefit the quality of the data analysis and findings. That said however, Seale (1998) observes that what people say in interviews is not necessarily what they do in practice.

To address this issue and attempt to collect as much reliable data as possible, an ethnographic approach to data collection involving participant observation on a Leinster Rugby fan forum online is included in the research design for the purposes of triangulation. Elliott and Jankel-Elliott (2003) note the compatibility and complementarity of participant observation and interviewing in order to increase the researcher's understanding of the setting.
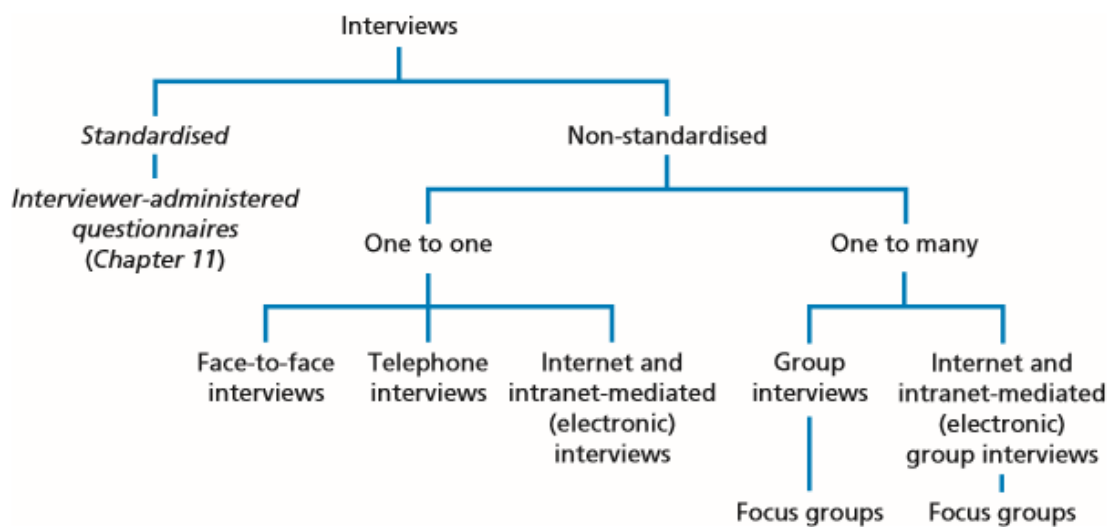


Fig 3.7.1: Interview Methods – Saunders et al. (2009)

### 3.7.2 Participant Observation: Netnography

Muniz & O'Guinn (2001) discuss that to have an understanding of brand communities, it is necessary to observe their enactment in everyday life and that one ideal methodological approach is ethnography. Kozinets (2002) describes ethnography as an anthropological method that refers to fieldwork involving and, or, but usually, observation and interviewing, in order to study the distinctive meanings, practices and artefacts of particular social groups. Ethnography usually entails participation and observation in particular cultural arenas. It is chosen as part of this research project as ethnographic findings are generally of rich qualitative content, thereby effective as a route towards answering this study's research questions.

While ethnography is an important technique that focuses on the behaviour of the people who constitute a market for a product or service, it is a time-consuming and elaborate method that requires skill and substantial investments of researcher resources (Kozinets 2002). For this reason, for the purpose of this research project it made sense to adopt netnography as a data collection method.

Kozinets (2002) describes netnography as ethnography adapted to the study of online communities. Netnography is faster, requires less travel, and is less expensive than traditional ethnography, but, it also provides information on the symbolism, meanings, and consumption patterns of online consumer groups. Hewson et al. (2003) share this positive view of netnography when it is pointed out that using the Internet for structured observation offers researchers the advantage of non-intrusiveness. It is for these reasons netnography is employed as one of the data collection methods used in this research project to investigate Leinster Rugby fans in an online environment. A Leinster Rugby fan forum as well as a number of social media sites including Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram were observed and relevant findings recorded over a period of one month in July.

The sites that were observed as part of this research were Leinster Rugby's Fan Forum Facebook page, Leinster Rugby's Fans Instagram feed, and also Leinster Rugby's fan forum, known as "Babbling Brook".



Fig 3.7.2: Leinster Supporters Club Facebook Page

### 3.8 Data Analysis

### 3.8.1 Qualitative Data Analysis

Whether a researcher decides to follow a quantitative or qualitative approach depends on the researcher's epistemologically grounded beliefs (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Specifically, qualitative data analysis is adopted as the chosen inductively-based analytical procedure to analyse the qualitative data (Graue 2015). Therefore, when analysing qualitative data, the researcher deals with meanings and not with plain numbers (Graue 2015).

Data analysis is considered to be the "Achilles' heel" of qualitative research (Gummesson 2005). The effort to compress massive volumes of qualitative data into few lines of text that must be illustrative, descriptive, explanatory and theory-inducing all at once is the challenge qualitative researchers encounter when making their findings presentable to audiences (Black 2006). As such, the researcher is the instrument of data analysis.

Two types of data require analysis in the present study; data from participant observation, (Netnography), and interview data. The first stage of analysis involved the researcher personally transcribing all interviews immediately after their conclusion. The research then involved an inductive analysis approach to the qualitative data collected. Meanings from the data are summarised, categorised and structured, according to identified themes, relating directly back to the research objectives.

### 3.9 Research Ethics Considerations

### 3.9.1 In-Depth Interviews

Informed Consent Sheets (see Appendix 1 for a blank informed consent sheet example) were distributed to all 6 participants of in-depth interviews during this research. The reason for this was to explain that the information was being collected for a research dissertation and to ensure the participant is happy for the researcher to use any of their quotes in the findings and discussion chapter.

The necessity of lengthy and in-depth explanations regarding research procedures sometimes produced adverse effect on participants' openness to participate in interviews and case studies as has been noted in methodology literature (Kapoulas 2003). With that said, participants for the most part were engaged in conversation and happy to contribute their experience for the sake of the research project. The confidentiality and anonymity of interviewees is guaranteed during the present study with all interview quotes anonymised.

### 3.9.2 Netnography

Permission from gatekeepers was requested in order to be able to quote members of the online forum in the findings and discussion chapters. The anonymity of participants who were observed online was ensured through the use of pseudonyms when reporting and quoting on their activity.

### 3.10 Summary

To achieve the research objective outlined in 3.2.1, a number of research questions were formed, which when answered would result in the fulfilment of the research objective. Given the nature of the research it was decided that an interpretivist, qualitative approach would be taken and that the data collection methods would consist of in-depth interviews and participant observation, or more specifically netnography. This chapter also provides a justification for the chosen research methodology, and discusses the ethics considered for this research.

# Chapter 4 - Findings

## 4.1 Chapter Introduction

This chapter presents the findings from six in-depth interviews as well as participant observation of an online fan forum. The main findings include the formation of a list of characteristics of brand communities as presented by the marketing literature. Further to this it was found that the behaviours and beliefs of Leinster rugby fans do show that they are representative of a brand community as characterised by the marketing literature. Moreover, in-depth interviews reveal that some Leinster fans reject the idea that they are part of a brand community even if they do exhibit the aforementioned characteristics. This chapter's structure follows broadly along the lines of the relevance of data to each of the research questions. Through answering these 3 research questions, the researcher assesses whether the objective of the research project has been fulfilled, i.e. whether Leinster Rugby fans are representative of a brand community.

## 4.2. Findings Regarding Research Question 1

> **Research Question 1:**
>
> What are the key characteristics of a brand community according to marketing research literature?

This research question is answered through secondary research, through the exploration and consideration of the relevant marketing literature to date. Muniz & O'Guinn (2001) provided the basis for this research through the characteristics of brand communities they suggest. This is coupled with Brand Community Practices as proposed by Schau et al. (2009), in order to identify and define the key characteristics of brand communities. That literature is summarised in Chapter 2.

**4.3 Findings Regarding Research Question 2**

> **Research Question 2:**
>
> Do Leinster Rugby fans display the characteristics of a brand community?

Once the characteristics of brand communities were determined through a review of the marketing literature (Muniz & O'Guinn 2001; Schau et al. 2009), the researcher could compare findings from data collection against these characteristics in order to answer research question 2.

**4.3.1 Traditional Community Markers**

Muniz & O'Guinn (2001) discuss how there are at least three core components or markers of a traditional community. These are Consciousness of Kind; Rituals and Traditions and Moral Responsibility. Evidence of these community markers were found in the observation of Leinster rugby fans and the details will be discussed below.

**4.3.1.1 Consciousness of Kind**

As discussed in Chapter 2 Muniz & O'Guinn (2001) describe consciousness of kind as the intrinsic connection that members feel toward one another, and the collective sense of difference from others not in the community. Within consciousness of kind there are two sub-categories of community markers and these are sense of belonging and shared attitudes. Evidence of consciousness of kind was found through observation of an online forum, in which the lyrics of a Leinster song were posted. One of the online users observed then replied to provide an insight into this sense of collectivism:

*Participant 14: "We are the skint Leinster supporters; Coming from across the sea (allez les bleus); our women are at home complaining; raising our NAMA owned roofs to heaven (allez le bleus); we are the skint Leinster supporters, so give us a*

*pint; Give me a pint of plain! Because we are Leinster (Allez); because we are Leinster (lez bleus)".*

*Participant 15: "But were not skint, were from D4 and were loaded. Could we have an alternative version for those of us in the stadium sipping our mochalochachinos?"*

Although the comment was humorous in intent, it still suggests that Leinster supporters do believe that majority of their support does generally come from affluent backgrounds, particularly Dublin 4, thereby inferring that anyone who is 'skint' is different from others in the community. This is a clear example of a shared attitude that Leinster fans exhibit.

Consciousness of kind can also be identified when speaking to Leinster Fans individually as can be seen from the interviews conducted as part of this research. One interviewee speaks of their love of the Leinster culture of play and identifies that in particular as something that sets Leinster Rugby aside from the rest.

*"We used to call it Leinstertainment (Leinster Entertainement). Yeah, we went through times where we should have been tougher, everyone calling us the ladyboys and all, but on our day the rugby we used to play was beautiful. Free flowing, exciting, when it worked it was 100 times better than what Munster were doing, even if they were more successful over the course of the season."*

This response illustrates the sense of community, or sense of belonging, which was built around a specific aspect of the team. The fact that Leinster played exciting rugby delighted fans and helped them to align on the belief that this is how rugby should be played, and not only that, but it showed them that the other teams showed them how it shouldn't be played.

Both of these examples, shared attitudes and sense of belonging, illustrate the community feel among Leinster Supports, firstly the idea that there is a typical Leinster supporter who is usually from Dublin 4 and well off, and that they identify with a common idea about how rugby should be played, and those who do not believe the same would not belong in the community.

### 4.3.1.2 Rituals and Traditions

Rituals and traditions are the second marker of traditional communities and they represent vital social processes by which the meaning of the community is reproduced and transmitted within and beyond the community (Muniz & O'Guinn 2001). This is a theme that was often encountered in interviews and also during participant observation. Rituals and traditions can also be subcategorised to social practices and shared history and culture (Muniz & O'Guinn 2001).

One particular area of research that continued to come up was the importance of match day rituals and traditions as Leinster fans. In observing the fan forum, one participant allowed the researcher to see one of the traditions of a match day setting.

*Participant 8: "Are you bringing the stuffed pussycat up this time? Good times!"*

This shows that Leinster fans do indeed have a shared history and culture, and one they are happy to recreate at future gatherings of the community. Match days also seemed to be the setting of other examples of activities which could be viewed as ritualistic or traditional as discussed by participants in interviews:

*Interviewee: "Ah I like a few pints before a game, and I'd usually get a bit of grub beforehand, I do like to make it social you know."*

This sentiment was mirrored by more than one person during interviews:

*Interviewee: "It's usually the same routine for a home game. Up, jersey on, and straight to Paddy Cullen's. Great atmosphere in there me and the lads love it. The place is usually packed but that's part of the atmosphere before a game. Then straight to the game and maybe Oil Can Harrys after."*

From this it is clear that Leinster rugby fans do exhibit the social processes by which meaning of the community is transmitted, via the match day rituals such as assembling in the same places before games to associate with one another, and also wearing jerseys to show that they are part of the community and let people outside of the community know who they are.

### 4.3.1.3 Moral Responsibility

The third marker of community is a sense of moral responsibility, which is a felt sense of duty or obligation to the community as a whole, and to its individual members (Muniz & O'Guinn 2001). Protection of the community during times of threat is one facet of moral responsibility in action. Another is the assistance community members provide to one another in their membership of the community (Muniz & O'Guinn 2001). Both of these actions are evident when speaking to or observing Leinster Rugby fans.

In observing the online fan forum, protection of the community as a whole and the responsibility of each member can be seen to be addressed in the following post:

Participant 7: *"Over the last while an undercurrent of abuse and on occasion some mild harassment has crept into a very small minority of posts on the forum. We cannot condone this in any way and we feel that it is something that could damage the community that we have all contributed to and built up over the years."*

This sense of moral responsibility and collective action is also evident in the interviews conducted as part of the research:

Interviewee**:** *"I don't make it to many away games but when I can I do make the effort to go. I'm not an armchair supporter watching the games at home I do like to go to games as much as possible and obviously a lot less go to away games, especially when they're abroad. So, when I can, I do feel like it's something I should do to support the team, and probably something that's lacking in some of the supporters at the moment."*

It is clear the interviewee feels a responsibility, or obligation to the community, to support the team at away games even when that is not particularly suited to them, moreover the community coming together on the online forum in a time of threat is also a great example of moral responsibility to the community itself.

### 4.3.2 Brand Community Practices

As discussed in Chapter 2, Schau et al. (2009) conducted research in order to identify a common set of value-creating practices in nine different brand communities. Their aim was to compile an exhaustive list of practices common to the brand communities studied and to situate those practices in the context of prior research. Schau et al. (2009) find that there are 12 value-creating practices which they organise into four thematic categories: Social Networking; Impression Management; Community Engagement; and Brand Use. Interviews and participant observation was conducted to identify whether any of these practices are consistent across Leinster Rugby supporters.

### 4.3.2.1 Social Networking

The first category of practices Schau et al. (2009) identified were Social networking practices. These are practices that focus on creating, enhancing, and sustaining ties among brand community members. Social networking among Leinster fans proved to be a prevalent practice in the community and this was observed through netnography. Various social media sites were observed including Facebook and Instagram. Below can be seen an example of how Leinster fans utilise social media to interact with one another to enhance and sustain relationships.



Fig 4.3.2.1: Social Networking

### 4.3.2.2 Impression Management

Impression Management practices are those that have an external, outward focus on creating favourable impressions of the brand (Schau, et al. 2009).

This can be found in the action of Leinster fans and was observed in a number of different areas. On the online forum the following post was observed:

Participant 5: "I am an Ulsterman but as we are 'out' I'm heading down to Lansdowne tomorrow (with girlfriend in tow). Any Suggestions for food?

Participant 6: "Try Farmer Bownes on Bath Ave."

Although the person asking the question was not actually part of the Leinster fan community, one of the members still replied which serves to not only help the person in need of information who lies outside of the community, but also create a positive impression of the fans in the online forum in particular and also the Leinster community as a whole.

Another occurrence of Leinster fans exhibiting impression management practices was observed through an in-depth interview:

Interviewee: "We try not to mix too much with just ours either, we like to meet the travelling fans and have a drink with them. Same as the way the Irish soccer fans have a good name abroad I think Leinster fans like to do that!"

This is another example of Leinster fans engaging in activities to create a more positive impression of their community to people outside of the community.

### 4.3.2.3 Community Engagement

Community engagement practices as those that reinforce members' escalating engagement with the brand community (Schau, et al. 2009). Fig 4.3.2.3 shows an example of community engagement observed online by a Leinster fan and his family in which he meets a member of the team at an organised event. Community engagement practices were also observed on the online fan forum when members offered lifts to fellow community members who they may not even know on a personal level:

**Participant 1:** *"This is a call to people that travel to Leinster games from around the province by any means necessary. Leo the Lion suggested this as an idea for supporters who travel from around the province to home matches. If there's enough interest, I'll set up a new area on the forum for people to either ask for or offer seats in cars to other supporters."*

**Participant 3:** *"I'll be able to give lifts if I'm going to the games, but it could be from Dublin or Navan depending on whether I'm working. But yeah sounds like a great idea."*



Fig 4.3.2.3: Community Engagement

### 4.3.2.4 Brand Use

Lastly Brand Use practices are identified by Schau et al. (2009) as specifically related to improved or enhanced use of the focal brand. This can be seen through the images obtained through participant observation on social media such as Fig 4.3.2.4 which clearly show Leinster rugby fans engage in the practice of brand use.

This is also a practice which can be observed on the online fan forum:

Participant 10: "On our way to Edinburgh and wanted to get some Car flags, would anybody know where I could get some now that the Store in Donnybrook is closed, neither Life style or Elverys have them."



Fig 4.3.2.4: Brand Use

## 4.4 Findings Regarding Research Question 3

**Research Question 3:**

Do Leinster Rugby fans consider themselves to be part of a brand community?

To answer RQ3 the researcher, during in-depth interviews with Leinster Rugby fans, asked a specific question of the participants, which was, "As a Leinster fan, do you think you are part of a brand community?". The first two research questions were proposed as the answers would provide the researcher with a clear framework of the characteristics of brand communities, and an insight into whether Leinster Rugby fans exhibit these characteristics.

The aim of RQ3 however is to investigate and understand whether Leinster Fans felt as though they were part of Brand Communities. The reason for the inclusion of this question was that the data collected during the research may suggest that Leinster fans are representative of a brand community as proposed by the marketing literature, but the attitude of fans towards brand communities would not be recorded. Therefore, even if it was concluded that the Leinster fans appear to conform to the characteristics of typical brand communities, the individual fans may not feel like they are part of a community, or vice versa.

All six in-depth interview participants were quizzed on their opinion regarding their position as a brand community member and a mixed response was received. Some participants, though they met the characteristics of a brand community member felt as though they were not part of a brand community. The responses will be discussed further in the next section.

### 4.4.1 Positive Responses

It must also be mentioned that while responses may have been positive there was also some confusion as to what a brand community is; some clarification was offered by the interviewer in order to create a better understanding of the question.

One interviewee in particular saw themselves as part of a brand community as Leinster Rugby fan:

*"Yeah definitely, like I don't think about it all the time but if you take big football clubs like Barca or United people are clearly more obsessed with the brand than they are about the team. Like they want to be seen in the jerseys and all.  So, to a certain extent I would say I like the Leinster brand, even though I'm a fan of the team if that makes sense."*

The interviewee makes a comparison between well-known sports brands and consumers proclivity to associate themselves these brands. Implicit in the response is also that these consumers are more concerned with the brand as an extension of themselves, than the actual sports team itself. The interviewee put themselves in this grouping also, while offering a caveat that they do in fact care about the team as well as the brand itself.

One of the interviewees gave an interesting response to the question provided by the researcher from the point of view of where the brand, and the sports team meet.

*"Yeah probably. I think if you're a season ticket holder you'd have to say so. I love the club and love going to away games with the lads. Even with the ones you don't know there is a community atmosphere in the bars and everyone is great craic you know? To be honest I'm not sure how much of it is about the team itself rather than the brand but it's pretty much the same thing to me. "*

The interviewee refences the community associated with Leinster rugby and expresses their love and admiration for the organisation as a whole. It is then mentioned that the brand, and the team is hard to separate from each other from the interviewees' point of view. It could be suggested that Leinster fans do not delineate between the brand and the team or the organisation. It would appear that sports fans, and in particular Leinster rugby fans do not consciously acknowledge or identify with the brand, even though subconsciously the brand itself may have an effect on their attitudes.

This uncertainty surrounding brand community's involvement is further illustrated when speaking to another interviewee.

*"I'm not 100% sure what that is but I think so yeah. I love the Leinster gear and I have all the scarves and jerseys and stuff. I'm not over the top but people definitely know I'm a fan like."*

From this response it is clear that the participant is a fan of the team and though may exhibit the signs of a brand community member, is not particular sure whether they would fit in the categorisation of a brand community member. It is interesting however that they mention that people would know them as a Leinster fan, this would suggest they are proud of the fact that they support Leinster Rugby, and perhaps act in ways that promote this admiration of the team, i.e. jerseys and scarves.

Another interesting insight was offered by one of the interviewees:

*"Eh, I'm not sure really, I kind of just see myself as a fan, not necessarily mad about the brand itself more based around the team. If you mean the logo and jerseys I wouldn't be too fussed about all that but the team itself yeah, I'm not really sure*

*what the difference is but I do use the fan forum and would go to most of the games. So yeah I am part of a community anyway."*

This interviewee acknowledges that they are part of a community, but not necessarily associated with the brand.

### 4.4.2 Negative Responses

Some of the interviewees elicited a more negative response to the suggestion of whether they may be part of a brand community as a Leinster rugby fan. This response from an interviewee shows their dissatisfaction with possibly being referred to as a brand community member.

*"Eh, no, no I don't, I don't feel that I'm part of a brand community. When someone asks me if I'm a Leinster fan I'd say yeah but if they asked if I like the Leinster brand I suppose I would say yes but it's a different question. It's not a predominant brand in psyche, as far as I know. On matchday maybe when you're pulling on the jersey you feel a bit more of the sense of identity but that's more just on matchday rather than an ongoing thing. So, in a sense do I feel like the Leinster brand and my involvement with the team separates me from my neighbour? I would say no."*

The interviewee made it very clear that in their mind there is a difference between the team and the brand. They suggest that they are a fan of Leinster team, but have no major ties to the brand that represents the team. This admiration of the brand increases slightly on matchdays when they are wearing Leinster clothing or jerseys, but they do not feel that their association with the Leinster brand separates them from others who may not be Leinster fans.

Information collected from another interviewee follows the same message, in that they separate the brand itself from the team, in this they case they discuss how culture is more important to them then branding:

*"Do I think I'm part of a brand community? No. It's more about the culture than the brand itself. I mean when I first started supporting them they played exciting rugby and they were kind of a classy team. It's that culture that's more important to me."*

It is clear that this interviewee began to support Leinster rugby because of their style of play and the excitement that elicited in them.

### 4.4.3 Fans Conflicted about Whether they are a Brand Community

Leinster fans exhibit a mixed response to the idea of being a part of a brand community. Some interviewees feel as though they are part of a brand community, and others feel as though branding was not something that came into their 'psyche' or thoughts or experience as a Leinster fan.

Of 6 interviewees, 4 feel as though they were indeed participants of a brand community for a variety of reasons. Some feel as though the Leinster brand is actually as important to them as the team, whereas others identify themselves as part of a community and describe their love of the team itself as the same as their love for the brand.

The other 2 interviewees feel, even though they displayed the characteristics of brand community members, that they are not members of Leinster Rugby brand community in their own mind. Both interviewees feel that the brand was separate to the culture and separate to the team itself.

These findings suggest that no matter whether sports fans exhibit the characteristics of a brand community, they may reject the idea of being a part of one due to their understanding of branding and what they feel is important about being a fan of a team.

### 4.5 Findings Summary

The main findings of this research consisted of the identification of a common set of brand community characteristics. These were then used to ascertain whether Leinster rugby fans are representative of a brand community. Findings suggest Leinster fans are representative of a brand community, however, the research finds that Leinster Rugby fans are conflicted as to whether they see themselves as part of a brand community, with a mixed response being received through interviews.

# Chapter 5 – Discussion

This chapter will build on the key findings from the primary research, by discussing this findings with reference to the literature review in Chapter 2.

## 5.1 The Formation of Sports Brand Communities

Professional sport generates significant amounts of revenue from a variety of sources (Morgan & Summers 2005), and as such, organisations are trying to compete in an increasingly competitive market. In order to do so, organisations must try to manage its resources efficiently, and just of one of these resources is the organisation's brand (Villarejo-Ramos & Martín-Velicia 2007). As discussed in Chapter 2, Muniz & O'Guinn (2001) illustrate how a brand's competitive advantage may lie in the facilitation of brand communities, and how brand communities form more consistently when they are facing threatening competition in a hostile market.

The findings of this research serves to back up this idea as Leinster fans exhibit loyalty to the team and also show unfavourable associations towards Munster rugby, another rugby union club in Ireland. The competition between Munster and Leinster has intensified over the years, and was evident in speaking with Leinster fans, and through participant observation. One interviewee discussed how the style of Leinster's play was just one thing that sets them apart from their rivals:

*"Yeah, we went through times where we should have been tougher, everyone calling us the ladyboys and all, but on our day the rugby we used to play was beautiful. Free flowing, exciting, when it worked it was 100 times better than what Munster were doing, even if they were more successful over the course of the season."*

Muniz & O'Guinn (2001) discuss how through opposition to competing brands, brand community members derive an important aspect of their community experience, as well as an important component of the meaning of the brand. This is evident in the statement by the interviewee regarding Leinster's style of play. This Leinster fan is looking to put distance between Leinster and their rivals Munster by observing how much more attractive Leinster's style of play appears to the spectator.

This idea is mirrored by Thompson & Sinha (2008) as they find that brand communities have been cited for their potential to engender a sense of oppositional loyalty toward competing brands, the competing brand being Munster Rugby in this case.

However, not all interviewees exhibited the same level of opposition to competing brand, in this case Munster Rugby. One interviewee discusses how they in fact used to support Munster Rugby before they shifted to supporting Leinster.

*"Munster initially got me interested to a great degree around the turn of 2000, and then I eventually followed Munster's journey to Heineken cup success in 2006, and from then on Leinster began to have a bit of success themselves. I was conflicted at the time because people like me who weren't pre-Leinster fans may have probably been a bit in favour of Munster."*

This research as a whole finds that there is competition between Leinster and a number of different rugby union teams, Munster in particular. As mentioned previously Muniz & O'Guinn (2001) posit that through opposition to competing brands, brand community members derive an important aspect of their community experience, and this is something that is visible in the study of Leinster rugby fans. Moreover, Muniz & O'Guinn suggest that brand communities are more likely to form in a hostile and competitive market and given that Leinster rugby are situated in a competitive market, it would suggest that Leinster Rugby may see the formation of a brand community among their fans, and this is what formed the basis of this research which will be discussed in the next section.

## 5.2 Leinster Rugby Fans as a Brand Community

Chapter 4 presents the findings of this research project and answers the questions posed by the researcher prior to the investigation. In order to answer RQ1 the characteristics of brand communities were researched and identified in order to compile a list of characteristics which could be used to measure prospective brand communities against to see if they align. To answer RQ2 Leinster Rugby fans were studied via netnography and in-depth interviews to see if they conform to the characteristics identified in RQ1. This research finds that Leinster Rugby fans do exhibit the characteristics of a brand community as proposed by the marketing literature (Muniz & Guinn 2001; Schau et al. 2009). As a whole, the Leinster fans investigated exhibited the characteristics of a brand community, although there were some instances where the actions or attitudes of certain fans may not align with the marketing literature.

An example of this misalignment with the characteristics of brand communities can be seen through the use of the brand as proposed by Schau et al. (2009), who describes brand use as specifically related to improved or enhanced use of the focal brand. One of the Leinster Fans interviewed did not associate themselves with the brand but rather the team and made this clear when speaking about how they identify with Leinster Rugby.

*"I kind of just see myself as a fan, not necessarily mad about the brand itself more based around the team. If you mean the logo and jerseys I wouldn't be too fussed about all that but the team itself yeah."*

The opposite can be seen with other Leinster fans who were observed through online forums and social media. These fans show their intent to enhance their use of the focal brand through the purchasing of Leinster branded equipment and merchandise.

"On our way to Edinburgh and wanted to get some Car flags, would anybody know where I could get some now that the Store in Donnybrook is closed, neither Life style or Elverys have them."

Leinster Fans can be seen to show the characteristics and employ the practices of brand communities. Each characteristic which was identified as a result of answering RQ1 was observed and can be identified in the study of Leinster rugby fans, and

these observations can be seen in Chapter 4. Leinster Rugby fans exhibit all the characteristics of a brand community which serves to confirm the idea proposed by Muniz & O'Guinn and Thompson & Sinha (2008) that brand communities are more likely to form in a hostile and highly competitive market.

## 5.3 Co-Creation of Value

McAlexander et al. (2002) discuss how critical relationships include those between the customer and the brand, between the customer and the firm, between the customer and the product in use, and among fellow customers. Through the triadic connection between consumer, consumer and brand, an opportunity for consumers to co-create value lies in the participation of brand communities. The finding of this research serve to align with this statement, in that the triadic connection Leinster fans have between themselves as fans and the brand, creates value in a number of ways.

*"Jersey on, and straight to Paddy Cullen's. Great atmosphere in there me and the lads love it. The place is usually packed but that's part of the atmosphere before a game."*

It is clear that the interviewee feels that fellow fans, or consumers collectively co-create value through their presence and participation with the brand, which coincides with the ideas discussed earlier put forward by Pongsakornrungsilp & Schroeder (2011) and McAlexander et al (2002).

## 5.4 Brand Community Utility

Brand communities are capable of carrying out important functions on behalf of the brand, such as sharing information, perpetuating the history and culture of the brand, and providing assistance to customers with less allocation of resources provided from the firm (Muniz & O'Guinn 2001). The use of netnography allowed for the researcher to observe Leinster Rugby fans on an online community to understand their behaviour and attitudes towards the brand. This research finds that the online community does carry out important functions for the brand such as information sharing and assistance to fellow community members.

One member of the community seeks guidance from the forum when they have difficulty with tickets, rather than contacting Leinster Rugby officially:

"So, I ordered two tickets for the match a few weeks ago and I went to print out my tickets today only to find I couldn't. I wonder can anyone help, or do you think I will be able to sort it out at the ticketing office before the match. Would really appreciate advice."

"Had the same problem. Give Claire a call. You will need to send her your confirmation email as well. She was a great help and I got my tickets."

The same can be seen when community members converse on how best to travel to away matches with the team:

"Normally I make my own way but might be tempted with a package on this one, particularly as we would be at home if we reached the semi."; Participant 12: "Flights available now via Aer Lingus from Cork to Nice return. Out 4th, back 7th. €113 pp."

These two examples of conversations on the online community show that the Leinster Brand Community does show its utility to the organisation and confirms Muniz & O'Guinn (2001)'s statement that brand communities can carry out important functions on behalf of the brand.

**5.5 Fans' Attitudes to Brand Communities**

In chapter 2 the importance of fans was discussed in the success of sports teams as they are increasingly being recognised as a crucial element of sports brands (Healy 2012; Pongsakornrungsilp & Schroeder 2011). As a result, it is critical for sports teams and organisations to understand their fans, as a loyal fan can enhance the brand equity of a team (Kaynak et al. 2008). One important finding from this research that may impact upon a team's brand equity is the attitude Leinster fans show towards the suggestion that they are part of a brand community. There is a lack of marketing literature in this area, and consumer attitudes towards being brand community members may be a critical factor for teams. As Gladden et al. (2001) state, athletic success of a team may be fleeting, but a team should focus continually on their commitment to customers.

# Chapter 6 - Conclusions, Limitations and Recommendations for Further Research

## 6.1 Conclusions

The overall research objective of this project was to identify whether Leinster Rugby fans were representative of a brand community. This objective was to be fulfilled by answering the three research questions proposed set out in Chapter 3. Firstly, a common set of brand community characteristics were identified with reference to the marketing literature and a particular focus on the literature of Muniz & O'Guinn (2001) and Schau et al. (2009). Leinster Rugby fans were then investigated through participant observation and in-depth interviews to identify common practices and behaviours which could then be measure against the list of characteristics compiled as a result of the literature review. This research revealed that Leinster Rugby fans do exhibit the characteristics of a brand community, through their attitudes and beliefs which were observed though interviews and also their online behaviour which was observed though netnography. It can be concluded as a result of this research that Leinster Rugby fans are representative of a brand community, therefore, it is felt that the research objective was fulfilled.

## 6.2 Limitations

Due to the fact that this research project was based on a small sample size it is difficult to generalise the findings. Further to this, given the use of in-depth interviews the possible presence of bias is something that must also be recognised. Further investigation would need to be conducted into this research area in order to avoid some of these issues, but time constraints was also something that limited the researcher in this regard.

## 6.3 Recommendations for Further Research

This study's findings focuses on whether Leinster Rugby fans are representative of a brand community. There is a lot of potential to extend the findings in future research to discover whether other Irish Rugby teams, Munster, Ulster and Connacht, exhibit the same characteristics. Moreover, as discussed in this project there is a lack of literature in the area of brand communities in Rugby. There is an opportunity to perform further research into whether rugby fans exhibit the same behaviours and attitudes to fans of other sports such as soccer or GAA.

The findings of the research also lead to an opportunity of further research with regards the fans attitudes to being associated as being part of a brand community. This research finds that a number of Leinster rugby fans were conflicted at the idea of being referred to as part of a brand community as opposed to the normal title of 'fan'. This is an area with scope for further research to better understand consumers attitudes towards being part of brand communities, as opposed to simply speaking about the characteristics and benefits of brand communities for the organisation.

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# Appendices

## Appendix 1 – Informed Consent Sheet

**Informed Consent Sheet**
**"An Exploration of Whether Leinster Rugby Fans are Representative of a Brand Community"**

I, _____ voluntarily agree to participate in this research study.

- I understand that even if I agree to participate now, I can withdraw at any time or refuse to answer any question without any consequences of any kind.
- I understand that I can withdraw permission to use data from my interview within two weeks after the interview, in which case the material will be deleted.
- I have had the purpose and nature of the study explained to me in writing and I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the study.
- I understand that participation involves an in-depth interview ranging between 20-30 minutes in length.
- I understand that I will not benefit directly from participating in this research.
- I agree to my interview being audio-recorded.
- I understand that all information I provide for this study will be treated confidentially.
- I understand that in any report on the results of this research my identity will remain anonymous. This will be done by changing my name and disguising any details of my interview which may reveal my identity or the identity of people I speak about.
- I understand that disguised extracts from my interview may be quoted in the researcher's dissertation.
- I understand that under freedom of information legalisation I am entitled to access the information I have provided at any time while it is in storage as specified above.
- I understand that I am free to contact any of the people involved in the research to seek further clarification and information.

Signature of Research Participant:

_____
Signature of Participant Date:

_____
Signature of Researcher:

_____
Signature of Researcher Date:

_____

**Appendix 2 – Interview Transcript Sample**

**Interview Transcript Sample: Interviewee 2 (August 15th, 2018)**

**Interviewer: First things first, when did you start supporting Leinster, was it as a kid or later on?**

Interviewee: No, it was probably after the professional era, Munster initially got me interested to a great degree around the turn of 2000, and then I eventually followed Munster's journey to Heineken cup success in 2006, and from then on Leinster began to have a bit of success themselves. I think in 2008 they may have got beaten by Munster in the Semi-Final of the Heineken Cup. I was conflicted at the time because people like me who weren't pre-Leinster fans may have probably been a bit in favour of Munster. From then on through their victories in 2009 and 2011, I was actually at the match in Northampton and Twickenham. I suppose shortly after that time you could say I would have been pure Leinster from then on!

**Interviewer: Okay so like you said Munster seemed to get you interested in rugby union, but if you were to go and watch a Leinster -v- Munster match now, would you be conflicted or Leinster through and through?**

Interviewee: Oh, I would be totally Leinster no doubt about it. To be honest I wouldn't say I started as a Munster fan I would say I started as an Irish rugby fan, all my heroes were Irish. So, when Munster were becoming successful if you followed Ireland, by extension you followed Munster. But once Leinster began to have success, it was just on to that particular train and you found your identity and your heroes in Brian O'Driscoll and Gordon D'arcy and all these characters added brick by brick to create the Leinster that I began to follow.

**Interviewer: So just to go a bit deeper on that, do you feel as though you're a Leinster fan because of geography? Is the fact that you're from Leinster the defining factor in who you would support?**

Interviewee: I think there is a certain mythology about Munster rugby that people outside of Munster may gravitate towards. I don't think Leinster have the same brand, Munster are steeped in history and Leinster are not quite, maybe in 50 years they will be. Munster Rugby have beaten the All Blacks and so on, so I think to a certain extent it is to do with geography yeah.

**Interviewer: So, do you feel like it's important for a team to have an impressive history or tradition in order to have a good fan base? And do you feel Leinster may be lacking this?**

Interviewee: From a fans point of view if you have a heritage and history as a club, you probably have family members who would be more likely to recruit than if you have to find your way to a team yourself. I came to Leinster myself on my own, maybe through my peer groups but certainly not through my family. I'd say if I had have been brought to Leinster matches as a boy I would have been a bigger Leinster fan, so I'd say yeah history plays a big part in making a team interesting to support.

**Interviewer: You mention peer groups, were your peers involved in stimulating your interest in Rugby, and ultimately your eventual support of Leinster Rugby?**

Interviewee: No, not particularly I would say my interest came from my Dads love of Irish Rugby when I was growing up, and I sat on his knee and watched Ireland play England. When they won he was thrilled and when they lost he was distraught. From then on even though I had no real involvement in the playing of the sport I always loved it and obviously when Munster started to have success in the late 90s that brought me into provincial rugby and then eventually into Leinster rugby as a result of their success. I think if you were to say the two main drivers for fans are geography and success, I'd still say I may be a Munster supporter if Leinster hadn't have been as successful.

**Interviewer: So, would you regularly attend Leinster matches now?**

Interviewee: I'm not a season ticket holder now, I would probably go to 3 or 4 Pro14 matches a year, and then I'd certainly go to the big European games against Wasps and Saracens and any big games in the Aviva, and kind of on an ad-hoc basis if an away trip caught my eye. If there was a chance to go to a final like a Champions Cup final I'd be interested. Through the year I'd attend about 8 or 9 games, predominantly the larger games and then just watch the rest on the tele if they're on.

**Interviewer: So, I imagine the Leinster -v- Munster game is also a big one you would be interested to go to?**

Interviewee: Yeah well that can change I mean if you think now the way Scarlets have played in the last few years they have become one of the most attractive teams in European rugby, so that would mean that you would have slight changes in that you may have only used to look for Irish derbies, but  now you may have Welsh teams as well so you have the added international feel to it. It's not that the Munster rivalry will die off it's that others will grow such as Scarlets.

**Interviewer: Do you think this emergence of international "derbies" as you've explained would have the effect of creating more of a uniting effect among Leinster fans as opposed to if they were playing another province from Ireland?**

Interviewee: I think the international aspect will strengthen support for teams, it just adds to the sense of identity you feel with the team, so if there a rise in the competition from Welsh teams or even South African teams, there could be more of a unity among Leinster fans then there would be if they were playing against our neighbours Munster.

**Interviewer: When you yourself are attending games, who would you go with? Do you have certain people you always go to games with or would you ask random friends or family to attend with you?**

Interviewee: I'd be more inclined to ask my family member, my brother, my sons, I have in the past asked colleagues from work or other friends, but usually family and close friends would be who I would go to the games with.

**Interviewer: What's a typical match day for you like?**

Interviewee: Ah I like a few pints before a game, and I'd usually get a bit of grub beforehand, I do like to make it social you know, make a bit of a day out of it, especially if we win! I think the biggest thing for me if I'm honest is not the winning that I get overly excited about it's the style of play. You can't expect them to produce a Brian O'Driscoll every generation, you used to expect to see some magic watching him but anything that brings you close to that excitement is great it gives you things to talk about and reminisce about, pre and after games yeno.

**Interviewer: Is that excitement you mentioned that you expect to see part of the reason you enjoy watching Leinster, and is it something that sets them apart from other teams?**

Interviewee: Absolutely I think now Leinster are renowned as a fast running fast passing team, and I think it would be a shame if they started to play the type of rugby that Munster success in the past. So yeah, I do think the type of rugby they play is important, to me anyway.

**Interviewer: How do you follow the team, team news and updates etc? Do you actively follow up on latest news?**

Interviewee: Yeah, yeah, I'd have a number of online forums that I'd use to keep up to date, also the Irish Independent is a good rugby paper, the Irish Times, I'd regularly visit planetrugby.com which is an international forum but there is Irish forums on it. I'd be a bit more of a lurker than a contributor, but I enjoy the banter between the fans. There's a number of different websites that you'd be directed from the website, again I'd use Twitter. I dip in and out of the Leinster website but it's more for info and purchasing tickets I wouldn't go on looking for discussion pre or post-match.

**Interviewer: So, my next question is, as a Leinster Rugby fan, do you think you are part of a brand community.**

Interviewee: Eh, no, no I don't, I don't feel that I'm part of a brand community.

**Interviewer: Okay, so you wouldn't feel as though you are an admirer of the Leinster Rugby brand, you feel it's more than a brand?**

Interviewee: Well when someone asks me if I'm a Leinster fan I'd say yeah but if they asked if I like the Leinster brand I suppose I would say yes but it's a different question. It's not a predominant brand in psyche, as far as I know. On matchday maybe when you're pulling on the jersey you feel a bit more of the sense of identity but that's more just on matchday rather than an ongoing thing. So, in a sense do I feel like the Leinster brand and my involvement with the team separates me from my neighbour, I would say no.

**Interviewer: Have you ever thought of Leinster Rugby as a brand?**

Interviewee: No, I don't think of it as a brand – well yes to the extent that if you were to say what defines the brand you'd say Brian O'Driscoll's magic style of rugby, that defines the brand. To me the brand means magical rugby I suppose. We've all read about the weak forwards but the brilliant backs. To me I suppose what I would see as the Leinster rugby brand, and what would separate it from other rugby brands is the fact that there is a certain type of rugby that they play, and the fans have a certain expectation for them to play that style of rugby. But I don't tend to think of Leinster in terms of a brand rather than a team yeno.

**Appendix 3: Netnography Responses**

**Online Fan Forum - http://forum.leinsterfans.com/index.php**

*Participant 1:* *"This is a call to people that travel to Leinster games from around the province by any means necessary. Leo the Lion suggested this as an idea for supporters who travel from around the province to home matches. If there's enough interest, I'll set up a new area on the forum for people to either ask for or offer seats in cars to other supporters."*

*Participant 2:* *"I can provide one lift per week from the Terenure area on a 50cc moped that shares the Leinster colours. any takers."*

*Participant 3:* *"I'll be able to give lifts if I'm going to the games, but it could be from Dublin or Navan depending on whether I'm working. But yeah sounds like a great idea."*

*Participant 3:* *"So, I ordered two tickets for the match a few weeks ago and I went to print out my tickets today only to find I couldn't. I wonder can anyone help, or do you think I will be able to sort it out at the ticketing office before the match. Would really appreciate advice."*

*Participant 4:* *"Had the same problem. Give Claire a call. You will need to send her your confirmation email as well. She was a great help and I got my tickets."*

*Participant 5:* *"I am an Ulsterman but as we are 'out' I'm heading down to Lansdowne tomorrow (with girlfriend in tow) to cheer on Leinster against Bath. Any Suggestions for food?*

*Participant 6:* *"Try Farmer Bownes on Bath Ave."*

*Participant 7:* *"However, over the last while an undercurrent of abuse and on occasion some mild harassment has crept into a very small minority of posts on the forum. We cannot condone this in any way and we feel that it is something that could damage the community that we have all contributed to and built up over the years."*

*Participant 8:* *"Are you bringing the stuffed pussycat up this time? Good times!"*

*Participant 9:* *"With the game on the 23rd of October (Sunday) the best route I found was Ryanair flight to Carcassonne (about 90 mins on the train from Montpellier) on Saturday Morning followed by a Ryanair flight from Beziers on the Monday (about 45 mins on the train from Montpellier) to Bristol and then an Aer Lingus flight home from Bristol. This was available for €120 return earlier. Hopefully, it'll help some more of you get out to France."*

*Participant 10:* *"On our way to Edinburgh and wanted to get some Car flags, would anybody know where I could get some now that the Store in Donnybrook is closed, neither Life style or Elverys have them."*

*Participant 11:* *"Normally I make my own way but might be tempted with a package on this one, particularly as we would be at home if we reached the semi."*

*Participant 12:* *"Flights available now via Aer Lingus from Cork to Nice return. Out 4th, back 7th. €113 pp."*

*Participant 13:* "I didn't lose anything other than my voice, but I found a Leinster flag in the middle of the road between the Ibis and the Park Inn on Saturday evening. I brought it home, just in case anyone is missing it. As it has obviously been kept for a while, and as it looked like someone keeps it/kept it on their wall (there's blu-tac on the corners), I figured someone might be missing it. Let me know if you know the rightful owner."

*Participant 14:* "*We are the skint Leinster supporters*

*Coming from across the sea (allez les bleus)*

*our women are at home complaining*

*raising our NAMA owned roofs to heaven (allez le bleus)*

*we are the skint Leinster supporters, so give us a pint*

*GIVE ME A PINT OF PLAIN*

*Because we are Leinster (Allez)*

*because we are Leinster (lez bleus)*".

"*But were not skint, were from D4 and were loaded. Could we have an alternative version for those of us in the stadium sipping our mochalochachinos?*"

**Appendix 4 - Social Media Posts**

Great fun at the @adidasrugby @leinsterrugby shirts. Can't wait to wearing the new gear in the South stand this season. Particularly love the 12 counties map on the Green Jersey. Thank you to @olscrugby for the invite #ShowYourMettle #LiveLeinster #leinstertainment #LeinsterRugby #12countyarmy

Jaysus you've some contacts Russell! 😉

26 likes

AUGUST 8

Log in to like or comment.



Not a bad way to spend a Wednesday 🏆 #leinsterrugby #bankofireland #championscup #pro14

117 likes

JULY 11

Log in to like or comment.

Getting the kids up close to the two trophies Dylan is going to win in about 20 years time 😋 #guinnesspro14 #europeanrugbychampionscup #leinsterrugby #layacityspec

So we've decided on rugby have we? 💪😊

♡ ⃝ 🔖

46 likes

JULY 10

Log in to like or comment.         ⋯



Chocolate cake just beats a day of tackling @sexton_johnny10 at Leinster rugby camp #LeinsterRugby #rugby #rugbycamp #happybirthday #birthdayfun 🔥

♡ ⃝ 🔖

15 likes

JULY 5

Log in to like or comment.         ⋯

Amazing seeing the boys in green do the business on the other side of the world . Doesn't matter where the match is . The green army follows #greenarmy #ireland #irelandrugby #leinster #leinsterrugby #irelandvsaustralia #rugby #sydey #iloveireland #ilovethisplace #rugbywin #irishrugby

Hahaha I can see myself in the background...

26 likes

JUNE 23

Log in to like or comment.



Vanilla sponge Leinster Rugby Jersey covered with fondant with fondant lettering and logos #leinsterrugby #vanillasponge #jerseycake #fondant

12 likes

JUNE 19

Log in to like or comment.

Number one son proudly sporting his new Leinster shirt (count the stars😊). Thank you to Auntie Mo, winning at auntying for over 30 years 💕🏉🏉💙..
.
.

#leinsterrugby #coybib #numberoneson #rugbymumlife #europeanchampions #bestauntieever

22 likes

5 DAYS AGO

Log in to like or comment.



Waiting for the new @pro14official season very patiently 🐶
.
.

#leinster #leinsterrugby #COYBIB #cruz #TheCruz #saluki #dogsofdublin #dogsofinstagram #lurcher #lurchersofinstagram #sighthound #sighthoundsofinstagram #rugby #rugbyunion #pro14

27 likes

AUGUST 10

Log in to like or comment.