

An Exploration of whether Munster Rugby Supporters are a representation of a Brand Community.

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MSc in Marketing

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An Exploration of whether Munster Rugby Supporters are a representation of a Brand Community

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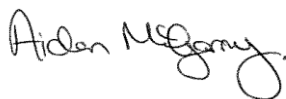
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Abstract

With sport and rugby sitting within a multi-billion industry, the competition amongst sports organisations off the field is equal to what is experienced on the field. Supporters and fans are critical to the financial success of a club, and that is often influenced by the level of success experienced by the team. An organisation like Munster Rugby must compete to recruit, retain, and develop their supporter base, in the same way, any other organisation must do. They must filter their potential market down the funnel to the ideal target of creating active, loyal customers.

The brand community offers organisations means to develop and utilise a unique competitive advantage. The explosion of online platforms and mobile usage now means supporters always have the means to communicate and interact with a brand community and this “always-on” is of particular interest for an organisation such as Munster Rugby whose supporters are so passionate and enthralled.

This thesis, by the use of netnography, content analysis and a series of in-depth interviews, determines if Munster Rugby supporters represent a brand community and discusses the critical literature on the subject. Throughout this thesis, relevant primary and secondary research is used to highlight the practical benefits of what a successfully managed brand community might mean to Munster Rugby.

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Chapter 1 Introduction to the Study and Research Topic

1.1 Introduction

Viewing an athlete, a team, or an organisation in sport as a brand is well documented (Ferrand et al.,1999). As the business of sport continues to grow globally, accompanying this growth is a fan base with a purchasing power combined with a high level of passion and emotion. Such a combination is often unique to a sports brand. A recent study that examined global market opportunities in sport projected that the sport of business worldwide would be worth \$614.1 billion by 2022 (The Business Research Company, 2019).

Sport, positioned within the leisure and discretionary spend category for most, is in a highly competitive environment both inside and outside of the actual stadium. The development of a strong brand can play a hugely important role in persuading the preferences of supporters from one club over another, one sport over another or even down to an individual sports star over another. As in many sectors, marketers in sports organisations seek to achieve high brand equity, leading to high levels of brand loyalty and competitive advantage (Wang, 2014). How organisations achieve this vary, but research has shown that a thriving brand community can facilitate their development (Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001).

This dissertation observes Munster Rugby supporters in an exploration as to whether they represent such a brand community.

1.2 Munster Rugby

Formed in 1879, Munster Rugby Club has established itself as one of the leading sports clubs in Ireland and consistently one of the top rugby clubs at Irish and European championship level. Munster Rugby Club is one of the four professional provincial teams in Ireland along with Leinster, Connacht, and Ulster. Munster Rugby competes in the Heineken European Champions Cup and the PRO14 competitions with, to date, two wins in the former tournament and three in the later.

Munster Rugby is based next to the University of Limerick. Thomond Park (26,000 capacity), in Limerick city centre, is their main stadium. Additionally, Munster Rugby regularly host matches at Irish Independent Park in Cork city that caters for up to 10,000 supporters.

An important starting point for this body of work is accepting that a sports organisation or event can be considered a brand. (Ferrand et al.,1999). In accepting this premise, it is therefore stated that Munster Rugby is a brand.

1.3 Munster Rugby & Brand Equity

When examining if Munster Rugby supporters are representative of a brand community, this dissertation does so under the context of Munster Rugby being a recognised brand. In discussing Munster Rugby as a brand, two of the pre-eminent authors on the topic, Keller and Aaker are regularly referenced concerning brand equity.

Aaker (1996, p.7) defines brand equity as “a set of assets and liabilities linked to a brand's name and symbols that adds to or subtracts from the value provided by a product or service to a firm and that firm's customers”. These assets and liabilities are examined in Chapter 4. Still, at a high level, Keller (2009) claims that these constructs of brand equity can offer high levels of competitive advantage for an organisation such as Munster Rugby.

For Munster Rugby, high brand equity is an essential step in the overall creation of a brand (Keller, 1990, p. 44), and much of this is often evident in their online platforms. Krishnamurphy (2003) suggests that marketing through online communities, usually a bedrock for modern-day brand communities, develops high levels of brand equity, a positive brand message and image, and thereby creating a clear understanding for the consumer of the product or service. As highlighted previously, a competitive leisure industry that Munster Rugby is positioned within means that such benefits of online communities are an important factor in the likely success of the organisation. Gladden et al. (2001) go on to develop this when pointing to an interesting relationship between social media activities and brand equity. It was found that sports teams with a large number of followers on various social media platforms had higher levels of brand equity. From that, it can be concluded that the social media strategies of Munster Rugby can impact on the organisation's brand equity.

The development and growth in the use of online platforms and social media had allowed brand communities to expand (Kozinets, 2009). The concept of developing these online brand communities is used as a means of increasing the brand equity of the organisation. The online activities of Munster Rugby and the interaction with supporters will be highlighted throughout Chapters 4 & 5. These online communities build on the traditional view of what a

community is (Chapter 2.4), and this is examined by Muniz and O'Guinn's (2001) model of the brand community (Chapter 2.5). There will be a significant focus within this dissertation on social media platforms as they provide the means for brand community members to participate and interact with each other (Fournier, 2011).

Munster Rugby can, with the correct strategy, interact with consumers or supporters who are heavily invested within the organisation (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010), and in doing so mould and shape the relationships with these individuals (Calder et al., 2009; Malthouse et al., 2013). While many brand communities are often driven and run by its members, organisations can develop these communities in a helpful way to the benefit of their organisation (Booth, 2011; De Vries et al., 2012). The development of these brand communities increases brand equity levels within the organisation, leading to increased sales, better margins, and profits (Aaker, 1991; Leuthesser, 1988). In highlighting that a brand community can be managed and developed, it allows an organisation such as Munster Rugby to potentially use any brand community as part of the overall marketing strategy.

1.4 Justification for Research

The potential role of a brand community in the creation and development of high levels of brand equity leads to the justification for this research on Munster Rugby supporters. Sport is now big business and in a competitive industry, so utilising a brand community for competitive advantage could be a significant differentiator for an organisation such as Munster Rugby.

1.4.1 Research Gap Identified

Research carried out on sports fans concerning brand communities is relatively limited, and certainly so in an Irish sports marketing context. O'Neill (2018) examined Leinster rugby fans under the microscope of a brand community and noted in his work that research on the other Irish rugby fanbases in Ireland was not evident. O'Neill (2018) provided some of the critical foundations for this dissertation to be adapted to Munster Rugby. From my review, I have seen no such research generally on Irish sports and nothing relating to Munster rugby fans. Conceptually, the gap in how the theory is being applied to everyday actions and strategies is also of significance. The potential importance of a brand community for Munster Rugby is

apparent when the importance of brand equity to an organisation is considered. The research gap identified the opportunity to set out the following research objective and questions.

1.4.2 Research Objective

The research objective for this dissertation is to determine if Munster rugby supporters are a representation of a brand community.

1.4.3 Research Questions

To achieve this research objective, the research questions to be answered in this dissertation are:

- What are the primary markers of a brand community as determined by the critical research literature?
- Are the primary markers of a brand community as identified within key research literature evident within Munster Rugby supporters?
- Do Munster Rugby supporters recognise that they are part of what forms a brand community?

1.5 Dissertation Structure

Chapter 2 will outline the full range of literature examined for this dissertation and the key works that will be used throughout. Chapter 3 will discuss the critical methodology undertaken while Chapters 4 and 5 will put forward the main findings of the work undertaken and the resulting discussions. Chapter 6 will conclude the dissertation as well as pointing to the limitations of the research and suggestions for further future studies.

Chapter 2 Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

This chapter reviews the key literature relating to the subject matter of this dissertation; namely brand communities, brand loyalty and consumer-brand relationships. While examining the primary theories and characteristics of a brand community, further related literature was reviewed to give a clear overview of the literature used to establish and achieve the research objectives. While examining the broad research literature, literature relating to sports organisations was incorporated into this chapter. This review aims to identify the determinants and markers of a brand community in the critical research literature that will be applied to Munster rugby supporters later in the dissertation.

2.2 Consumer – Brand Relationship

The work of Ambler (1992) is very much a consumer-focused piece that defines the brand as a promise of satisfaction based on its' attributes that the consumer will experience. These attributes that come together to form the brand can be based on emotion or rationality; they can be tangible or intangible, real, or imaginary, etc. Emotion is a particular basis of a consumer-brand relationship that will be evidence in examining a sports fan.

Keller (2009) highlights the importance of an organisation such as Munster Rugby to have a strong and compelling brand as it brings with it such benefits as:

- Increases customer loyalty
- Reduces the risk from industry competition as consumers are less likely to switch
- Higher acceptance/understanding of poor one-off experiences
- Increases opportunity to upsell

Within the work of Keller (2009), several relationships are put forward that a consumer can experience within an organisation.

- Consumer/Organisation: the relationship a consumer has with the organisation based on what the consumer experiences after their interactions with the organisation
- Consumer/Consumer: the inter-consumer relationship experienced

- Consumer/Brand: the relationship the consumer has to the brand and the level of attachment to it
- Organisation/Brand: the relationship between the organisation and its brand in terms of how the organisation perceives and manages its brand

The relationship between a customer and the brand has similarities with the atypical human to human connection (Fournier, 1998). This connection brings in the elements of emotion and intangibility that is so evident in the context of a Munster rugby fan. These relationships will be examined thoroughly in this dissertation.

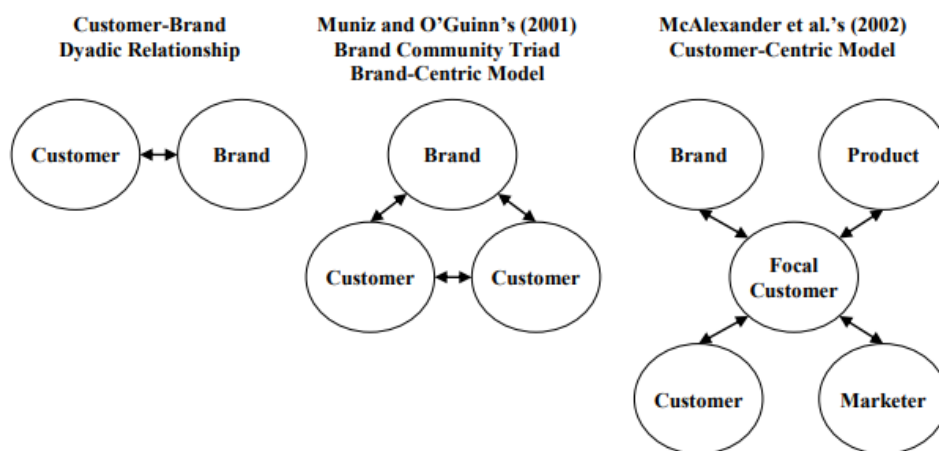


Fig 1: Comparison of Three Customer-Brand Relationship Models (Hedlund, 2011)

Fig 1 brings together three of the customer-brand relationship models. The work of Muniz & O'Guinn (2001) and McAlexander et al. (2002) will provide the basis for much of the literature framework of this dissertation. While the model of McAlexander et al. (2002) is more customer-centric than Muniz & O'Guinn (2002), it none the less includes and confirms many of the key characteristics that help confirm the presence of a brand community. Loyalty towards the brand is an essential factor throughout all the relationship models.

2.3 Brand Loyalty

Organisations discuss the importance of their brand equity but at the heart of this equity sits the theory of brand loyalty. Brand loyalty reveals the depth of the relationship that a consumer has to a particular brand (Aaker, 1991). With a high level of consumer brand loyalty comes an increase in the brand value to an organisation. The higher the level of commitment displayed by the fan base of a club such as Munster, the higher the overall brand value will be of the club. Aaker (1991) emphasises that that brand loyalty is qualitative unlike other aspects

of brand equity as it cannot be present before purchase or experience of the product or service. As outlined in Chapter 3, the methodology of this dissertation will be qualitative.

The role of attitude and behaviour can determine the level of brand loyalty, and it is widely discussed with contrasting findings. Griffin (1995) suggests consumer loyalty is primarily based on behaviour rather than attitude while Wilkie (1994) states that both a positive attitude towards the brand and also evidence of behaviours including repeat purchases of a particular brand is needed. Funk and James (2001) develop this into a sporting context when describing how an individual creating a psychological connection to a team can result in repeated and often long-lasting displays of positive attitudes and behaviours towards the team. This suggests attitude and behaviour must be in sync for a consumer to display a high level of brand loyalty. Kaynak et al. (2007) discuss an interesting scenario of when a consumer's attitude is harmful towards the brand but continues to make the purchase regardless. An applicable example of this for Munster Rugby is the supporter who might have a negative attitude toward the current management or owners of a rugby club but continues to support the team with ticket and merchandise purchases.

In terms of the consumer loyalty displayed to a sports team or organisation, Wakefield and Sloan (1995) noted that loyalty was one of the most influential factors on determining a sports fan's level of desire to attend a match. The length of time the fan has displayed the level of loyalty can also be used to define their loyalty (James et al., 2002). There is an increase in the level of research that examines both attitude and behaviour factors at the same time to determine fan loyalty (Gladden & Funk, 2001; Mahony et al., 2000). This is favoured by Jacoby & Chestnut (1978) as the best approach to have a holistic view of the concept of brand and fan loyalty. So while there are contrasting findings, it can be deduced that displaying loyalty is shown by behaviours and attitudes over a period of time.

Within the topic of brand loyalty, fandom and sports fans are touched upon in the literature. A sports fan can be described as someone who perceives themselves as a supporter of a particular team or sport (Dietz-Uhler, et al. 2000). Jenkins (1992) describes fandom as social and goes on to discuss how fandom can create a community that is not defined by the traditional characteristics of a community. This compliments our later discussions on the brand community. Belk (1988) suggests that the sports team is a contemporary symbol of group identity.

James et al. (2002) go on to discuss the importance of brand loyalty to the organisation in terms of economic and non-economic benefits. Many researchers have found that recruiting new customers is more expensive than maintaining your current customer base – this can be applied to a sports organisation such as Munster rugby. Attracting a new supporter to attend Thomond Park for the first time is more costly and complicated than trying to bring in repeat business from regular supporters. Kotler (2003) found that maintaining a loyal customer is far more cost-effective than trying to appeal to a new customer market. Every means possible should be followed in the attempt to keep these customers with strategies such as loyalty programmes (Henderson et al., 2011), customer delight (Kano, 1995), sales promotions (Buttle et al., 2005) etc. Munster Rugby's supporters' club benefits or ticket offers for repeat ticket purchase are obvious activities used to put this theory into practice.

As well as the financial benefits, Munster Rugby can take advantage of some non-economic benefits as outlined by Linton (1993) that include the influence of product or service creation and development, re-focuses, the organisation to be consumer-focused, opening sales channels etc.

This dissertation hopes to outline that with the correct management of a brand community, brand loyalty along with its many benefits can be realised by Munster Rugby to the betterment for the organisation and supporters alike.

2.4 Brand Equity

Keller (1993) and Aaker (1991) put forward some of the most credited work on brand equity, and they do so from the perspective of the consumer. This applies to a sports supporter or fan such as those involved in Munster Rugby. What they outline, highlights how vital brand equity is to Munster Rugby and the relationship it has with a brand community.

Aaker (1996, p.7) states that brand equity is “a set of assets and liabilities linked to a brand's name and symbols that adds to or subtracts from the value provided by a product or service to a firm and/or that firm's customers”. Aakers' reference to the positive or negative associations to logos etc. marks the significance of high brand equity to a sports team such as Munster Rugby (Kaynak et al., 2007). Brand equity is “the design and the implementation of marketing programmes and activities to build, measure, and manage brand equity” (Keller, 1990, p. 44). Keller's reference to marketing programmes notes the opportunities that

organisations have to build and manage their brand equity as they would any of the organisation's assets.

It is clear that high brand equity results in any number of benefits. Arens (1996) points to high customer loyalty, price elasticity, as well as long term and sustainable income and profits. Such customer and brand loyalty make for a robust revenue supply for an organisation such as Munster Rugby through ticket sales, media rights etc. and high brand equity ensures they can be sold at a premium price (Aaker, 1991). High levels of brand equity boost the prospects of an associated brand being chosen (Pitta & Katsanis, 1995) and the associated loyalty protects an organisation and the brand from its competitors.

Chapter 2.7 outlines the key benefits of a brand community to an organisation. The benefits and advantages detailed compliment and assist in raising the brand equity levels of Munster Rugby. A loyal Munster Rugby supporter can contribute to the brand equity of a sports team, and these fans play a vital part in the process of branding (Gladden et al. 2001).

2.5 Traditional Community

The concept of the community has been examined in considerable depth by any number of authors in a variety of fields (Kozinets, 2002). Many of the traditional understandings of a community up until the 20th century follow the description of Bell and Newry (1974). They describe how the community operates within a geographical area that is self-sufficient and share common experiences, means of life and cultures. The community can be defined as "the relations between people that are governed by natural ties of kinship and friendship, by familiarity, by traditional beliefs handed down from one generation to the next, by age-old habits, and by customary ways of doing things" (Wright, 2004, p. 7). McMillan (1976) discusses the importance of emotions and feelings involved in a community and the sense of belonging and togetherness (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Weigandt (2009) identifies everyday examples of community categories such as tribes, families, parishes, towns, and villages.

Puddifoot (1996) highlights how, in all the community examples, the "sense of community" is essential to those within, as it brings a framework to their existence. Chavis and Newbrough (1986) are one of any number of literature pieces that provide examples of the benefits experienced by those with a sense of community. These include physical and mental health improvements, visible improvements to the geographical area the community is set in,

improved societal measurements such as crime, poverty, etc. Throughout our findings and discussion, the sense of community, togetherness and being part of something is a central theme for Munster Rugby supporters.

2.5.1 Community Evolution

With changes in society, often led by technological advances, the concept of the community developed alongside these evolutions. In particular, the set geographical nature of the traditional community has been made somewhat redundant. McAlexander et al. (2002) touch on this when describing how distances and locations of community members are no longer important as communities identify themselves more so by other consumption practices and commonalities such as interests or even devotions to brands. This different means of defining a community was developed further by (Wiegandt, 2009 P. 9) who described it as a “social network of continuously interacting individuals, who influence each other within a specific timeframe and develop a sense of belonging. Thereby the social interaction between members is a subject to a well-understood focus, such as a common goal, a shared identity, a common possession, or common interests”.

Ahonen & Moore (2005) point out that researchers are now focused more than ever on how various groups of people consume goods and services in a community-like setting. Hedlund (2011) details that over the years researchers have given these groups titles such as subcultures of consumption (Celsi et al., 1993; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995), consumption communities (Boorstin, 1973), cultures of consumption (Kozinets, 2001), consumer tribes (Cova & Cova, 2002; Maffesoli, 1996), and brand communities (McAlexander et al., 2002; Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001).

2.6 Brand Community

To examine the theory of the brand community, it was essential to consider how the traditional concept of the community has evolved. We will see a significant number of common characteristics from our understanding of the traditional community carry over into our discussion of the literature on the brand community that we will now examine.

Muniz & O’Guinn (2001 P.421) define a brand community as “a specialised, non-geographically bound community based on a structured set of social relationships among users of a brand”. Their brand community definition is an extension of the main characteristics of a community identified by the traditional works of Anderson (1983) and

Gusfield (1978). The brand community is viewed as rising above geography due to the growth in mass media and online activities (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001; McLuhan 1964; Ong 1982). Kozinets (2009) states the internet plays a significant role in how consumption is performed and in turn, how these impacts on culture and society. The internet allows fans or supporters to form or join a community that is not based on the typical set of values or criteria that the traditional community might be based on, e.g. religion, politics, gender etc. These communities are based on sharing, what they see as a connection, with a shared understanding (Jenkins 1992).

Elaborating further on their geographic view, they can be geographically concentrated (Holt 1995) or scattered (Boorstin 1974). As already mentioned, with the development of online platforms, they can be entirely non-geographical (Granitz and Ward 1996; Kozinets 1997; Tambyah 1996).

In terms of longevity, Schouten and McAlexander (1995) state that some brand communities are stable or enduring, while others can be short-term and temporary (Arnould and Price, 1993; Holt 1995; McGrath, Sherry, and Heisley 1993). McAlexander et al. (2002) point out the opportunities to marketers in this variance – take advantage of long-term relationship opportunities or short-term niche opportunities. Within the sporting world, the marketer should ensure that they take advantage of positive results as interest within the brand community will be at its highest.

Muniz & O'Guinn (2001) highlight three essential markers of a brand community and provide the backbone for many subsequent theories by other authors. Many of these markers or characteristics have similarities to those we examined through the community literature. As well as the traditional characteristics, we interweave some of the critical research of brand community markers primarily from McAlexander et al. (2002) and Schau et al. (2009). They serve to re-enforce the validity of the work of Muniz & O'Guinn (2001). In identifying these characteristics by several different researchers, the literature has created a set of criteria that can be applied to Munster Rugby supporters.

2.6.1 Consciousness of Kind

Consciousness of kind is put forward by Muniz & O'Guinn (2001) as the most important marker of a brand community above rituals & traditions and moral responsibility. In

understanding what consciousness of kind is, the authors refer to the “we-ness” (Bender, 1978) that members experience in a brand community. By this, Bender was referring to the resilient relationship, and association members have with the brand. Even deeper than this is the fundamental relationship members have with others within the brand community. In examining this further, Anderson (1991) puts forward the concept of the “imagined community”, one in that the feeling of togetherness is more prevalent than actual social interactions.

McAlexander et al. (2002) confirmed in their studies that consciousness of kind was observed but noted that some members had a fear of not belonging. Like any other setting with a group of people, they stated some members were worried about not fitting in, and this was seen as a barrier to entry to the brand community. This was often overcome by long time members of the community making an effort to bring new members into the heart of the community and thus displaying a level of moral responsibility – the third marker of a brand community identified by Muniz & O’Guinn (2001).

Despite the sense of “we-ness” in describing consciousness of kind, brand community members are aware of the commercial nature of their community. Muniz & O’Guinn (2001) see brand communities as explicitly commercial and one that exists in full view to its members. This suggests that the fact that Munster Rugby is a clear commercial organisation should not deter or prevent the creation of an active brand community. Elliott (1998) discusses that attempts to build community through consumption practices are an important aspect for consumers. This is no different from other subcultures and can be found in consumption in music, films etc. In having full awareness of the commercial nature of the community they are a member of, it provides opportunities for marketers within Munster Rugby such as ticket prices, jersey sales, and other commercial merchandise.

Social networking (Fig 2) as outlined by Schau et al. (2009) is consistent with the description of Muniz & O’Guinn (2001) of consciousness of kind in that social network practices bring the members of the community together, strengthening the bonds between members and creating that sense of togetherness discussed previously. Schau et al. (2009) outline social networking as “those that focus on creating, enhancing, and sustaining ties among brand community members. These include welcoming, empathising, and governing”.

2.6.2 Traditions & Rituals

Traditions and rituals are the second characteristics of a brand community to be examined. Traditions entail a group of “social practices which seek to celebrate and inculcate certain behavioural norms and values” (Marshall 1994, P537). Brand communities are associated with significances that unite people and society together, and rituals offer an opening to recall these significances and strengthen them (Cova 1997). Traditions and rituals have a deep-rooted history and culture that is of considerable importance to the community. McAlexander et al. (2002) state that marketers can take an active role in establishing the shared rituals, traditions, and meanings that foster consciousness of kind.

Communities tend to form around a brand that has a meaningful and recognised past. It is often a powerful image and one that has competition (Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001). McAlexander et al. (2002) argued that brand community centres on the consumer rather than the brand. Those consumers that were core supporters of the brand community tended to bring a high level of emotional attachment to the brand, with a genuine hope that the brand and organisation does well (McAlexander et al. 2002).

While McAlexander et al. (2002) differ in some ways from Muniz and O’Guinn’s (2001) view of the brand community concept, there remains considerable agreement including on the characteristic of traditions and rituals. Their research into “Jeep” highlighted that members displayed traditional handwaves and discussed amongst themselves their favourite driving techniques and routes.

Schau et al. (2009) identify community engagement (Fig 2) as a brand community characteristic. They define community engagement as practices that “reinforce members’ escalating engagement with the brand community. These include staking, mile stoning, badging, and documenting”. This category compliments the traditions and rituals characteristic of a brand community by Muniz & O’Guinn (2001).

As well as community engagement (Fig 2), Schau et al. (2009) identify brand use similarly to traditions and rituals. It is described as “practices that are specifically related to the improved or enhanced use of the focal brand. These include grooming, customising, and commoditising” (Schau et al. 2009). This again falls under the description of traditions and

rituals as described by Muniz & O'Guinn (2001). Those within the community see themselves and what they represent in others based on attire or forms of communication.

Rituals and traditions are identified as inseparable elements of sport (Mazurkiewicz, 2011) and will be critical determinants in the study of Munster rugby supporters.

2.6.3 Moral Responsibility

The third marker of a community is moral responsibility that can be described as "a sense of duty to the community as a whole, and to the individual members of the community, and it is what produces collective action and contributes to group cohesion" (Muniz & O'Guinn 2001 p.424). By this, it is understood that community members will look out for one another, try, and assist those within the community to get the full benefits of the community and therein binding the group closer together. It is this sense of belonging and communal identification that distinguishes a member of the brand community from someone who just happens to use the brand regularly. The example put forward by O'Reilly (2011) is the Coca-Cola drinker. Just because someone regularly drinks Coke does not put them automatically into a brand community.

Marketers within an organisation or other levels of management have clear incentives to promote and engage in moral responsibility to the brand and community. Alexander et al. (2002) confirmed in their study that moral responsibility was an apparent characteristic of a brand community. They gave a clear example of long-time members of a brand community trying to bring new members into the heart of the community and thus displaying a level of moral responsibility. Gouldner (1960) Sahlins (1972) discuss that a community as a whole benefit through moral responsibility as it involves the exchange of knowledge that further enhances the relationships through mutual exchanges of such values. This can be applied to the brand community (McAlexander et al., 2002).

Impression management (Fig 2) is consistent with the description set out by Muniz & O'Guinn (2001) of moral responsibility. Schau et al. (2009) describe impression management practices as "those 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". This sense of loyalty towards the brand and those associated with the brand, tie in with the theory outlined on moral responsibility.

2.6.4 Brand Community Practices

As discussed through each of the brand community markers, a critical study was carried out by Schau et al. (2009) in revealing the process of collective value creation within brand communities. The authors, rather than merely involving a case study, combined bodies of previous literature on the subjects with data sourced from nine brand communities. In doing so, they identified a reliable set of value-creating practices.

The authors determined from their study of the nine brand communities that there are twelve standard practices across brand communities. These twelve common practices are grouped into four categories that O'Neill (2008) noted can be viewed similarly to have similar characteristics set out by Muniz & O'Guinn (2001):

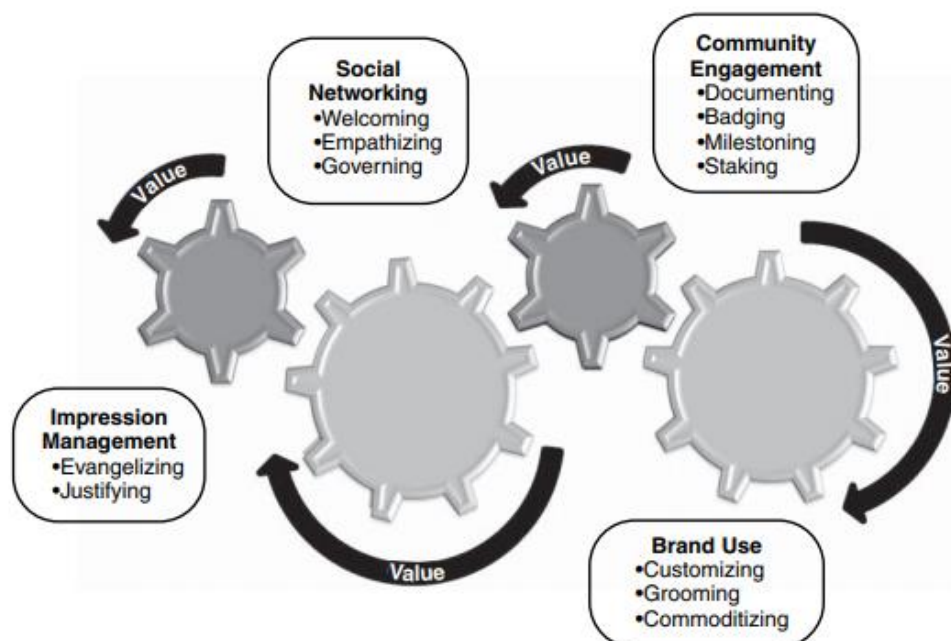


Fig 2: Brand Community Practices (Schau et al. 2009)

The level of research by authors such as Schau et al. (2009), O'Guinn & Muniz (2001) and McAlexander (2002) in identifying the key markers of a brand community enable this dissertation to make a reliable determination in its exploration of Munster rugby supporters.

2.7 Brand Community Benefits

Munster rugby sits within the sports industry - a leisure industry placing demands on the consumers' discretionary spend budget. Like many marketplaces, it is an extremely competitive marketplace where marketers within these organisations seek advantages over

their rivals. Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) suggest that a thriving brand community provides the opportunity for an organisation to achieve a high level of competitive advantage as it puts a focus on the customer relationship with the organisation. They are difficult for competitors to replicate. Using a brand community as a means of creating a level of competitive advantage is endorsed by a significant body of other authors (Berry 1983, 1995; Kalwani & Naryandas 1995; Peppers & Rogers 1993). More recently, Thompson & Sinha (2008) note that brand communities have the potential to create a sense of oppositional loyalty towards competing brands. It highlights the importance of the research questions and objectives of this dissertation – the following benefits can be realised by an organisation such as Munster rugby if it is determined that Munster rugby supporters represent a brand community.

As highlighted earlier, brand loyalty is at the heart of an organisation's brand equity with Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) putting forward the proposition of brand communities being a means of creating and developing high levels of brand loyalty amongst the community members. Studies of brand communities combined with other work in the sphere of consumer collectives (Holt 1995; Schouten & McAlexander 1995), suggests that inter-customer relationships figure highly in determining the levels of brand loyalty an organisation might experience. High levels of loyalty towards the brand tend to create natural brand ambassadors (Berry, 1995). Once integrated into the community, these consumers become brand missionaries by communicating the marketing message to their peer groups and even other brand communities. This communication brings the benefits of word of mouth through face to face interaction but even more so through online platforms (Henning et al. 2004).

As well in instilling a level of loyalty to the community, these interpersonal relationships help create exit barriers for members (Alexander et al., 2002). While the consumers might have initially become part of the brand community for the product or service, they have come to realise the additional benefits of belonging to the other community members makes it difficult for them to leave. This even applies if the product or service is no longer a high priority for them. They are, therefore, at much less risk to switch or another competitors' brand.

The assertion of Berry (1995) that community members are likely to show a higher degree of forgiveness for a disappointing service is another crucial benefit for an organisation. However, it does come with a degree of caution in that it is not considered a permanent level of acceptance of continued poor performance.

2.7.1 Co-Value Creation

Research points to consumers being active participants in the creation of value in terms of products and services (Payne et al., 2009; Gronroos, 2011). Vargo & Lusch (2004) puts this down in part to growing attention on the perspective of the consumer and an understanding that value is created through the exchange of knowledge, data and skills. Examples of value sources include personalised experience (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004), and emotion and culture feedback (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982).

Vargo & Lusch (2008) develop the role of the consumer in value creation further by stating the customer is always a co-creator of value. Alexander et al. (2002) believe that through their participation and the subsequent relationships formed within brand communities, a brand community offers a setting for important value co-creation.

2.8 Brand Community Risks

Having outlined the benefits of a well-managed brand community, the literature does also point to some inherent risks to consider.

For instance, Bellezza & Keinan (2014) point to brand communities growing too big, too quickly and losing many of the attributes of a thriving brand community. This occurs by many members of the brand community not being true brand advocates or core members initially. Instead, they have had access to the community and are diluting the central and positive characteristics it strives for.

Hickman & Ward (2007) raise another concern in the organic nature of some of these communities. Often the brand's organisation will not have control over the community as so much of a brand community's activities come directly from its members. Because of this, the hierarchy of members or lack thereof can lead to arguments and disagreements. The work of Healy & McDonagh (2013) also touches on the issues that can arise when the organisation behind the brand community is at odds with its actual members. Brand community members might disagree with the direction the organisation is going in or recent decisions made.

A broader concern that relates not just to brand communities, but none the less is worthy of note, is the research that suggests that customers are becoming overwhelmed by all the various marketing attempts to build relationships (Fournier, Dobscha, and Mick 1998). It is

fair to say that while no further research was discovered, the possibility of this sense of being overwhelmed has only grown since the explosion in online technology, including mobile.

2.9 Literature Review Summary

Following a significant review of the critical literature relating to brand communities, the literature set out by Muniz & O'Guinn (2001), McAlexander et al. (2002) and Schau et al. (2009) put forward the key characteristics of a modern brand community. Throughout the literature review, the appropriate sports marketing literature was brought in for discussion, and the combination highlighted the valuable opportunity to examine Munster Rugby supporters under the microscope of the aforementioned brand communities' characteristics.

Chapter 3 Research Questions and Methodology

3.1 Research Objective

The research objective for this dissertation is to determine if Munster Rugby supporters are a representation of a brand community. There have been previous works on brand communities in sport (Healy, 2012) and specifically Leinster rugby (O'Neill, 2018); however, there has been no such work on Munster Rugby.

The concept of the brand community is one whose characteristics apply to a sports community such as Munster Rugby supporters. The Munster Rugby fan base will be examined with the application of the brand community characteristics as outlined within the key piece of work of Muniz & O'Guinn (2001).

3.1.2 Research Questions

To achieve these research objectives, the research questions to be answered in this dissertation are:

- 1) What are the main markers of a brand community as determined by the key research literature?
- 2) Are the main markers of a brand community as identified within key research literature evident within Munster Rugby supporters?
- 3) Do Munster Rugby supporters recognise that they are part of what forms a brand community?

3.2 Methodology Introduction

The term methodology incorporates the principles, procedures, and practices that oversee research carried out (Kazdin, 1992). It is the foundation theory of how research is managed and undertaken.

The "Research Onion" as devised by Saunders et al. (2009) outlines various stages undertaken by a researcher when preparing a methodology. See Fig 3.

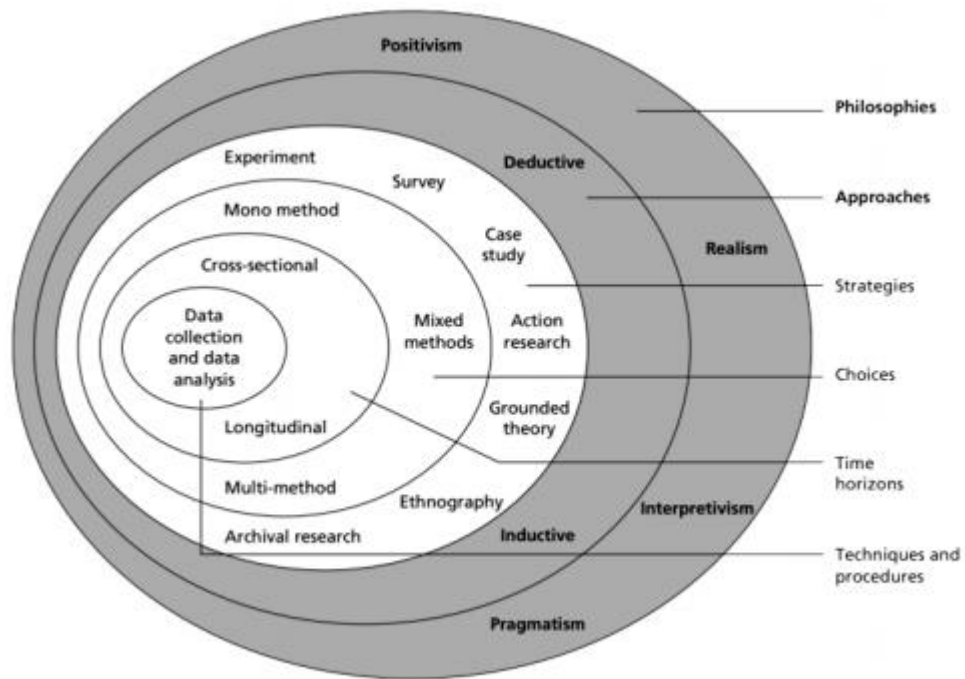


Fig 3: Research Onion Source: Saunders et al., (2009, p108)

This chapter encompasses the full process and the various elements of how the research is conducted for this study. Blaikie (2000) placed a high degree of importance to the understanding that the methodology component of any study involves a significant level of critical evaluation of all available methods and research strategies. This was carried out, and now the selected methodology and the justification for the chosen research methodology will be outlined. Limitations of the research and ethical considerations will also be highlighted.

3.3 Research Philosophy

The first layer of the “onion” that has to be addressed is the research philosophy. Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2009, p. 107) research philosophy ‘relates to the development of knowledge and the nature of that knowledge’ and in doing so, this represents the view of the researcher. Quinlan (2011) describes this view held by the researcher as his or her “worldview”. The chosen research philosophy develops the foundation for all future aspects of the research process including the formulation of the research question and the selection of research methods (Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2011; Bryman and Bell, 2011).

Given the detailed nature of research philosophy and its many facets (Makansi & Acheampong, 2012), Kapoulas & Mitic (2012) highlight the importance for a researcher to have in-depth knowledge and clear understanding of their investigations. The clear understanding of the nature of their studies is essential as it helps to match these investigations with the correct methodology. The methodology should be fit for purpose.

3.3.1 Epistemology

Saunders et al. (2009) describe epistemology as what is classified as an “acceptable knowledge” in a particular field of research and in-turn what is the best means to examine this field further. Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2007) separate researchers within epistemology into either:

- Resources-Orientated researcher who tend to be in a positivist position
- Feelings-Orientated researcher who tend to be in an interpretive perspective

This dissertation will undertake a feelings-orientated research role as much of the data and information will have an interpretive element based on some of the views of the Munster rugby fan base that will have a significant emotional aspect to it.

Saunders et al. (2009) discusses that the epistemological approach can have positivism and interpretivism considerations that will be examined further in this chapter

3.4 Research Paradigm

Burns & Burns (2009) describe a paradigm as a framework of assumptions that mirror a group of philosophical beliefs. It can be viewed as the necessity to position one’s research philosophy. Saunders & Tosey (2012) point to positivism, realism, interpretivism, and pragmatism as the four main types of research philosophy.

The two significant paradigms are positivism and interpretivism though some researchers include a more nuanced paradigm, postpositivism (Della Porta & Keating, 2008, P.21).

3.4.1 Interpretivism

Fisher (2007) discusses interpretivism as research that is based on the understanding that reality is socially constructed. In defining interpretivism in this manner, it puts forward the theory that it is the interpretations of people within communities and society on reality. Interpretivism highlights that knowledge and truth are subjective. It works on the basis that

researchers cannot be detached fully from their values and belief systems that, in turn, will influence how data is collected, interpreted and subsequently analysed (Ryan, 2018). This contrasts with Denzin & Lincoln's (2008) "objective truth" under positivism.

Saunders & Tosey (2012) states that interpretivism is related to the study of social phenomena in their most natural environment. Interpretivism determines that research is value bound, unlike positivists (Saunders et al., 2012), with qualitative data collected through in-depth investigations with smaller sample sizes. The works of Bryman (2008) and Saunders et al. (2009) point to the natural tendency towards qualitative research methods when undertaking the interpretive paradigm.

With the fundamentals of positivism and interpretivism considered for this dissertation, an interpretivism approach is being taken. Given the sport and fan-based landscape of this piece of work, the concept of interpretivism understands that correlations cannot be understood on their own without recognising the motivations behind the behaviour (Blaikie, 2000). The use of qualitative research methods such as in-depth interviews and content analysis, complement the interpretivism approach.

3.4.2 Inductive Approach

There are two significant approaches to developing an understanding of theory and how it is applied. An inductive approach will be taken for this dissertation as it lends itself to an interpretivism method that considers the more human and emotion facets through qualitative data collections techniques. Emotions play a significant role in the input and results from Munster Rugby supporters.

As their names suggest, an inductive approach takes the opposite angle with theories developed and generated from the data and information sourced. Saunders et al. (2009) discuss how researchers with an inductive approach bring no preconceived theory, rather the theory developed within the process. As now outlined, qualitative methods are undertaken with an inductive approach.

3.4.3 Qualitative Methods

Choy (2014) outlines many of the key characteristics of qualitative and quantitative research and the contrast in approaches point this research in the direction of the qualitative methods.

Creswell & Plano Clark (2007) state that qualitative research is more focused on the role of the researcher in drawing out key data and information through more open-ended techniques. This is done through methods like in-depth interviews that allow the interviewees to provide information and answers in their own words. Qualitative research, unlike quantitative research, accounts for emotions, opinions, ideas, and is non-numerical (Choy, 2014). For this dissertation, Bryman (2011) makes a noteworthy distinction between qualitative and quantitative interviews. He notes that quantitative interviews are primarily structured, whereas qualitative can be semi-structured or unstructured. The semi-structured nature of interviews allows for a level of flexibility that will be beneficial when trying to draw out essential understandings and insights from the participants rather than strictly adhering to a set of pre-selected questions.

Confirming that this dissertation will focus on qualitative methodologies, the vast majority of data used will require interpretation due to its nature, e.g. online discussions, opinions, and perspectives. This is a similar process to work carried out by Healy (2012) and O'Neill (2018) who examined other sports teams and their relationships with brands. This further strengthens the decision to focus on qualitative methodologies.

3.5 Sampling

Quinlan (2011) state there are two primary sampling techniques: probability and non-probability sampling. Sampling techniques allow researchers to identify a sub-group of the population that acts as a representative of the overall population.

Saunders et al. (2009) outline the practical considerations that researchers must consider when developing their sample planning. Time restrictions, financial limitations and other limited resources will impact the level and quality of sampling. The resources at the disposal of the researcher will play a part in the decision-making process as to what sampling technique will be used.

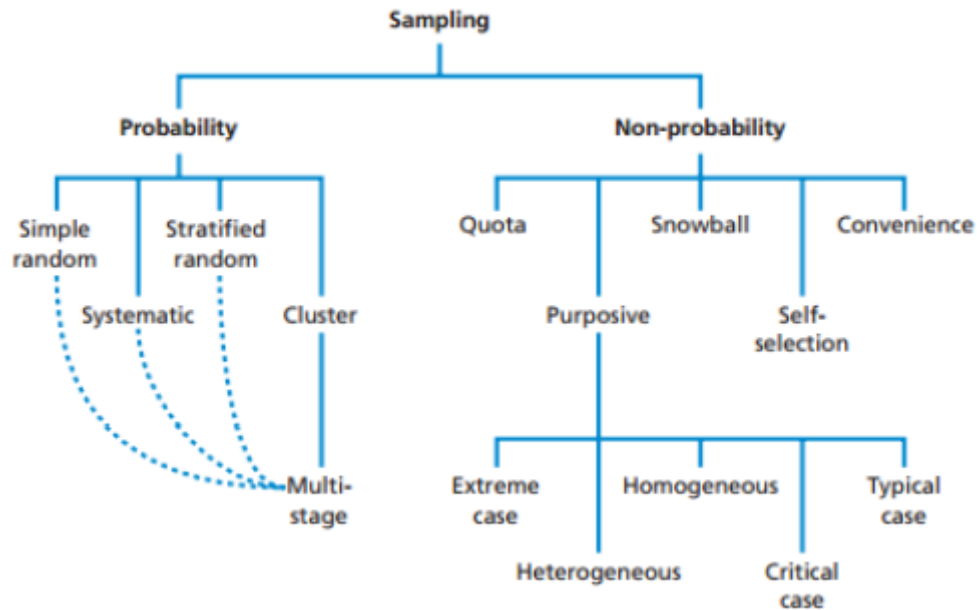


Fig 4: Sampling Techniques: Source: Saunders et al., (2009, P207)

3.5.1 Purposive Sampling

Saunders et al. (2009) state that non-probability sampling, as its name suggests, is the opposite of non-probability sampling. This is due to the probability of someone being selected from the overall population is simply not known. Non-probability sampling is often linked with qualitative research, and therefore it can facilitate smaller sample sizes and thus increasing efficiency (Taherdoost, 2016).

Non-probability sampling is the selected technique for this dissertation for several reasons. It is exploring sport and those fans who have a relationship with the brand that delves into an emotional connection with qualitative research techniques. Baker (2001) highlights that non-probability sampling is less time consuming and less complicated for those with less of the resources outlined earlier. Limited resources are a factor that had to be considered for this dissertation.

As with probability sampling, non-probability sampling has many techniques, and the chosen format is purposive sampling. It is deemed the most suitable for this dissertation as it allows the researcher to play a significant role in using their judgement in small sample size when trying to resolve their research questions and objectives (Saunders et al. 2009; Maxwell 1996). This is mirrored by Neuman (2005) when discussing how purposive sampling allows the researcher to work with particularly small sample sizes that are relevant to the project.

3.6 Data Collection Method

When selecting a research method the researcher has the option of using a single research method (mono method) or using more than one data collection method (multiple methods) Saunders et al., (2009). At all times, the objective of answering the research questions and achieving the objectives set out must at the centre of the decision-making process.

With the reasons for selecting qualitative methods outlined, the following methods were applied for this dissertation; in-depth interviews and a combination of netnography and content analysis.

3.6.1 In-Depth Interviews

Qualitative in-depth interviews are commonplace in research (Hopf, 2004). Hopf details how in-depth interviews are closely tied to the methods of interpretative sociology. The author puts this down to its nature of openly investigating the motives for action within a particular situation or gathering ordinary theories and self-interpretation in a differentiated and unspoilt way, and also because of the chance of discursive understanding through interpreting these discussions.

Saunders et al. (2009) highlight how in-depth interviews can be very structured with set questions, or they can be more informal and semi-structured. The author's classification of interview styles as structured, semi-structured and unstructured is affirmed by the work of DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree (2006).

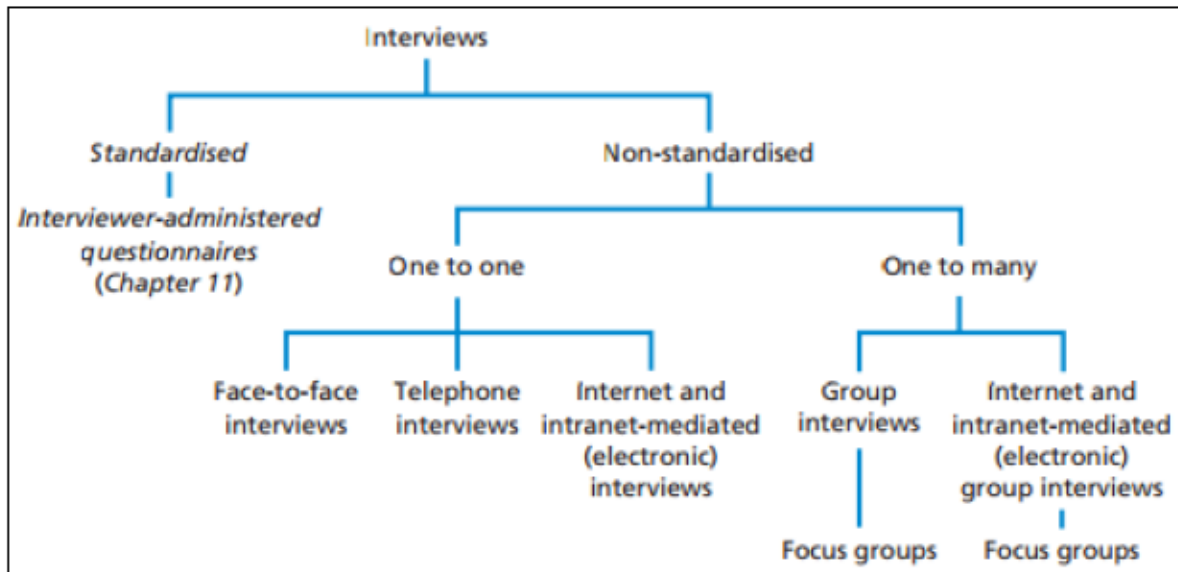


Fig 5: Interview Types. Source: Saunders et al. (2009)

Bryman & Bell (2011) point out that unlike quantitative interviews, qualitative interviews are generally either semi-structured or unstructured. With this in mind, it was decided to use semi-structured interviews for this dissertation that will be recorded and subsequently transcribed. The semi-structured nature of the interview will allow the research objectives to be at the centre of the interview at all stage while also allowing the interviewee scope to elaborate or develop on their additional thoughts. While the questions will be planned and prepared in advance, the interviewee will not be tied down to a specific running order of questions to ensure a natural flow to the conversational nature of the interview. The structured style of interviews would not have allowed for the flexibility and ability to improvise in such a way.

The in-depth interview is a technique that aims to draw out a vivid picture of the interviewee's perspective and view on the research topic (Milena et al. 2008). They produce rich forms of information and data that will include the interviewees emotional and genuine perspective. Collis and Hussey (2003) touch on this richness of data when they discuss how it is challenging to consider individuals as separate from their social background. They found that real insights can only be achieved when consideration is taken of the individual's perception of their activities and those around them.

Five in-depth interviews were carried out with Munster supporters. Due to the outbreak of Covid-19 in Ireland, these in-depth interviews were carried out through online platforms such as Zoom and Microsoft Teams. While face to face, personal interviews would have been ideal, the use of video rather than just audio still allowed for body language and other non-verbal expressions to be captured. These expressions pointed out by (Saunders et al., 2009), are of significant importance to the researcher as the sincerity and truthfulness of the interviewee's responses can also be gauged by such factors. Not all verbal answers in an interview are actually what the interviewee acts out in reality (Seale, 1998).

Microsoft Teams has a recording function, and from these recordings, each interview was transcribed immediately to ensure crucial impressions and data were fully captured.

3.6.2 Netnography

Netnography is a form of online ethnography. Muniz & O'Guinn (2001) outline how to have a clear and detailed understanding of a brand community; its members must be examined through their everyday interactions with the brand. It is immersive. Ethnography offers guidelines for the adaptation of participant-observation procedures seen in ethnography to the unique online communities that form through online based communications (Kozinets, 2010). Consumers are using online communities to interact with similar consumers who are objective and independent information sources. Netnography allows for record-keeping of these interactions, note any changes over time, and form insightful analysis with the process outlined in Fig 6.



Fig 6: Netnographic Research Process – Source: Kozinets (2010)

Initially, netnography was to be one of the key data collection techniques to be carried out within this dissertation similarly to how Healy (2012) and O’Neill (2018) did in their work on fandom and brand communities within sport, respectively. However, key concerns arose due to the Covid-19 outbreak in Ireland:

1) Lack of online activity: Rugby in Ireland was suspended for the foreseeable. Due to this lack of activity and a general re-prioritisation amongst the public to other matters, Munster Rugby social media accounts and online forums that would have been active with Munster Rugby supporters were much quieter with little or no activity. Netnography requires a high level of engagement between those being observed, ensuring the researcher is “immersed” for a considerable period (Kozinets, 2002).

2) Planning & Time Constraints: For the author to start the process of netnography at such a time of uncertainty led to concerns that enough time would not be available to complete this dissertation if some way into the timetable another data collection technique was required.

To alleviate these concerns, a third data collection technique, to compliment the netnography and the in-depth interview, was selected.

3.6.3 Content Analysis

Hsieh et al. (2005) defined content analysis as a research method “for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns”. It dates back to use in the 18th century (Rosengren, 1981) so has a long history of use within the research field.

It is a qualitative research analysis of text data that concentrates on the content of contextual meaning of the text (Budd, Thorp, & Donohew, 1967; Lindkvist, 1981; Tesch, 1990). The text data examined can be in print or electronic form and might have been obtained observations, or various forms of media (Kondracki & Wellman, 2002). For this dissertation, it will allow for the examination of past posts on social media and online forums. The primary aim of content analysis is “to provide knowledge and understanding of the phenomenon under study” (Downe-Wamboldt, 1992, p. 314).

Hsieh et al. (2005) identified three approaches to content analysis: conventional, directed, and summative.

- **Conventional Content Analysis:** this method is usually applied to a study design to describe a phenomenon. Generally, previous research or theory on this phenomenon is minimal. To attain new insights, researchers immerse themselves in the data (Kondracki & Wellman, 2002). Mayring (2000) described it as an inductive technique.
- **Directed Content Analysis:** this method is usually applied when theory already exists or if the research has previously been carried out on the phenomenon in question. The aim is to build on the research already carried out. Potter and Levine-Donnerstein (1999) listed this as a deductive technique.
- **Summative Content Analysis:** this method is usually applied by identifying and measuring particular words or content in the text. The overall goal of this is then to understand the contextual use of the words or content. It goes beyond merely counting the number of times a word appears in a piece of text but instead it examines latent content analysis of the piece. This is the method of content interpretation (Holsti, 1969).

For this dissertation, a conventional content analysis of the content sourced through various online platforms will be undertaken. This method involves a significant level of observation with the researcher then enabled to gain a deep and rich understanding of a phenomenon (Hsieh et al., 2005).

3.7 Data Analysis

For the in-depth interviews carried out, as per Kvale (1996), the transcribing of the interviews took place immediately after the interviews were completed. Kvale found that qualitative data analysis in qualitative research should be carried out during and directly after it has been carried out. From the data summarised, the key topics and ideas that relate to the research questions and objectives were identified and categorised with conclusions drawn after that.

A similar process was carried out for the bodies of work undertaken by netnography and content analysis. Again, the key themes and topics observed that relate to the research questions and objectives were identified and categorised with conclusions drawn after that.

3.7.1 Trustworthiness & Credibility

The topics of trustworthiness and credibility of qualitative research are of use for this dissertation as the research outlined discusses how to assess the quality of a study that has been undertaken and more to the point what criteria should be used to determine a qualitative study (Clavarino et al., 1995; Barker 2003). Eisner (1997) raises the theory of trustworthiness that exists when examining the trust that can be placed between the research questions, research design and the subsequent analysis.

Moret et al. (2007) outline how qualitative researchers, through in-depth interviews, investigate an interviewees' "version of the truth" but none the less the research still aims to attain knowledge. This dissertation applies this understanding in allowing those participants to offer their honest held views and experiences, without its authenticity or accuracy being questioned or doubted.

3.8 Research Ethical Considerations

The author is aware that as with every piece of research, there are ethical considerations with this dissertation. Cooper & Schindler (2008) define ethics as the standards of behaviour that steer and direct the moral choices we make in the context of our behaviour and relationships with others. Saunders et al. (2009) noted that:

- Participants have the right to privacy and anonymity. All participants in this dissertation had their names and details removed, and once transcribed all stored videos and audios were deleted. For content sourced online through content analysis and netnography, permission was requested from the gatekeepers of the online forums. The anonymity of participants from content analysis and netnography was maintained by using pseudonyms when used in any quoted content. All content used will be from open and public social media accounts and public forums that do not require logins or have restricted views.
- Participation is voluntary. All participants were spoken to in advance of the interviews and were fully informed that they could withdraw from the process at any stage. For content sourced online through content analysis and netnography, permission was requested from the gatekeepers of the online forums. For the operation of the in-depth interviews, consent forms will be signed by the five individuals participating. The purpose of these consent forms was to ensure, before taking part, all interviewees were aware of the process, how the data was being collected, why it was being collected, where it would be held and displayed etc. All interviews will be recorded and transcribed after the interview has concluded. The key findings and insights from these interviews will then be summarised and grouped in the correct categories that will then be incorporated into the research objectives.

Chapter 4 Data Findings

4.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses the key findings from the five in-depth interviews carried out on the week starting 25th May as well as an examination of various contributions from Munster Rugby supporters on multiple online platforms. This examination is carried out through a combination of content analysis and netnography techniques, as outlined in Chapter 3.

The findings are presented in the running order of each of the three research questions. While an in-depth discussion of these findings is found in Chapter 5, some points of discussion are touched upon within this chapter.

4.2 Research Question 1

Research Question 1 was answered by examining the key literature outlined in Chapter 3; What are the main markers of a brand community as determined by the key research literature?

A significant body of literature was reviewed with the key works of Muniz & O'Guinn (2001), McAlexander et al (2002) and Schau et al (2009) providing the main markers of a brand community. Muniz & O'Guinn (2001) put forward the characteristics of Consciousness of Kind, Rituals and Traditions and Moral Responsibility. These markers were endorsed by McAlexander et al. (2002) while Schau et al. (2009) came to similar conclusions but describing them (Brand Community Practices) as Social Networking, Impression Management, Community Engagement and Brand Use.

Therefore, the findings for Research Question 1 state that by using Muniz & O'Guinn (2001), the markers of a brand community are Consciousness of Kind, Rituals and Traditions and Moral Responsibility.

4.3 Research Question 2

Research Question 2 asked are the main markers of a brand community, identified in Research Question 1, evident within Munster Rugby supporters? By identifying them, it allows for the examination of Munster Rugby supporters under the microscope of these markers.

The literature described consciousness of kind as a sense of togetherness or described by Bender (1978) as a sense of “we-ness” experienced within a brand community. Through the process of carrying out the in-depth interviews as well as a significant level of netnography and content analysis, consciousness of kind is evident in Munster Rugby supporters.

This sense of “we-ness” involves the supporters displaying a real passion for the club and for those people within the club and fellow supporters. This naturally results in those within the club being unified for the common benefit of the club. This unity occurs irrespective of many supporters not having met or interacted with each other previously.

Interviewee 1 describes how Munster rugby is similar to the GAA in terms of community spirit *“I suppose there is that feeling you know everyone, even though obviously you don’t. Everything feels natural and inclusive. There is definitely a feeling of community for everyone”*. Interviewee 1 goes on to discuss how merely being a supporter of the club brings people together with the most simple but effective example: *“If I was in a pub in Edinburgh and there was a lad in a Munster jersey I would go up and say hello and chat”*.

Interviewee 3 discusses how *“invested”* he is and differentiates that from simply being a fan (Dietz-Uhler et al. 2000) and how it *“makes us different from other clubs and fans”*. Interviewee 2 describes the common characteristics they share and states that fellow Munster supporters are *“more relatable and I liked what I saw in the team and in their fans”*.

The level of community and “in this together” aspect of consciousness of kind for Munster Rugby supporters came to the fore through netnography and content analysis. The reaction of the Munster Rugby supporters online to the tragic death of a former Munster player and the then manager Anthony Foley highlights some of the critical characteristics of consciousness of kind identified by Muniz & O’Guinn (2001).

The death of Anthony Foley provides an example of the impact losing a community member had on the supporters despite many not having met the man. One supporter on www.munsterfans.com forum describes how *“Munster rugby to me has always been about family and friends; today I feel like we have lost someone close to us, even though I didn’t know him personally it hurts and saddens me beyond comprehension.....today all our clubs are united as one mourning the passing of a Munster great.”*

The discussion amongst fans on this platform underscores the connection supporters had with someone they did not even know:

“What a man Munster has lost a piece of its heart with Foley’s passing.”

“RIP and thoughts go out to the family. I got a phone call and did not believe it.”

“This genuinely doesn’t feel real. Rest in peace, Anthony. You were and always be everything I love about this team.”

www.munsterfans.com


The above example is a difficult one in terms of its sensitivity, but the day to day interactions of supporters also confirm the presence of consciousness of kind. The Munster Rugby Supporters Club describes their community below as a *“Real Life Social Network”*. Responses to this post are universally positive with one comment summing up the general feeling *“Brilliant, Munster really does fill you with a sense of Pride, Passion, Belonging and Family”*.



Munster Rugby SC 
@MRSC16

"A Real Life Social Network"

Renewals for Membership of the Munster Rugby Supporters Club are now open. Go to mrsc.ie for all details.

Thank you for your support.  #SUAF

Source: www.twitter.com/mrsc16

The *“Real Life Social Network”* campaign of the official Munster Rugby organisation, follows through on Kellers’ (1990) reference to the marketing programmes that organisations can undertake to add value to their assets. In tapping in the social networks that exist within the brand community, Munster Rugby is attempting to reinforce further those bonds and relationships for the betterment of the organisation as a whole. It further endorses the concept of the *“imagined community”* we examined in the literature of Anderson (1991).

Muniz & O’Guinn (2002, PP 421) state that “rituals and traditions represent vital social processes by which the meaning of the community is reproduced and transmitted within and beyond the community” and this is certainly evident in Munster Rugby and their supporters.



“The Munster Rugby brand embodies the qualities of passion, ambition, excellence, integrity and community, inspiring both the supporters and the players.” (www.munsterrugby.ie). Keller (2009) highlights the importance of an organisation such as Munster Rugby to have a strong and effective brand

In 2003, as part of a re-brand, the Munster crest was updated. It retained some of the original features such as the three gold crowns on a navy field that represent three of the medieval Lordships in Munster, the O’Brien’s (Thomond), the Butlers (Ormond) and the Fitzgerald’s (Desmond). The stag’s head was added as in Irish folklore the stag always guarded its territory. The McCarthys, a famous Munster family, had their motto incorporated by Munster Rugby, “to the brave and faithful nothing is impossible”. Muniz & O’Guinn (2001) stated that communities would form around a brand that has history and a powerful image, and the Munster Rugby crest fits their statement. Aakers’ reference to the positive association to a logos (or in this case crest) marks the significance of high brand equity to a sports team such as Munster Rugby (Kaynak et al., 2007).

Based on feedback through the in-depth interviews combined with the research online, match day attendance is an important facet of the experience for any Munster Rugby supporter. It can be seen as a combination of rituals and traditions displayed by all within the community. The attendance alone is a strong indication of brand loyalty as it shows positive attitudes and behaviours from the consumer (Wilkie, 1994).

Much of the comments concerning the matchday tradition references a high degree of routine to the day. All interviewees discuss getting into Limerick early, getting lunch, meeting friends, going to the same bar on the way to Thomond Park etc.

The Munster jersey worn by the players and of course the supporters (along with other branded merchandise) is a means of differentiating from others on and off the field, e.g. opposing players or supporters. It is a simple symbol of being a Munster player or supporter, and the red is synonymous with the Munster brand community. Interviewee 1 describes how *“For home games, I wouldn’t really be in a jersey as often as I head out afterwards, but I would have a red scarf or hat. More so in away games, I would always wear a jersey from the minute I get on a plane”* while Interviewee 3 details *“I am always in my Munster jersey and or jacket – I love that about match days in Limerick, seeing everyone kitted out”*. These comments confirm the view of Cova (1997) that brand communities are associated with meanings that unite people and society together. These rituals are a method of remembering and strengthening them.



Music and song play a significant role in the matchday experience two songs associated with the club – The Fields Of Athenry & Stand Up And Fight. These songs sang in a stadium like Thomond Park, a location where many fans consider to be extra special or almost “sacred” (Solomon et al. 2006) add to the ritual. Interviewee 3 describes how *“I love getting there early for the choir belting out The Fields Of Athenry or Stand Up & Fight. I love the fact Munster celebrates these traditions that if they were not authentic, they would come across as really cheesy and forced”*. Such music is emotive. McMillan (1976) discusses the importance of

emotions and feelings involved in a community and the sense of belonging and togetherness (McMillan & Chavis, 1986) it can instil.

The lyrics of Stand Up And Fights tie in with the themes already discussed regarding the crest and the club moto – strength and never giving up:

*“Stand Up and Fight, Until you hear the bell,
Stand toe to toe, Trade blow for blow,
Keep punching 'til you make your punches tell,
Show that crowd what you know,
Until you hear that bell, That final bell, Stand Up and Fight like hell.”*

These lyrics of Stand Up and Fight carry over to those fans not in attendance with supporters using the abbreviation #SUAF on the social media posts:

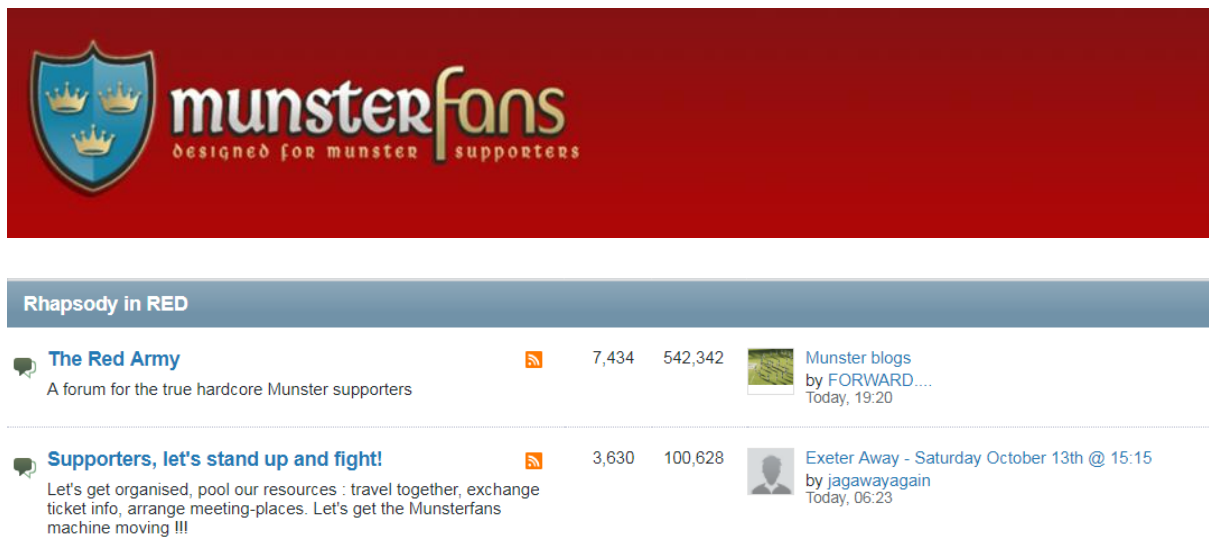
<i>All over and we claim a bonus-point win to move top of the Champions Cup Pool 2! #SUAF</i>
<i>Travelled down yesterday from Randalstown, Co. Antrim, with my young son for the game. We follow Munster from afar and thoroughly enjoyed our first visit to Thomond Park. Cannot wait to return. #SUAF</i>
<i>Joey is playing class again. Perfect mix of control and creativity. What a valuable signing he could prove to be #SUAF</i>

Source: www.twitter.com/munsterrugby

Traditions and rituals are deep-rooted within the history and culture of the community. McAlexander et al. (2002) state that marketers can take an active role in establishing the shared rituals, traditions, and meanings that foster consciousness of kind. Schau et al. (2009) similarly discuss how brands can engage with their community to “reinforce” their membership. Munster Rugby has done this on matchday by having a choir at every match to encourage the singing of the songs, providing complimentary branded flags at matches etc. This has been carried out to such a success that those elements of the matchday have become “inseparable” (Mazurkiewicz, 2011) elements.

The match day is an important example of the co-value creation as discussed by Payne et al., (2009) and Gronroos (2011). Research points to consumers being active participants in the production of value in terms of products and services. In creating an atmosphere in Thomond

Park, the Munster Rugby supporters are co-creating an event or experience that others will want to attend in the future.



Source: www.munsterfans.com

Moral responsibility was the third characteristic to be applied to Munster Rugby supporters. One of the key platforms on which netography and content analysis were carried out for this dissertation was www.munsterfans.com. This is a dedicated fan forum, set up and ran independently from the official Munster Rugby organisation. The forum has over 7,000 registered members with hundreds of thousands of posts. Kozinets (2009) states that these online communities are becoming more critical in contemporary social identity and communal social relations.

This forum has a section titled “Supporters, let’s stand up and fight”, that contains over 100,000 posts dedicated to members who are organising meetings, travel and tickets etc. between themselves. Examples of sharing taxis to games, advice on the easiest way to travel to a match, free or discounted tickets that members do not want to go to waste etc. are all evident:

I have four tickets for the European Finals weekend in Bilbao, 11-12 May, covering both the Champions Cup & Challenge Cup Finals, which I am now unable to use due to a family holiday. Please contact me if they are of interest. For sale at face value.

I have two tickets available for the match today v Scarlets. Unable to travel due to illness, so would like someone to use them. PM me and I can organise email transfer.

There are two of us travelling to Castres on the morning of 15 December. I was wondering is there anyone else in the same predicament? Maybe we could share a taxi?

Call out to any Munster fans out west. Just wanted to see if people are about who would be interested in carpooling for games or establishing a regular spot in Galway for catching matches?

Hi Folks, I am suggesting a meeting point in Colombes....looking forward to meeting a lot of Munster fans there.

Source: www.munsterfans.com

The examples set out on this platform resonate with what Muniz & O’Guinn (2002) described as a “sense of moral responsibility”. These Munster Rugby supporters attempt to ensure that fellow supporters are assisted in making it to the match, cost savings on their trips based on sharing hotels and taxis etc. These attitudes and behaviours reinforce the bonds between Munster Rugby supporters with many knowing nothing else about the person they are assisting other than the fact they are fellow Munster Rugby supporters. Such sharing of information is integral to what makes a community (Belk 2010). Gouldner (1960) Sahlins (1972) discuss that a community as a whole benefit through moral responsibility as it involves the exchange of knowledge that further enhances the relationships through mutual exchanges of such values.

These examples are further endorsed by the feedback from Interviewee 1 who described “*if I was in a pub in Edinburgh and there was a lad in a Munster jersey I would go up and say hello and chat*” while Interview 5 comments how “*international trips are the best. You get to meet guys you’ve never met before but the craic is great and good-natured, with everyone looking out for each other while away*”.

These unofficial sites and social media platforms, often play a considerable role in offering help and assistance to fellow supporters as outlined above. There are websites like www.threeredkings.com or www.munsterhaka.com that are supporter-created and driven media. These platforms enable the creation and development of stronger relationships and give supporters that sense of ownership over their community and what it represents (Haynes 1995; Coalter 2007).

Supporters who engage on these platforms appreciate the efforts and resources that go into these platforms from a fellow supporter:

Just started listening to The Three Red Kings the last month or so. It’s not perfect, but I love that he goes into such detail. Source: www.munsterfans.com

What a well written and heartfelt piece that is. Still remember the news and coverage that day. Thanks for sharing. Source: www.twitter.com

Thanks for the updates!! Source: www.twitter.com

Munster Rugby supporters display clear characteristics of moral responsibility through their interactions with one another online and in-person in aiming to ensure no supporter is left behind or without assistance.

4.4 Research Question 3

Throughout their discussions, Muniz & O’Guinn (2001), point to brand community members being aware that they are part of a brand community and one that has commercial aspects. Again, through the various examples set out, Munster Rugby supporters, on the whole, are aware of their involvement and that there is a commercial nature to their community. Still, they see it in a different light.

All participants in the in-depth interviews were asked two key questions to answer this Research Question 3:

- Do you view Munster Rugby to be a brand?
- Do you feel you are part of a Munster brand community?

Interviewee 1 discusses how Munster Rugby is a brand but *“not a corporate brand like Nike or Adidas”*. Still, moments later acknowledges *“they are trying to sell things like tickets and merchandise”* and that Munster Rugby *“want you to be part of it rather than simply pulling money out of you”*. In acknowledging that Munster Rugby is a brand, the interviewee goes on to confirm that he feels part of a brand community when asked - *“Yes – absolutely. As I said, if it's my community of friends on WhatsApp, when we discuss Munster rugby or even on social media with people I don't know. I am involved in a community for sure”*.

Interviewee 5 has a clear understanding when, in response to being asked if part of a brand community, stating *“Now that you have explained what a brand community is – yeah definitely. I think you can see from the answers I have given that I would probably be an excellent advocate of Munster or the Munster Rugby brand. I get so much from being a Munster Rugby fan and I guess they get the same from fans like me”*. This answer gave a clear

indication of the interviewees' acceptance of their involvement in a brand community and confirms the previously noted finding that high levels of brand loyalty tend to create natural brand ambassadors (Berry, 1995). There is no better marketing tool than an authentic endorsement from a community member.

Interviewee 5 needed clarification as to what a brand community is. Confusion with what the interviewees consider to be a brand community was an issue, but their overall comments can build a clearer picture. Interviewee 2 was another to be unsure of what a brand community was, but in other answers acknowledges that "*Munster is a brand*" and that as a supporter he seems himself "*as being in a community*". Throughout all the interviews, all interviewees regularly attended matches, wore merchandise and were aware of the general commerciality of an organisation such as Munster Rugby.

The commercial aspect of the relationship between a brand community and its members tie in with the benefits of high brand equity previously outlined. High customer loyalty, price elasticity, sustainable income/profits Arens (1996), robust revenue supply for through ticket sales, media rights etc. at a premium price (Aaker, 1991) all can be seen within the Munster Rugby organisation. The awareness of this is evident amongst the brand community members.

Chapter 5 Discussion

5.1 Introduction

Following the completion of Chapter 4, outlining the key data findings from the in-depth interviews, netnography and content analysis carried out, Chapter 5 will discuss and analyse these findings. The key findings will initially be summarised but then broken down into some of the common themes evident and how they link back to the overall research objectives and questions.

5.2 Data Findings Summary

To resolve the three research questions identified, the application of the chosen methodology yielded the following summaries findings:

1. What are the main markers of a brand community as determined by the key research literature?

Muniz & O'Guinn (2001) identified Consciousness Of Kind, Rituals & Traditions, and Moral Responsibility as the three key markers of a brand community. The works of McAlexander et al. (2002) and Schau et al. (2009) with complementary characteristics identified, served to endorse the three markers of Muniz & O'Guinn (2001) as reliable markers of a brand community to be applied to Munster Rugby Supporters.

2. Are the main markers of a brand community as identified within key research literature evident within Munster Rugby supporters?

The three markers identified in Research Question 1 were applied to Munster Rugby supporters through in-depth interviews, netnography and content analysis. As a result, it was determined that Munster Rugby supporters displayed levels of Consciousness Of Kind, Rituals & Traditions, and Moral Responsibility. In displaying these markers, this dissertation has determined that Munster Rugby supporters represent a brand community.

3. Do Munster Rugby supporters recognise that they are part of what forms a brand community?

On the whole, those studied did recognise that we are part of a brand community. However, it should be noted that some responses were negative or unclear. Much of

this can be put down to a lack of understanding of what a brand community is, even after some explanations. It is put down to lack of understanding rather than outrightly disagreeing with being part of a brand community based on their other answers that often pointed to them being part of a community.

5.3 Munster Rugby Supporters Are A Brand Community

The findings in Chapter 4, as summarised in 5.2, point to Munster Rugby supporters being representative of a brand community. This is not just confirmed by the three key markers as outlined by Muniz & O’Guinn (2001) but also some of the other broader findings of several researchers on the topic of brand communities as already highlighted in Chapter 2. These more comprehensive findings are pulled together and combined with the critical literature and the results of the methodology data.

5.3.1 Non-Geographic

As highlighted throughout the literature review, the original description of a community as one with geographical boundaries and limitations is not relevant to what Muniz & O’Guinn (2001) describe as a brand community. That Munster is a province would suggest Munster Rugby provides an excellent example of the original understanding of a community versus the brand community.

Two of the in-depth interviews carried out were from Munster Rugby supporters living outside of Munster and who were not originally from the province. Interviewee 2, who plays rugby for his local clubs in Kildare in Leinster, describes how he *“found Leinster the D4 typical supporter annoying and just not me”*. While with Munster Rugby he *“found them more relatable and liked what I saw in the team and their fans more than the alternatives, I guess”*. This, despite not being from Munster.

Interviewee 3, who is also from Leinster, states that *“I know I am from the province but being from a province is different from being from a county or country. It does not make a difference that I am from the province of Leinster – they are actually probably my least favourite team. I’d support Munster (obviously), Connacht and Ulster any time they take on Leinster”*. In pointing the order of preference held for the provinces, and combined with the comments of Interviewee 2, it does lead to the irrelevance of geographical location for Munster Rugby supporters.

This is further enforced when examining some of the social media platforms that are dedicated to Munster Rugby fans based outside of Munster.



Source: www.twitter.com/MRSCDublin



Source: www.twitter.com/MRSCLondon

Again, removing any geographical limitation, these social media accounts for those based outside of Munster confirm that Munster Rugby supporters conform with the description of Muniz & O’Guinn (2001). This community created around the brand for these members is only possible due to mass media and ever-changing communication technologies (McLuhan 1964; Ong 1982). The social media accounts are dedicated to Munster supporters based in London and Dublin. The Irish Examiner (2018) provide further evidence as far away as New York when Munster Rugby organised a fundraising event in support of Munster community rugby programmes. The then Commercial Director for Munster Rugby, Dougie Howlett, commented:

“The dinner has been in our strategic plan for a while now, to connect with our people abroad, our Munster diaspora. We’ve been to London for four years, and it’s proving successful,

allowing us to get face time with our supporters. With the support of some key individuals in America we've been able to turn this into a reality and this is the first step, there's still a small bit of exploration required but the turnout has certainly confirmed we have a strong Munster Rugby following in New York".

In acknowledging the non-geographical nature of the Munster Rugby brand community, it aligns with the literature previously outlined concerning how communities have evolved from the traditional concept.

5.3.2 Legitimacy

One of the makers of a brand community touched upon by Muniz & O'Guinn (2001) examines how members of the brand community view themselves and in turn how they use this view of themselves to then differentiate themselves from competitors and others within other brand communities.

In 2018, Munster Rugby released the "We Are Munster" campaign (www.facebook.com/mrsc16) that was promoted throughout their various social media channels. This video highlights the bond that exists between everyone in the Munster Rugby brand community. It discusses how the Munster rugby community makes *"each other better....together or not at all"* – a message of inclusivity and that *"we have each other's backs"*. The piece finishes on *"we rise by lifting each other"* a particularly apt note for a sporting brand highlighting that even when the results are bad, remaining united and working together is essential. The response to this from supporters was universally positive:

<i>"Absolutely fabulous its what Munster is about and no other club can match it"</i>
<i>"Best supporters in world rugby the 16th man at Munster"</i>
<i>"This is what Munster rugby is all about, togetherness"</i>
<i>"Absolutely, bring it, we are Munster"</i>
<i>"That's the DNA right there"</i>

Source: www.facebook.com/mrsc16

Legitimacy is a crucial facet of consciousness of kind and again is evident in Munster Rugby supporters.

5.3.3 Oppositional Brand Loyalty

Thompson & Sinha (2008) note that brand communities have the potential to create a sense of oppositional loyalty towards competing brands. Aside from Munster Rugby, one other team was consistently raised through the in-depth interviews – Leinster. Leinster Rugby and Munster Rugby are the two most successful rugby provinces in Ireland with more leagues and championships won than any of the other Irish clubs. They are seen as two of the powerhouses of European rugby, so it is no surprise to see rivalry amongst their supporters. Within the marker of consciousness of kind, Muniz & O’Guinn (2001) discuss the subject of oppositional brand loyalty. They consider this in the context of “a common enemy against whom to unite makes this brand community particularly strong”. Englis and Solomon (1997) state that consumers use brand choices to mark both their inclusion and exclusion from various lifestyles.

From the in-depth interviews, comments such as:

<i>“I found Leinster the D4 typical supporter annoying and just not me” (Interviewee 2)</i>
<i>“We set the bar for years and years and now Leinster and other European clubs” (Interviewee 2)</i>
<i>“I see other big teams like Leinster & Saracens who almost bought success whereas our history is so strong it makes it almost mean more for us” (Interviewee 1)</i>
<i>“Again it could be wrong but I think it means more to the average Munster fan than it would to the average Leinster, Saracens or any other team’s fans” (Interviewee 5)</i>

Such observations are commonplace on the many social media channels:

<i>“Munster have fans, Leinster have a bandwagon. That’s why you don’t understand”</i>
<i>“When Sky Sports Rugby say Irish hopes rest on the shoulder of Leinster men do Munster fans get behind Leinster? No Chance”</i>

Source: www.twitter.com

Another example observed of Munster Rugby supporters closing ranks and protecting themselves from a “threat” arose with the signing of Gerbrandt Grobler. This signing brought with it considerable media scrutiny as the player had previously been suspended for failing a drugs test.

The responses from Munster Rugby supporter was consistent with a strong reaction against what was deemed to be a media campaign against the player and club:

<i>Yes and I will be vocal of my support for him on Sunday</i>
<i>I am a firm believer in second chances. Is Ireland the only country where it is tolerated for the media to whip up such a frenzy</i>
<i>Redemption has to be part of life as all of us make mistakes</i>
<i>I am sick to death of this which hunt</i>

Source: www.munsterfans.com

Many of the comments included posts suggesting they did not agree with drugs in sport and how it had a detrimental impact on all sport. Despite being uncomfortable with the issue of drugs, this was put to one side as he is now a *“Munster player, simple as that”*.

5.3.4 Brand Loyalty

As the literature pointed to brand loyalty is a the heart of brand equity and therefore is another by-product of a successful brand community. Bensman and Vidich (1995) stated that communities unite with relationships strengthened during and after difficult times have been experienced. The death of Anthony Foley, as previously mentioned, brought about such a reaction for Munster rugby supporters. His sad passing has been seen as the trigger that brought about an increase in attendance at Munster matches following some years of declining attendances. This confirms an earlier discussion that Wakefield and Sloan (1995) noted loyalty was one of the most influential factors on determining a sports fan’s level of desire to attend a match.

A record nine sell-out crowds saw Thomond Park attendances almost double last season

Munster have released their projected financial results for the 2016/17 season.

Jun 8th 2017, 6:03 PM  6,675 Views  13 Comments

 Share 28  Tweet  Email

MUNSTER ARE SET to record a cash flow surplus of €310,000 following the conclusion of the 2016/17 season, with a record nine sell-out crowds, including six at Thomond Park, contributing to the considerable turnaround in their financial performance.



Source: The 42.ie <http://www.the42.ie/munster-financial-results-3434231-Jun2017/>

Thomond Park and Munster connect like we haven't seen for some time

This felt like the renewal of something special between province and supporters.

Oct 22nd 2016, 8:13 PM  44,356 Views  31 Comments

 Share 647  Tweet  Email 4

Updated at 18.48

THIS WAS A day when we saw that famous relationship between Munster and their supporters hit the old heights.

From two hours before kick-off, there were Munster fans in their places in the east and west terraces at Thomond Park, with thousands more filtering in the gates towards the Shannon clubhouse.

Source: The 42.ie <http://www.the42.ie/munster-thomond-park-glasgow-anthony-foley-3040690-Oct2016/>

These examples highlight Munster Rugby supporters displayed both attitude and behaviours (Griffin, 1995; Wilkie 1994; Kaynak et al.,2007) that point to an increased level of brand loyalty.

5.3.5 Brand Community Value Co-Creation

Research points to consumers being active participants in the creation of value in terms of products and services (Payne et al., 2009; Gronroos, 2011). Alexander et al. (2002) believe that through their participation and the subsequent relationships formed within brand communities, a brand community offers a setting for important value co-creation. In terms of

value co-creation, those Munster Rugby supporters who were examined for this dissertation, believe they contribute to the overall experience. Therefore, they are involved in the creation of value. One example of this co-creation of value is identified by Interviewee 3 when describing Thomond Park, with much of the emphasis put on supporter participation *“it is a pretty special place – the atmosphere from the fans is unreal. That is what makes it. We are in the middle of lockdown at the moment and when people ask what is the first thing you’d like to do, one of the first is getting back to Thomond”*.

From this and other comments, there is the clear inference from Munster Rugby supporters that their involvement within a brand community is essential to the matchday in terms of creating atmosphere and an occasion.

5.3.6 Commercial Awareness

Through the in-depth interviews and content analysis, another aspect of a brand community was identified in the Munster Rugby supporters that Muniz & O’Guinn (2001) discussed. That is the understanding from the members that their brand community is a commercial one; the organisation’s brand will require the members to purchase and consume their goods and services and do so knowingly and freely.

This is seen in many examples in terms of purchasing match day tickets or the latest jersey. One of the more topical examples was that of the Munster Rugby Supporters Club annual subscription. Due to Covid 19, many of the benefits for subscribers of the 2019/2020 season were not availed of due to social distancing and match cancellations. As a result, Munster Rugby offers supporters a refund at the same time as opening subscriptions for the 2020/2021 members. The response from many members confirmed their commercial awareness of their involvement in Munster Rugby’s brand community:

<i>Renewed and left over balance has been left to the club</i>
<i>Ready to renew and any refund due will go back to the club #Teamwork</i>
<i>Membership renewed. No need for a refund. Cannot wait to get back to Thomond Park</i>
<i>Two memberships renewed and refunds gifted back to the club #SUAF</i>
<i>Refund gifted back to the club and membership renewed. It’s a small contribution but a very willing and proud one #SUAF</i>

Source: www.twitter.com/mrsc16

The Irish Examiner (2020) reported that a 96% renewal rate of those who responded within the first 24 hours. Head Of Communications, Fiona Murphy stated: *“In terms of uptake of membership renewals it’s extremely positive and equally, we’re hugely grateful for the fact that supporters are expressing their financial support for Munster Rugby as well by leaving their credit with the club in terms of what they paid for memberships and season tickets in 2019-20”*. That has been driven by supporters requesting to do so, we’ve facilitated that option, and it’s incredible that they’ve followed through”.

Aaker (1991) pointed to brand loyalty bringing with it robust revenue supplies for an organisation and the results of the 2020/2021 Munster Rugby Supporters Club Membership provide substantive evidence of this. This support for a Munster Rugby financially from its members, further endorses the findings that Munster Rugby supporters represent a brand community. It also aligns with the view of Elliott (1998), who discussed how consumption as a means of developing a brand community. Munster Rugby supports consuming the product, e.g. attending games, purchasing memberships etc. all help to establish the brand community in the same way Harley Davison brand community members develop their brand community by purchasing their products.

5.4 Implications For Marketers

Muniz & O’Guinn (2001) believe marketers will determine that brands with dedicated brand communities will be of higher value than those brands without such communities. The brand community of Munster Rugby can be identified as one with dedicated support. They are unlikely to re-position their support from Munster Rugby to another rugby club, and they may be more forgiving (Solomon et al. 2006). However, marketers should be aware that lack of success on the field can result in a measurable drop in attendances and profits as this study of Munster Ruby highlighted.

The commitment of the Munster Rugby brand community is one of their most substantial assets, and their supporters can act as one of their most effective brand promotions. Interviewee 3 is aware that he himself is *“an excellent advocate of Munster or the Munster Rugby brand”*. Authenticity in marketing is ever more critical due to the rise in paid promoters and endorsements so marketers should endeavour to take advantage of this authentic support.



It's official, Munster rugby supporters are the best in Europe

Source: Joe.ie (2015) <https://www.sportsjoe.ie/rugby/its-official-munster-rugby-supporters-are-the-best-in-europe-24471>

With such authentic support, comes genuine feedback that most marketers would pay for. Throughout this study of Munster Rugby, social media channels and fan forums have provided unedited, unbiased and undirected feedback. Heding et al. (2009) note how useful such a collection of data is to an organisation is if processed and interpreted correctly. Heding et al. (2009) also highlighted the benefits for marketers of facilitating a brand community, and Munster Rugby has allowed for that development through their Munster Rugby Supporters Club. While engaging with a brand community of this size takes effort and resources, it can lead foster a sense of brand loyalty. Its' authentic nature also encourages positive word of mouth recommendations that can lead to further growth.

The appropriate management of a brand community can lead to considerable benefits to the organisation and the overall community in a mutually beneficial relationship.

Chapter 6 Conclusions

6.1 Conclusions

The combination of the three research questions identified were all intending to determine if Munster Rugby supporters represent a brand community. This objective was achieved by the use of netnography, content analysis and in-depth interviews.

On the basis that the markers of a brand community were identified and successfully applied to Munster Rugby Supporters, it was determined that these supporters do represent a brand community. They represent a brand community through their attitudes and beliefs and just as importantly through their behaviours. As the research questions have been concluded successfully, the research objective was achieved.

6.2 Limitations

As with many dissertations, the broader limitations include smaller sample size and limited resources in terms of time.

As well as those broader limitations, specific limitation arose in this study. Firstly, this dissertation was carried out through the height of the Covid 19 pandemic in Ireland with the country under severe lockdown. As a result, in-depth interviews had to be carried out over Microsoft Team rather than face to face in person. While the use of Teams (with a webcam) was superior to a telephone interview as it allowed for the use of body language to be recorded, it still did not allow for quite the same flow and interaction of a face to face interview. While internet speeds and connections, on the whole, were adequate, there were some delays or lags in the feed. Possibly interviewees could have been more relaxed and forthcoming in a one on one environment.

Another limitation relating to Covid 19 was the fact that there was no live rugby taking place. Internet forums and social media channels were quieter and less engaging than if games were taking place every week. It was for this purpose that content analysis was relied on more so than intended initially. Before the outbreak, netnography was the preferred option. However, with the outbreak resulting in a reduction in the "live interactions" online, it was felt a fully immersed experience online was not possible.

6.3 Recommendations for Further Research

The topic of brand communities is an interesting one and one that has real benefits for marketers and organisations. Despite those benefits, there have been limited studies carried out on brand communities within Irish sports and even less in Irish Rugby.

Some of the key recommendations relate to the application of these findings to other team sports but also individual sports. Studies have shown, individuals can also be a brand, so within sports do brand communities form around an individual's brand and how do such brand communities operate?

Above all, while this dissertation touched on the implications for marketers, further research could be carried out into how organisations can benefit and monetize such brand communities without unduly impacting the benefits that already come from their organic and authentic nature.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 – Informed Consent Sheet

“An Exploration of Whether Munster Rugby Supporters are a representation 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 with 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:

Appendix 2 – Interview Transcript Sample

Q1. How long have you been a supporter of Munster Rugby?

I suppose I first found an interest in rugby in general in primary school. As a young kid, GAA was always my first love but as I went through primary school more and more of my friends were playing rugby and having an interest in it. So that is how I first had an interest in rugby it was really secondary school that my love of Munster rugby developed as it was a real Munster rugby school. So I am 26 now, so well over 10 years at this stage.

Q2. What first attracted you do you think?

In Limerick when they were consistently getting to Heineken Cup finals you could not but get caught up in it. I would have been around 12-13 and ended up getting tickets to the final that they won – I went with my friends and their family and that experience probably sealed it for me. It is up as my favourite sporting moment and I was only so young, so it made a huge impression on me.

Q3. Can you remember there ever being alternatives? What sets Munster Rugby apart?

Not really – I am from Limerick; all my family is from Munster and it would never really occur to me. Geography dictated I was a Munster supporter.

Q4. Are your family or friends Munster rugby supporters?

Yes – family and friends all passionate.

Q5. How regularly do you attend matches in person compared to watching on TV?

I would watch all (95-100%) of rugby matches on TV that I do not attend. But I would go to all the matches I can go to in Thomond, take in any matches that Munster play in Dublin and always take in one foreign trip a year. So that probably comes to around 15 matches a season I would attend and like I said I would watch them all thereafter on TV.

Q6. When you do attend a match, do you have a match day routine or tradition? Describe the day for me.

For a home game – Thomond is in the middle of Limerick city, so it lends itself to a day out. Myself and my sister would head into town 3-4 hours beforehand. Grab a bite of lunch, then

make our way to the pubs on the way to the stadium to meet friends – always the same pubs. 15 minutes before kick off we go to our seats. If it is a Saturday night, I would meet my friends afterwards again. So definitely a similar routine.

For home games, I wouldn't really be in a jersey as often head out afterwards. I would have a red scarf or hat. More so in away games, I would always wear a jersey from the minute I get on a plane.

Q7. How do you keep up to date with the team news and updates?

I follow Munster Rugby social media accounts. I definitely get updates from friends too especially on the big match weeks – there would be lots of discussion in the build up of any rumours. I am based in Dublin so I would ask my friends for any word back in Limerick. I would often get breaking news from those WhatsApp groups quicker than other platforms.

Q8. What do you under the “Munster brand” to be?

Hard to describe in individual words but I come from a GAA background originally and there is a real community background there and for Munster it is the same. Even though there are so many fans, but on an away trip I see people in their red and I could be in the south of France or Edinburgh, or wherever it is. There is definitely a feeling of community for everyone, if I was in a pub in Edinburgh and there was a lad in a Munster jersey I would go up and say hello and chat. So I suppose there is that feeling you know everyone, even though obviously you don't. Everything feels natural and inclusive at the games.

Q9. Do you view Munster rugby to be a brand?

Thinks about this Probably not so much as a corporate brand like Nike or Adidas. With Munster while they are trying to sell things at times, they want you to be part of it rather than simply pulling money out of you. So they are different in that sense. I feel part of the brand.

Q10. Do you feel you are part of a Munster brand community?

Yes – absolutely. As I said, my community of friends on WhatsApp, when we discuss Munster rugby or even on social media with people I don't know. I am involved in a community for sure.

Q11. How do you differentiate between being a part of a brand or a fan of the club?

I definitely feel more invested – I am at a large number of matches and it does get annoying when some fans only turn up for the big days in their Munster jerseys when you don't see them all year. When you are someone who goes to all the games you definitely feel more part of it. It means a lot more when it is as important as it is to me.

Q10. Talk about the history and traditions of the club and how do you feel that impacts your sense of identity as a Munster supporter?

I suppose when you look at the history of Munster, in school we were always told stories about Munster rugby and the clubs associated with it. Munster evolved from those smaller clubs into what they are now in the professional era. I suppose the struggles of the early 2000s and the losses in big finals and the heart break along the way – the history of that made it all the more special that when we did win it meant more. I see other big teams like Leinster & Saracens who almost bought success whereas our history is so strong it makes it almost mean more for us.