

**BMW Online Brand Communities in Ireland &
Brand Sponsorship and Engagement.**

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Abbreviations

Online Brand Community (OBC)

Submission of Thesis and Dissertation

National College of Ireland
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(Thesis/Author Declaration Form)

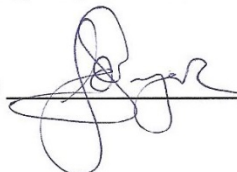
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Chapter 1 Introduction

In today's global society with the increasing levels of consumerism, the huge growth in mass media, the development of more sophisticated marketing techniques and the digital and social media revolution, a new cultural phenomenon has evolved, known as the brand community. Brand communities have developed as "people have begun in growing numbers to base their societal identity on their consumptive role, related their identity to the brands they consume, and developed fairly defined consumer identities" (Wirtz et al 2013:223 - 244). It is estimated that around 80 million people worldwide are active in online brand communities and that this number is constantly increasing. Brands now realise the potential of brand communities for enhancing their long-term relationship with customers and hence their brand loyalty (Wiegandt, 2009).

Brand Community has also been defined as "a specialised non geographically community based on a structured set of social relationships among admirers of a brand." (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001:412-431) This concept of brand community was initially introduced by Albert Muniz Jr. and Thomas C. O'Guinn in 1995, then furthered by them in 2001. In this section we also examine research conducted since then. This brand community concept was established to help explain the behaviour of consumers and the interrelationship between brand, consumers and their fellow consumers. Fundamentally, a brand community is connections between consumers and their relationship with their chosen brand. Online brand community (OBC) are effectively a digital evolution of the brand community (BC). OBC's dramatic growth can be attributed to increased internet usage, the social media revolution and the

adoption of the mobile telecommunications. Currently half of the world's top 100 global brands have established an OBC (Manchanda et al, 2012:111-115). Online brand communities are of significant value to the brand as they develop the brands relationship with their fans. While this applies to existing customers, it also applies to sales prospects, brand fans, employees and experts.

Brand communities are the new Holy Grail for marketers as cited by (McAlexander et al, 2002) and have been defined as the ultimate relationship between a brand and its consumer. These new social groups deliver mainly positive benefits to brands; however anti-brand activity has also evolved. The main motivation behind brand marketer's involvement with these groups is for the potential of increased brand loyalty, valuable consumer insights and the opportunity of brand advocacy that they can deliver. A further significant benefit of OBC's is the capacity for brand to negate through this channel any negative attitudes or anti-brand activity.

Brand communities are now a well-recognised brand related activity and there are now well established brand communities amongst many different sectors but are most popular OBC's are in technically advanced or coveted FMCG categories like IT, electronics, vehicles and toys. Well know brand community examples include Apple Inc. (which has even separate or sub brand communities at product level for Macintosh, iPod, iPhone) vehicles: Mini Cooper BMW, Sony PlayStation, Subaru and Harley-Davidson.

This literature review ultimately seeks to understand the following

- How consumers and brands benefit from brand communities.
- How consumers and brands interact within the brand communities.
- How brands can leverage these brand communities with their consent

The overall aim of this work is to build an understanding of how OBC's operate and how they can increase brand equity, deliver a better brand experience for the members and how the changing media landscape in particular the digital channel can assist this.

Objectives:

- Why and how online brand communities exist?
- How a brand can encourage and sustain its brand community?
- What are the brand outcomes, the benefits and negatives of brand communities for the brands?
- What has been the impact of Web 2.0, Social media on brand communities?

Methodology: Secondary research via online database and desk research sources

Chapter 2 Literature Review

Brand communities are seemingly new brand phenomena but their antecedents were known as fan clubs traditionally by firms and were traditionally based on physical meetings, events and newsletters. “Their interest was focussed on brands for physical consumer products but this latterly evolved to encompass brands for product service, organisation, teams and individuals” (Hill, 2012:160). In their article Muniz & O’Guinn (2001) set out to define and examine this social relationship around a brand.

(Wirtz et al, 2013) following their analysis of the nature of brand communities, concluded that there were three main aspects that fundamentally shape an OBC, brand orientation, internet use and funding & governance. In the instance of brand orientation, the brand is the main focus but there is also a wider interest in the brand segment i.e. Nike may be the brand focus but athletics maybe the wider interest. For internet usage, BCs can be offline, online or a hybrid of both. In terms of funding and governance, OBCs may be organic (member created, managed & funded) company sponsored & managed or any variation therefore.

Online Brand Community Characteristics

A brand community possess many of the same characteristics as other forms of communities and they must have according to (Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001) have at least three key elements for it to form, continue and progress .First element they stated was consciousness of kind i.e. an intrinsic connection that members feel toward one another, and the collective sense of difference. Consciousness of kind has been defined as an “intrinsic connection that members feel toward one another, and the

collective sense of difference from others not in the community” (Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001:412-431,) and this has been defined by them as oppositional loyalty. (Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001) cited that “Consciousness of kind is shared consciousness, a way of thinking about things that is more than shared attitudes or perceived similarity. It is a shared knowing of belonging as group of likeminded individuals focussed on a commonality” i.e. the brand. Secondly they noted that all brand communities shared another commonality needed to sustain it i.e. rituals and traditions. Thirdly a sense of moral responsibility and a shared responsibility must exist amongst community members.

Community Practices

(Schau et Al, 2009:30–51) identified twelve common value creating practices amongst the brand communities observed and they grouped these in four main categories social networking, impression management, community engagement and brand use. These four categories underline the value members derive from their membership of the community and how they contribute to sustain the community.

Social networking aspect, (Schau et Al ,2009:30-51) defined as creating, enhancing, and sustaining ties among brand community members” and this included three main practices .i.e. welcoming, empathizing, and governing and these are key to the social aspect of brand communities. (Fournier & Lee, 2009:105-111) cited that “People are more interested in the social links that come from brand affiliations than in the brands themselves” and this reinforces Schau’s assertion. Impression management again dealt with by (Schau et Al 2009:30-51,) deals with “an external, outward focus on creating favourable impressions of the brand, brand enthusiasts, and brand community”. Its two main elements are evangelizing and justifying. Evangelizing, is

where certain members act as representatives for the community and justifying as the term would suggest is how members will justify the community's existence to the general public.

Community engagement practices i.e. staking, mile stoning, badging and documenting as cited by (Schau et Al, 2009:30-51) document how members participate in practices that demonstrate their increasing engagement and allegiance to the brand community. These particular community engagement practices signify the member's individual assertion of their status, commitment, experience or knowledge within the community. Staking is a term that denotes a member's defined area of participation. A good example of this would be an assertion by an individual member within the Porsche owners community of their defined area of interest i.e. "I am only interested in Porsche 928 Series models". Mile stoning (logging or recounting standout brand experiences) and badging," the creation of semiotic signifier of a brand milestone or attribute" and finally the act of documenting i.e. "detailing the brand relationship journey in a narrative way" (Hill, 2010:160). There is a competitive edge to all these activities and this creates social capital for the creator within the group (Schau et Al, 2009:30-51)

Brand use has been defined (Schau et Al (2009 p30-51,) as "practices related to improved or enhanced use of the focal brand". Essentially this can be explained, by three key terms, grooming, customising and commoditising. Grooming refers to the sharing of tips or practices by members to enhance the design of products of their chosen brand i.e. BMW owners sharing knowledge and tips of how to enhance their car's paintwork. Customising as the name might suggest is the practice of personally altering a brand's product for an identifiable individual look within the shared values

of the OBC. Commoditising is a particular unique brand usage where members share ideas and methods to alter their brand's products to render it more widely available or interchangeable. A good example of this, are posts in mobile phone OBC forums by members of information to allow fellow mobile phone users to "unlock" or "jailbreak" their phones and install new and better applications other than those originally installed by the manufacturer.

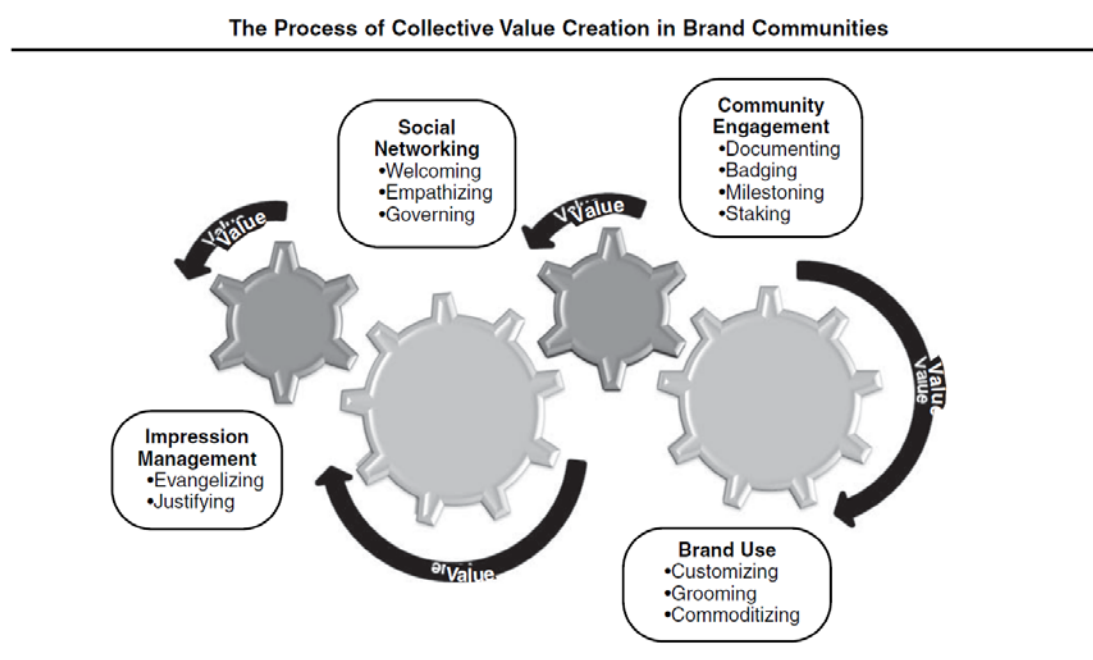


Figure 1: (Schau et Al, 2009, p36)

In summary these practices create a value beyond that anticipated by the brand. Members through their use develop a social network that is of importance to them, reinforces their brand selection choice and invigorates their interest in the brand. Finally these practices provide individual members with an opportunity to enhance their status within their chosen community and further their brand relationship.

Brand Community Members, Motivation & Engagement

Roles and Relationships

This section will also examine the nature of brand communities and the measurement of customers' brand community engagement. The nature of brand communities has been dealt mainly by (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001) & (Schau & Muniz, 2005) who determined their three components of brand communities' i.e. consciousness of kind, rituals and traditions and moral responsibility. (Schau & Muniz, 2005) expanded upon this analysis to discuss community membership and provided the different type of roles and tiers of relationships that exist within these communities i.e. subsumed identity, super member, community membership and multiple memberships. Brand community members can also divided into different segments dependent on their community interaction and motivation as detailed by (McAlexander et al 2002) i.e. enthusiasts, users, behind-the-scenes and not-me.

(Madupua & Cooley, 2010) provided a conceptual framework to determine member's motivation. They interestingly described two different types of community participation as being either interactive or non-interactive. They defined the non-interactive members as "lurkers". "Lurkers" are members who although they visit the website regularly and view forum posts, never actually contribute to the discussion i.e. they lurk in the background and that the lurkers-to-posters ratios can be as high 100:1. While "lurkers" are non-interactive or non-contributing members, they still represent a large audience within the community; that is directly influenced by the

manner members is an important community engagement goal. If “lurkers” are persuaded to convert to active members by existing members, the result is an increase in the vibrancy and strength of the community. Active participation is the lifeblood of the community.

Motivation & Engagement

There are four main motivating factors for consumers to initial join a brand community i.e. reassurance of quality for products with significant credence attributes ,high involvement with the branded product category, opportunity for joint consumption and the brand’s symbolic function”, (Schau et Al ,2009:30–51). A fundamental understanding of these motivators is essential, if a brand or its community leaders are to successful engage community members. The measurement of customers’ brand community engagement for instance, was dealt with by (McAlexander et al 2002) & (Schouten et al, 2007) who discovered that if there is greater engagement by members of the brand community with the community’s activities, then loyalty increased exponentially and that their relationship with the brand also increased significantly. (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006:45-61) in their study about purchase consequences of customer participation proposed that social identity and group behaviour are significant explanatory variables of purchase behaviour. Also in relation to participation (Casalo et al,2007:19-36) detected, for example, “that participation has a positive influence on consumer commitment to the brand and satisfaction with previous interactions increases the level of trust”.

(Brodie et al., 2011) defined “OBC engagement as an identification with the OBC that results in interactive participation in the OBC” (Writz et All 2013:229) cited “OBC engagement refers to the positive influence of consumers identifying with an

OBC. This is defined as the consumer's intrinsic motivation to interact with fellow community members"

As this statement would suggest members are interested in helping other members, motivated to partake in OBC events and actions and in any other activity that creates value for the OBC. Examples of OBC member engagement behaviour can include word-of-mouth recommendations, forum participation, assisting fellow members, blogging, writing reviews, attending offline events, organising member activities and communicating directly with the brand (Brodie et al., 2011) defined "OBC engagement as an identification with the OBC that results in interactive participation in the OBC".

One important aspect of motivation and engagement is the recruitment of new members and an understanding of the three main drivers that motivate consumer engagement in OBCs is vital towards the development of an OBC. (Writz et al, 2013) cited three drivers that motivate consumer engagement in OBCs. These three drivers are brand-related, social and functional drivers. In relation to brand related drivers, consumers often identify strongly with a brand and develop a relationship with the brand and as a result, they are motivated to seek out and engage with fellow similar consumers who share their enthusiasm for the brand Social drivers, members often participate in the community to seek assistance and help from other members (Dholakia et al., 2009) and such support discussions are interlinked with social conversations (Dholakia et al., 2009). As a result of said discussions, bonding often occurs amongst OBC members, who then begin to identify more strongly with the community

Functional drivers has been defined by (Dholakia et al., 2009) as " benefits are frequently derived from the direct, information-based support that a consumer receives from the OBC .New members often seek out existing OBC members as they can provide valuable insight into a range of topics such as whether to make a particular purchase, what products are recommended and why, potential causes of problems that may come up, viable solutions, and general tips on product usage" (Dholakia et al., 2009).

Uncertainty avoidance is a key functional driver. (Adjei et al, 2010) cited "Uncertainty reduction theory (URT) suggests that OBCs may serve an important role in making a consumer more comfortable with a purchase decision" (Adjei et al, 2010). (Weiss et al., 2008) cited that "URT suggests that the onset of a relationship is characterized by high levels of uncertainty and relationship partners communicate and seek knowledge in order to reduce their discomfort

In summary engagement drivers are essential to understand how new members are motivated to join an OBC and the resulting engagement and the relationships that can form as a result of these initial drivers.

Brand Benefits

Moving from the customer's engagement to the brand's engagement, in the current ultra-competitive marketplace, brands and their marketers are currently sourcing any potential marketing actions that can deliver any element of competitive advantage over their competitors and provide an improved brand experience for their customers. "Participation with brands communities is perhaps the most under used and undervalued channel available" cited (McAlexander et al,2002). Brand

communities offer brands an opportunity to enhance their consumer's brand experience, learn more about the brand, its history and values whilst sharing the experience with other community members.

(McAlexander et al, 2002:51).verified that company managed marketing activities via the brand community have a “measurable impact on the full range of customer-centred relationships”. They asserted that brand activities in communities also “proactively providing the context for relationships to develop, marketers can cultivate community in ways that enhance and thereby increase customer loyalty”. Also brand community integrated members’ act as “brand missionaries, carrying the marketing message into other communities”. (McAlexander et al, 2002:51). (Benny, 1995:236-245) cited that community members were also “more forgiving than others of product failures or lapses of service quality. Community members had greater propensity to buy the brand's ancillary products, were less inclined to switch brands, and were more forthcoming when require giving brand feedback to the company.

Following the initial setting up of a brand community or interaction with an existing community, there are many positive benefits for brands to extract from brand community involvement. (Woisetschlager et Al, 2008:237-253) extrapolated that a brands image is boosted by having their consumers interact with like-minded people in an environment where “brand is embedded”. They also found that brand equity was increased as these communities increased in size, increased engagement with each other and when new members were recruited. The example of Harley

Davidson's successful brand revival as cited by (Fournier & Lee, 2009:105-111)) aptly demonstrates the positive benefits a brand can derive if a company's management are prepared to reposition their "competitive strategy and business model around a brand community philosophy".

(Hur et Al 2011:1194–1213) cited four main benefits of brand community marketing activities, firstly that a brand has the power to influence the strength of the relationships among community participants, the brand, and the company. Secondly, the establishment of a space i.e. the brand community, so customers" can directly participate is extremely successful in enhancing customers' loyalty toward a brand". This allows consumers to get involved, exchange relevant information and increase their understanding of the brand. (Hur et Al 2011:1194–1213) state that a "customers 'participation often leads to brand loyalty activities; Other benefits include using brand communities as a device to improve marketing effectiveness and utilising the community to counteract negative or false word of mouth particularly online but also to spread positive word-of-mouth. Thirdly, brand communities are an invaluable tool for providing "new insights for customer relationship management and related marketing activities.

(Hur et Al 2011:1194–1213) suggests trust and affect are vital factors in enhancing customers' brand community commitment and suggest that brand managers can only achieve this by enabling the community to develop an emotional bond with the brand, affecting a pleasurable and enjoyable association with the brand and sharing honest, accurate and trustworthy information with community members. Brand communities are also often a significant source of innovation to brands due to their

enthusiasm for the brand and experience with its offerings, their idea generation and willingness to contribute (Fuller et al, 2008:608–619)

The encouragement of brand loyalty is perhaps the greatest motivating factor and the Holy Grail for brands in their support or participation in brand communities and the establishment of brand loyalty can only be stimulated by strong and active brand communities. Brands therefore greatly benefit from active positive engagement by members in brand communities as it leads to enhanced results for the brand in the form of a positive word of mouth, increased re-purchase intention, brand commitment, brand loyalty and satisfaction by the members (Kim et al, 2008:357-376). Also as members become more engaged with the brand, they develop a deeper relationship and feel greater personal ownership of the brand and become more embedded in the brand's performance and will seek to both defend and promote the brand without prompt (Ashforth & Mael, 1989:20-39). This type of positive community engagement is often stimulated by members feeling of satisfaction and feelings of personal value within the community as their participation is applauded and encouraged by fellow members who appreciate their positive input as it strengthens the overall brand community in terms of continuity and solidarity. (Algesheimer et al., 2005:19-34) cites that "stronger community engagement leads to stronger membership continuance and community recommendation intentions in a brand community". This is also supported by (Kim & Jung, 2007:231-252) who "state that community loyalty and word of mouth are key potential outcomes of community participation". To summarize if members feel valued within the community and / or the community is of value to them, they will continue to participate in a meaningful manner.

One important issue however in relation to brand loyalty and brand communities is an examination of its original meaning which has been initially defined as customers repeated purchasing. This meaning was redefined by (Jacoby & Kyner, 1973:1-9) as it can merely signify a customer's temporary acceptance of a brand (behavioural loyalty), so they introduced the theory that brand loyalty should be extended to encompass both attitudinal and behavioural loyalty. Attitudinal loyalty, they defined as being more constant than behavioural loyalty as it represents a "consumer's commitment or preferences when considering unique values associated with a brand"

Another important theoretical consideration for brands, in their interaction with brand communities is the three-stage model brand loyalty model as defined by (Iwasaki & Havitz, 1998) which proposes that the relationship between involvement and behavioural loyalty is a "sequential psychological progress includes (1) the formation of a high level of involvement in an activity, then (2) the development of a psychological commitment to a brand, and finally, (3) the maintenance of strong attitudes towards resisting changes in brand preference. This three step model can be a road map for brands in developing brand communities members, if they can through their engagement activities with brand community members influence their attitudes and then behaviour then they can develop true long term brand loyalists.

Brand Challenges

Managing an OBC presents many challenges for both the brand and the community members. One particular area of concern is anti-brand activity in the OBC is when members or visitors abuse the OBC to post negative information on issues of social concern or other causes. Often this type of activity is only partaken by a few

members but given the brand relationship with the OBC, this can have a rather negative affect for the brand, and although it may be grossly unfair or unwarranted, it can still create brand equity dilution (Buchanan et Al, 1999)

An important community management consideration is not to treat the OBC as a corporate asset as they cannot be fully controlled (Fournier & Lee, 2009). Instead brand managers should be advised to temper their management duties by “providing support and by replacing control with a balance of structure and flexibility” (Fournier & Lee, 2009:111). Their role within the community should be as community co-creators that aid and sustain the OBCs not as strict brand guardians. Given the fact that OBCs are now a global forum that contains many diverse cultures, this can be a difficult task. Brand managers would be advised that a highly diplomatic and sensitive approach would be recommended and encourage brand community members to self-police. (Porter et al. 2011:80-110) recommend that brands and their managers before engaging with the OBC’s should undertake to try and understand that it is important in terms of member’s needs and motivations. (Porter et al. 2011:80-110) also recommends that “unless there is an element of co-ownership of the brand, a true relationship between the firm and the community cannot exist”. They also recommend that a vital part of building bonds with the OBC’s is that the members are given some insight to “behind the scenes “at the brand and that this will encourage increased participation and understanding with members and open up avenues for real dialogue

Another consideration for brands is now the anti-brand communities’ phenomena and the brand damage that they can exert on brand equity if not properly addressed. (Fournier & Lee, 2009 :) also gives the example of the rejection of new Porsche

Cayenne by the Porsche brand community and the brand damage that can be inflicted by this influential and important group of opinion leaders for the brand's new offering to all Porsche customers. The Porsche Brand community believed that this new vehicle was in conflict with the brand's values, as the SUV they believed was developed as a brand extension to service other audiences for profit and was not a real Porsche sports car.

Community Growth & Management

Following the discussion of why and how brand communities exist and their value to the brand. We now examine how brands can stimulate and empower these brand communities to flourish. (Fournier & Lee, 2009) examined brand communities to separate the myth from the reality and thereby providing marketers with a basis and insight on how to interact with these communities in a purposeful and advantageous manner for all parties. They examined seven key areas that separated myth from reality and they discovered that companies that try to convert their customers into a "brand community" often fail as they delegate this task to the marketing team whereas a companywide strategic approach would be much more effective. Also (Fournier & Lee, 2009) states that companies often failed to understand the individual and social needs of members and instead of trying to control the community, instead companies should "be guided by it; indeed, the brand community experience should be central to the firm's business model" (Fournier & Lee, 2009:111). They found that more effective brand communities were guided by a brand's "light, open touch – and sustained with corporate-level commitment" (Fournier & Lee, 2009:111) and this resulted in a stronger brand loyalty and engagement from the community, increased marketing efficiency and increased brand equity.

While (Fournier & Lee,2009) have provided some insight into what brands should not do with brand communities , overall there has been very little strategic development and advice on how to instigate and develop a company-run brand community

(Carlson et al 2008:284–291).Case studies into the best practices of the large successful company-run brand communities would provide invaluable insight. Sony PlayStation EA (Electronic Arts) IBM, brand communities are excellent case study examples as recommended by ComBlu 4Th Annual “State of Online Brand Communities”.

As Brand communities, exist in two main formats i.e. company sponsored and managed communities; set up on behalf of the brands i.e. HOG (Harley Davison’s Owner Group) or as organic consumer created and administered communities which the brands can interact with. Brand Community managers should bear in mind, that whatever format the brand community exists i.e. company sponsored or organic, those community members represent a particular group of customers but they should not treat them as a single, homogenous group , as this would be a serious mistake. (Muhlbacher et al., 2006:6) as all community members are unique.

While members understand they maybe represent a group, all their needs are individual and they appreciate being treated as such. (Woisetschlager et Al, 2008) suggested that for a brand community to thrive, that participation by the brand community members is key and that their participation is based on three key factors: identification, satisfaction and degree of influence for members. They concluded that identical members should be clustered into groups to increase the identification of

key community members. They also identify that providing interaction elements to the users is paramount and points on how successful online communities like LinkedIn.com provide many successful models of how, to motivate interaction between community members .Successful interaction in turn can deliver satisfaction for community members which is vital to growth of the community. Finally they found that the more open the brand community is to user-generated content, the more community members will continue contribute to the community.

Another important aspect in the brand & OBC relationship is the importance of sanctioning employees with more flexibility in the way they deal with consumers/ members problems. This type of member /employee engagement is vital in improving the relationship between these parties and improves communications (Wirtz et al,2013: 223 – 244) also proposed that the setting organizational objectives for the OBCs is a critical factor in the development of OBC's for the brand. They broadly grouped these into four categories as described in Table1.

Table 1. OBC Organisational Objectives

1.Creative Idea resource for product development	2.Support Tool for changing company culture
3.Improve brand image and customer relations	4.Increase Sales

They proposed that while all four objectives can be pursued simultaneously that prioritization, should take place given resources available. In terms of providing

resources and managing brand communities, communities in the past generally tended to be brand funded but managed by the community but many variations of funded and management are also common. (Fournier & Lee, 2009:105-11) recommended “a hybrid approach to governance, in which firms neither entirely control the community, nor completely abdicate responsibility”. (Wirtz et al, 2013: 223 – 244) added to this finding, with their assertion that “firms tend to put corporate interests over those of the community, and that this significantly hampers the OBC’s vibrancy”. This in turn could alienate community members who could defect and set up rival brand communities, that brand then would have no control or influence over. Also this action could attract rival brands who would attempt to convert community members to their organisation.

Now more than ever, both management of a brand community instigated and managed by consumers or company run brand communities is paramount for the future development of the brand. However most brands are challenged by this new and very few brands have introduced brand community management into their marketing mix (Cova & Pace, 2006); (McAlexander et al 2002). Typically brand communities have been set up as short term campaigns and not seen as a strategic long-term brand investment and their potential has been neglected. Brands need to implement long term strategies for brand community management

The Digital Channel

Once significant channel, that has been central to the overall development of brand communities has been the internet and more recently social media. The internet is now the most commonly used communication media (Lagrosen, 2005) and has seen the rise of a multitude of virtual brand communities. A virtual community has been

defined as “a specialized, geographically dispersed community based on a structured and dynamic network of relationships among participants sharing a common focus” (Dholakia et al., 2004).

The internet has accelerated the growth of brand communities, as it facilitates brand communities who can now operate without any geographical restrictions and facilitates information and communication exchange amongst brand community members. Online is the perhaps the perfect channel to facilitate brand communities as it allows multimedia communication i.e. sharing of documents, images and sound, is low cost and is not time constrained and provides access for members of all levels of membership. Prime examples of early adopters of internet into brand communities are brands like Apple, Starbucks, Coca Cola and Harley Davidson. (Lagrosen, 2005). Also from a brand perspective, online brand communities do not suffer from offline marketing communications problems like fragmentation of media or low response rate (Bagozzi and Dholakia, 2006). However as (Fournier & Lee, 2009:105-11). has cited online social networks are not the key to a community strategy but are just one tool to be used to help create, facilitate and sustain brand communities online. Algesheimer et al (2004) stated that for brand communities to be successful and sustainable “marketers may have to employ a passive role when facilitating online brand communities such as being merely a sponsor of consumer-created online brand communities”

(Fournier & Lee, 2009:110) also asserted that the online channel does not replace other mediums entirely and that “physical spaces play important roles in fostering community connections”. Social media network sites have greatly enhanced the

opportunity for brand communities to develop with virtually every business and brand now delivering Facebook pages to their customer base as a form of an online brand community. There are now over 13m business users with Facebook pages alone and 8 million are updated on a monthly basis (Inside Facebook, 2013).

However one issue has arisen for brands in this context and it is how they deal with their new social media brand communities. (Ang, 2010:1) states that “the problem stems from confusing customers with online community members through the popularisation of the term ‘social customer relationship management (social CRM). This term is a misnomer because online community members are not necessarily customers of the organisation. (Ang, 2010:1) also coined the phrase, that is (CoRM) for community relationship management and stated that it more “accurately reflects what people do in online communities – connect, converse, create and collaborate.” (Ang, 2010:1)

Brands should however beware that offline brand community relationships are still stronger than online relationships and should factor that into their strategy for dealing with the community. (Stokburger-Sauer, 2010) commented that “Online relationships can only complement face to-face relationships; they cannot substitute for them”.

Conclusion

Following this literature review, this researcher has decided that online brand communities and its sponsorship and engagement by the brand is of significant interest particularly in the Irish marketplace. The researcher is particular keen to investigate the research questions below which have arose during this review.

Limitations,

This literature review contains a number of limitations. Primarily it is a review of only some of the available material that is relevant to its title and objectives. Also this research has no quantitative research and relies heavily on published academic studies. Through the review of literature devoted to the description of brand community, there is an opportunity to further our understanding of the dynamic nature of brand communities within the online context. Understanding online brand communities and how they bring meaning to consumers' lives will aid marketers' decision making with regards to branding practice and the establishment, growth and fostering of brand community.

Chapter 3

Research Aim and Objectives

A number of research aims emerged from the core research question. Each aim was then translated into a number of defined research objectives which allowed for the creation of a methodological framework towards their achievement

Research Aim

“To investigate if members of the BMW online brand communities in Ireland are in favour of sponsorship and engagement by BMW? The main goal of this thesis will be to investigate the attitudes of the BMW online brand community in Ireland towards brand sponsorship and engagement and if members' age, duration and level of participation are influencing factors.

Hypotheses 1 (H1) “Younger OBC member i.e. <34 years are more enthusiastic about the brand sponsoring their club”

Sub Objective No 1

The first sub objective of this thesis will be to explore attitudes of OBC members in relation to brand sponsorship from BMW Ireland .We also need to examine how this relates to their participation within the community

Hypotheses 2 (H2): “The more frequent a member interacts with the brand community, the more receptive they are to BMW brand sponsorship”.

Sub Objective No 2

“To examine if membership duration of the BMW OBC membership has any influence on members attitudes towards BMW offline events

Hypotheses 3 (H3):” Established community members are more enthusiastic about BMW organising offline events”

Methodology

1. Introduction

Following the formation of this dissertation’s research objectives, this section will discuss the research method to be undertaken to test the thesis. In this section, an outline of this proposed research design and strategy will be provided along with a discussion on the merits of quantitative and qualitative methods. There will also be a rationale behind the survey method adopted along with its limitations. There will also be a discussion concerning the sample, the sampling technique and why the sample will be carried out amongst members of both organic and company sponsored brand communities. The strategy for statistical analysis will be outlined to show how the researcher will test the hypotheses. Following the literature review and the resulting

hypotheses that consumers that are active in online brand communities and as a result more brand loyalty than consumers who are not involved.

There is no specific research available in Ireland to prove the extent of this audience's loyalty specifically in the area of premium high value brands like BMW cars in the Irish consumer market. There is also no specific Irish evidence as there has been no specific research carried out in Ireland in this area, to suggest if brand loyalty is increased as a result of engagement by a brand in an online brand community or not. The purpose of research will be to establish community member's attitudes and resulting behaviour. This research will also seek to establish and measure the need for the brand's interaction with the communities and to test the research hypotheses.

2. Quantitative vs. Qualitative Methods

Amongst the research methods available to the primary researcher, there are two main research methods, quantitative and qualitative (Sogunro, 2002). One of main differences between the two approaches is the methods by which data is collected and the purpose for which it is collected. Many researchers assert that each method has its own benefits and merits but neither method is considered to have a distinct advantage." (Sogunro, 2002)

Qualitative methods "seeks to observe, reflect and provider a deeper understanding on the complexity of human behaviour" (Chisnall, 1997:164). Qualitative research is by definition exploratory and seeks to develop a preliminary understanding around a research problem. It has been defined "as a set of interpretive activities that seek to understand the situated meaning behind actions and behaviours", (Sinkovics &

Adolfi, 2012:818). This research method is often used when researchers do not know what to expect from their research and is used to help in their definition of the problem. It is also used to probe deeper into topics, reveals the sample's motivations for decision making, and to study nuances around the research problem. Qualitative research is often used as an aid to prepare quantitative research and examine their results. Examples of qualitative research methods are focus group research, in depth interviewing, observation and ethnography.

Quantitative research is a more decisive method in that it provides recommendations and a definitive course of action. It seeks to achieve this by projecting results to a greater population. Quantitative research data is presented in a numeric fashion and "quantitative research techniques allow the researcher to derive meanings from the data and this is conducted via graphs, charts and statistics (Saunders et al, 2009:320). Examples of quantitative research include surveys, website analytics, audits and points of purchase transactions. (Creswell, 2008:18) cited "quantitative research as an important method when analysing new knowledge."

This research employs quantitative research as the main research method as it can project results to a larger population, identifies evidence regarding cause and effect relationships and because it can describe characteristics of a relevant group of people. Also quantitative research will test specific hypothesis and examine specific relationships and will identify and size market segments.

The type of research method selected whether it is quantitative or qualitative is primarily due to the objectives of the research and both quantitative and qualitative methods each have a unique task to perform when researching a specific topic.

3. Methodological approach

This study adopts a quantitative survey approach in order to test the research hypotheses. This method has been selected as it is appropriate to the research objectives and will support meaningful analysis of the data. Quantitative methods are particularly useful for getting answers to “who, where and how many questions” (Turner, 2007:7 - 8).

4. Survey Method

Bryman and Bells (2011:54) described the survey research method as a “comprising cross sectional design in relation on which data are collected predominately by questionnaire or by structured interview on more than one case, order to collect a body of quantitative or quantifiable data in connection with two or more variables which are then examined to detect patterns of association”. This defines the boundaries of methodological design in this study as it provides empirical evidence of actual levels of measurement for the key research objectives

The survey method was chosen as it can provide standardised data which supports comparison and analysis using descriptive and inferential statistics. Surveying also lends itself very effectively towards generalising the data across the sample and the entire brand community audience. This is particularly true in this instance as it is a random sample. (Creswell 2009:148) cited that “with randomisation a representative sample from a population proves the ability to generalize to a population”. Surveys are also easy to administer, have little interviewer bias, have good reach, are cost and time efficient and have high response rates. However surveys do have a

significant disadvantage, in that it does not provide deeper insight into the research question.

The main goal of this thesis will be to research if the BMW brand community in Ireland have a direct influence over generating greater brand loyalty with its members. These sub-objectives also require specific measurement of the desired level of interaction required from the brand and subsequent increases in brand loyalty amongst members. The results of this survey will enable marketing practitioners to formulate their own online brand community activity plans for online brand communities.

5. Sample, Validity, Reliability & Limitations

Further justification for the survey method as provides the opportunity to access a substantial size audience like the BMW online brand community, which of course is dispersed throughout Ireland and is difficult to access on one to one basis given its very nature. The minimum size sample will be 100 respondents and this should provide appropriate levels of validity and reliability and allow for the findings to be generalised. The random sample will be from both organic and company sponsored online brand communities to provide insight into differences in brand community involvement by these two disparate audiences, as this will allow respondents to provide more honest answers.

This research methodology is subject to some limitations as cited by (Czaja & Blair, 1996:78-85) in that it does not provide a more in depth insight into the attitudes of the brand community as a whole. Nevertheless the survey method is in line with the main and sub objectives of this proposed research and the overall benefits outweigh

the negatives and this researcher is confident that the survey method will yield appropriate results

Survey Instrument and Piloting

Survey Monkey is an online survey system which was used in this research to create and administrate this survey. To ensure anonymity is respected, the survey will not require the respondent to provide any detailed personal information. This survey will utilise the Likert Scale questionnaire with independent alternatives.

This design has been employed as it addresses the main objective and both sub-objectives. This survey instrument will establish if there is a differential in the sponsorship, engagement and brand loyalty levels based upon the involvement and participation by the brand within the OBC. The use of a Likert scale provides accurate measurement and its results need to show varying degrees of motivation and the Likert facilitates this. (Czaja & Blair, 1996) stated that the researcher when compiling a questionnaire, must always keep the respondent in mind, be aware of interviewer bias and not try influencing the respondents. Also as this is a self-administered survey, the questions should be clear and easy to understand. It is also recommended that all questions will be gathered together in sections centred on the stated research objectives. The survey will contain four sections with twenty one questions in total; the four sections will be comprised of questions surrounding member profile, community sponsorship, engagement and brand loyalty. See sample survey in Appendix 1. To ensure survey completion with a short timeframe and ensure sufficient quantity of respondents, the researcher will incentivise the brand communities to complete this survey with the inducement of a BMW accessory, to be randomly chosen from all completed responses.

Data Analysis & Findings

In this section this researcher will present the evidence and results of the primary research which has been carried out. The survey data will be extracted from the Survey Monkey online survey tool and will be verified to ensure that all surveys are complete and valid. Raw data will then be subsequently input in the SPSS programme for the processing for analysis and its findings.

The survey data will be organised in a logical manner to provide hard statistical evidence of the results and will demonstrate how the results were uncovered and will include only the most relevant figures as evidence of the findings. These findings will also openly demonstrate all relevant assumptions, relationships and methods. Results will be displayed in graph format with a written explanation underneath of the facts and will provide a clear explanation of the main points. The subsequent review will only be of those items which are relevant to the research question and not just everything this researcher discovered

The researcher will also detail any problems in the implementation of any research project and this will be brought to the attention of the reader.

In summary this section is about presenting to the reader the outcome of the research exercise.

Conclusion

This research examined the nature quantitative and qualitative methods, as a result this work has chosen the quantitative method and in particular the online survey tool as it addresses a number of key points. Firstly it provides hard statistical analysis to allow the brand make a choice concerning their brand community strategy. It is allows all members of the brand community to access the survey equally, shall be

free from interviewer bias and is a cost and time effective method that keeps the respondents needs and abilities in mind.

Also the additional incentive of a BMW branded prize shall encourage a timely and ensure a large sample is collected from a motivated audience. The Likert scale will be utilized as it is a familiar survey tool for respondents and is easily understood, provides an easy measurement tool of respondent's attitudes towards the brand and the online community. In the next chapter, the researcher will present and discuss the results of this online survey.

Findings

In this study, the primary research was established by quantitative data which was provided by an online survey. (See appendix 1). In this chapter, the researcher will discuss the survey results and envisages that the results acquired through the online survey will express a correct solution to the research question in this study. Also, the results from the online survey will be examined with relevance to the study's literature review and discover if the research corresponds with the literature reviews research foundation. Thus, this chapter will refer to the research question and the literature review.

An online survey was delivered to the members of all BMW online brand communities in the UK and Ireland via their online forum. From the survey results, the researcher will discuss the attitudes of the members towards support and engagement by the BMW brand in their respective OBCs'. The questions within the survey will give the researcher a more in- depth knowledge of how members perceive the BMW brand. This research will be conducted in order to discover if

there is a demand for BMW to support the OBCs and at what level this support should be.

Results of Primary Data

The process for analysing the data from the questionnaires was through Survey Monkey online survey results integrated through SPSS software. The charts were also developed via Survey Monkey.

Questionnaire Findings and Results

This section shall present the results from the online survey that was presented to the members of all BMW online brand communities. The first five questions of the survey help in profiling members in terms of age, gender, country of residence, length of membership and level of community interaction.. 128 surveys were attempted with 107 being returned complete and 21 incomplete.

Chapter 4 Findings

The results of the primary data collected by this researcher were as follows:

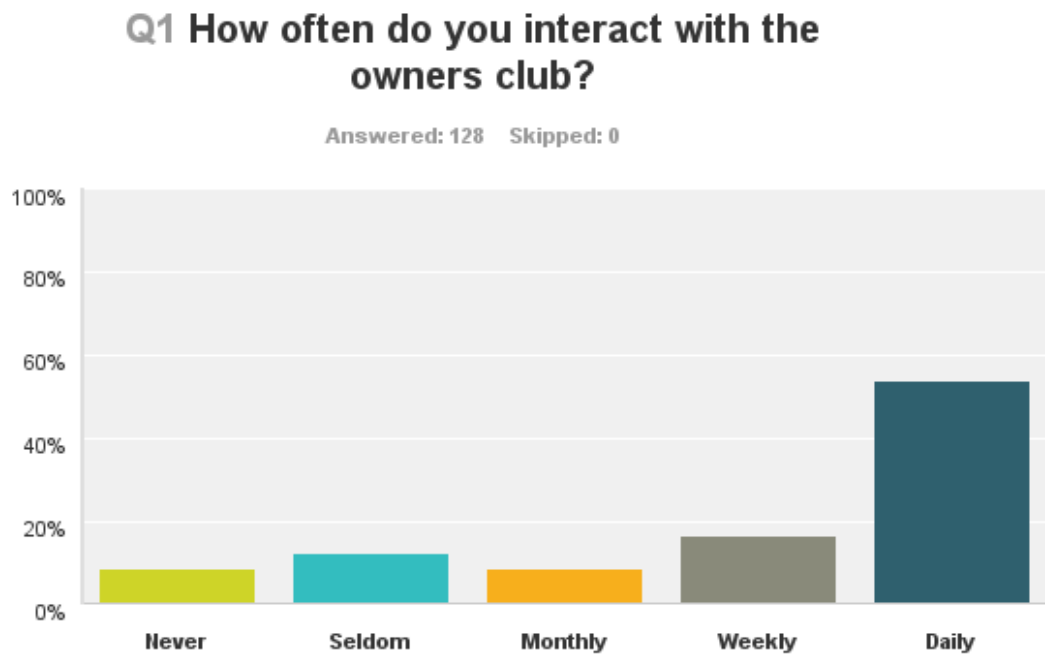


Figure 4.1

Q1. How often do you interact with the owners club?

As can be extrapolated for this chart, the majority of members, 70% interact with the community on a daily or weekly basis, with 54 % of respondents interacting daily and a further 16% on a week basis. 9% visit monthly while a further 12.5% interact monthly and 9% never interact.

Q2 Which country are you currently resident in?

Answered: 128 Skipped: 0

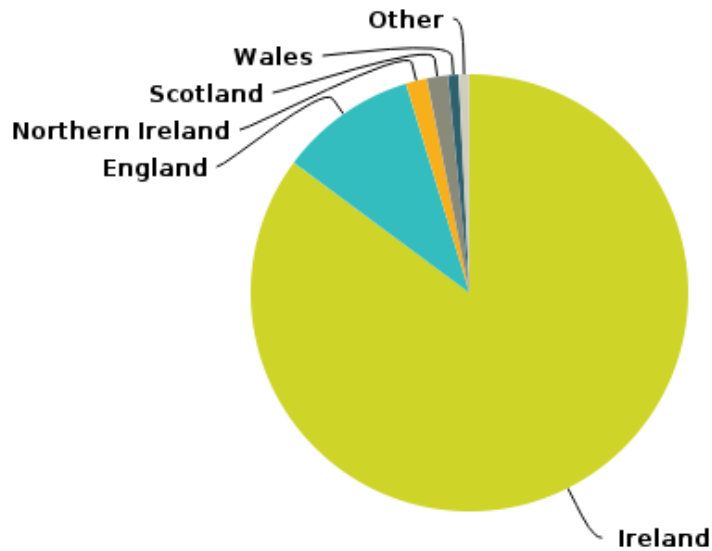


Figure 4.2

Q2. Which country are you currently resident in?

Ireland was the primary country of residence of respondents with 85% living there, while 10% resided in England, 2% in Northern Ireland & Scotland each. There were no respondents from the Channel Island or Isle of Man and only 1% of respondent in other countries.

Q3 What is your gender?

Answered: 128 Skipped: 0



Figure 4.3

Q3. What is your gender?

There was overwhelmingly 94% of respondent's male, with only 6% of respondents' female, showing that the online brand community has a significant male bias.

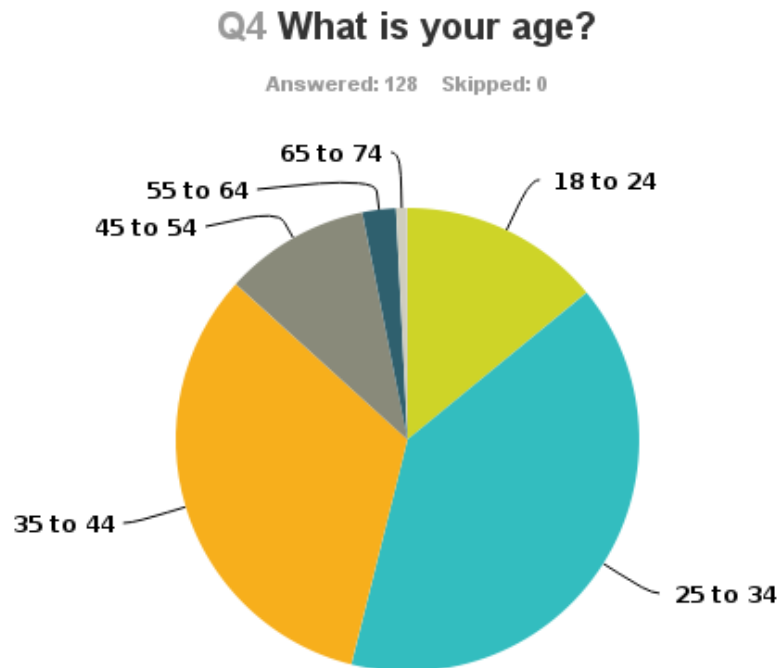


Figure 4.4

Q4. What is your age?

The majority of respondents i.e. 62% were aged between 25 & 44 years of age, with 14% aged between 18-20years. There are no respondents below the age of 18, years of age the largest group at 39% was the 25-34 year old group. There is 32% in the 35-44 year old group and 10% in the 45 to 54 year old group. The two smallest age groupings where the 65-74 year old group and 75 years and older had 2 & 1% respectively.

Q5 How long have you been a member of the owners club?

Answered: 128 Skipped: 0

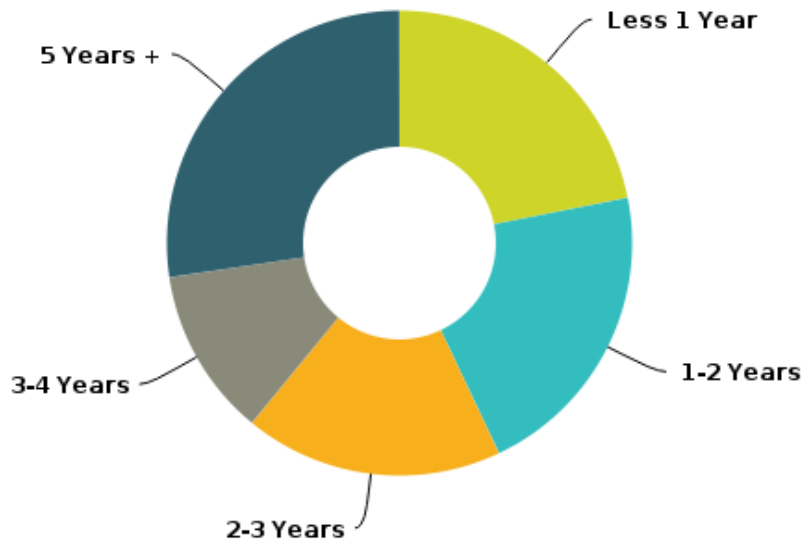


Figure 4.1

Q5. Length of community membership

42% had membership of 2 years or less, with 21% had less than one year and between one and two year's membership each. While 17% had between 2 -3 years membership and 11% claimed to have 3 m- 4 years membership. The largest single group was members with over 5 year's membership at 27%.

Section 2: Brand Sponsorship: Establish OBC attitudes towards brands sponsorship of the community

Q6 What type of owner club member, would you describe yourself as?

Answered: 107 Skipped: 21

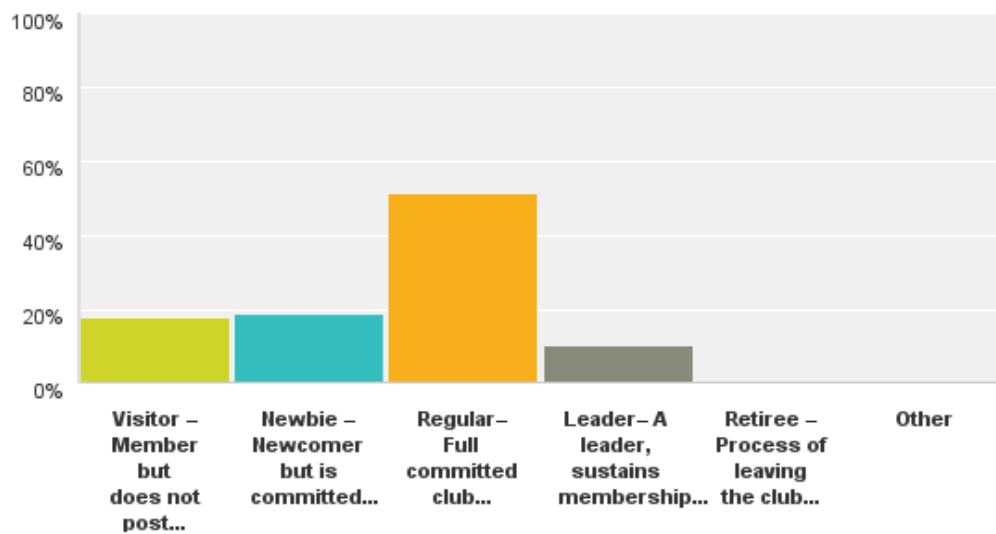


Figure 4.6

Q6. What type of owner club member, would you describe yourself as?

18% of members described themselves as visitors rather than participants, while 19% described themselves as newcomers to the brand community and the largest group at 51% was regular full committed members. 10% assert themselves as leaders and 1% described themselves as retirees or other.

Q7 The owners club should be sponsored by the BMW brand.

Answered: 107 Skipped: 21

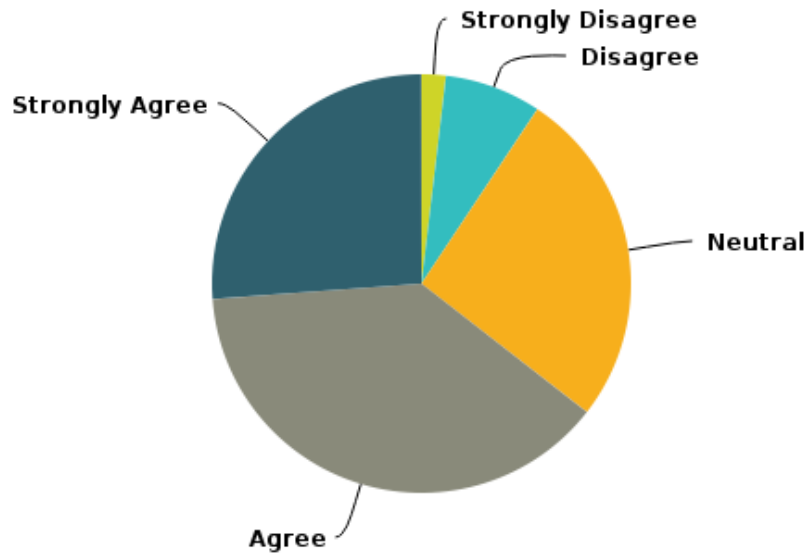


Figure 4.7

Q7 The owners club should be sponsored by the BMW brand.

Only 2 % & 7 % strongly disagreed or disagreed with this statement, while a further 26% expressed a neutral opinion, 38% agreed that community should be sponsored by BMW and a further 26% strongly agreed with this statement. The majority of members at 64% were in agreement with this view.

Q8 The owners club would benefit from BMW brand sponsorship.

Answered: 107 Skipped: 21

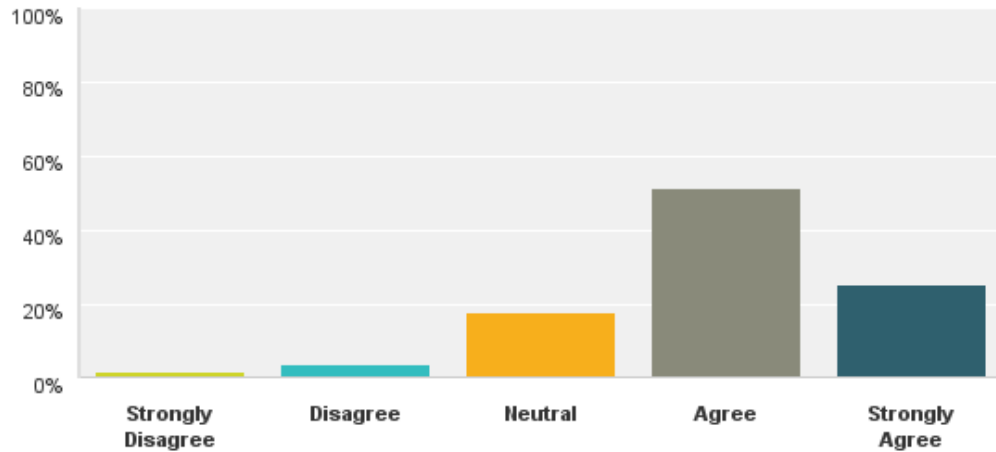


Figure 4.8

Q8. The owners club would benefit from BMW brand sponsorship.

Again 2 % & 7 % strongly disagreed or disagreed with this statement. 18% stated a neutral opinion. 51% agreed that community would benefit from sponsorship and was the single largest group BMW and a further 26% strongly agreed with this statement. The majority of members at 77% agreed that the community would benefit from sponsorship.

Q9 What type of sponsorship could the BMW brand provide to the club ?

Answered: 107 Skipped: 21

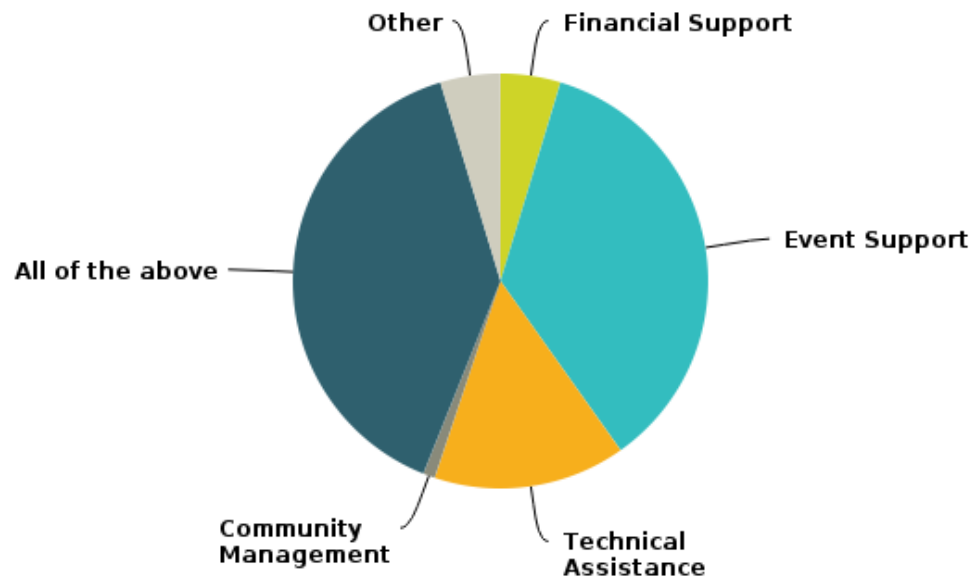


Figure 4.9

Q9. What type of sponsorship could the BMW brand provide to the club?

Interestingly only 5% were in favour of financial support only, while 35.5% wanted event sponsorship / support only. Only 1% opted for community management as a form of sponsorship while the biggest category was 39% who supported full community sponsorship. 5% disagreed and wished that the community stayed free of any brand sponsorship.

Q10 The owners club independence would be compromised by BMW brand sponsorship.

Answered: 107 Skipped: 21

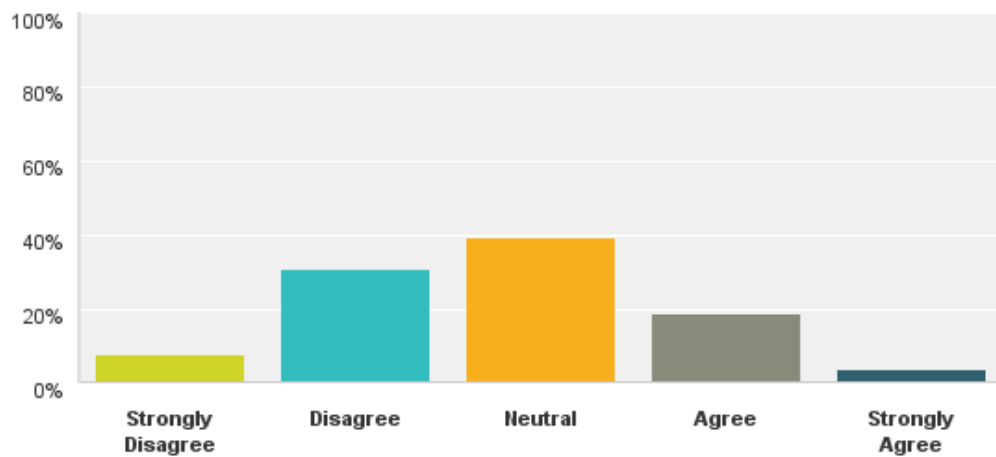


Figure 4.10

Q10. The owner's club independence would be compromised by BMW brand sponsorship.

Only 7% of the study's respondents strongly disagreed with this statement that the club would be compromised by BMW sponsorship, while 31% stated that they disagreed. The neutral response was the overall largest answer at 39%. On the agreement side 18% and 4% agreed and strongly agreed respectively.

Q11 Would you partake in BMW brand events organised through the owners club?

Answered: 107 Skipped: 21

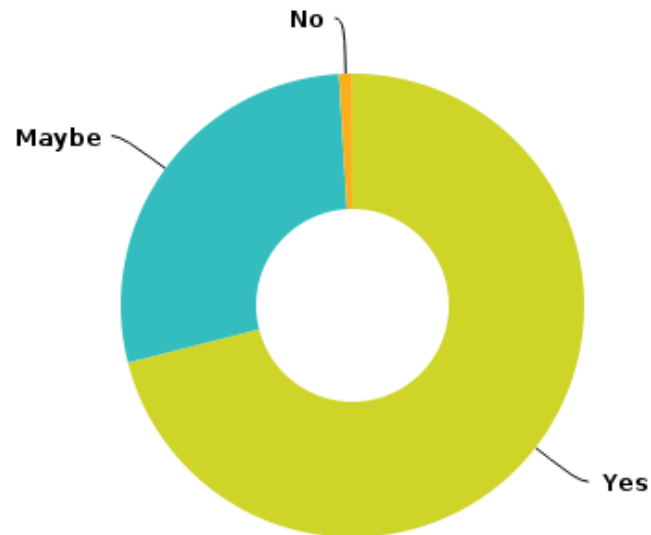


Figure 4.11

Q11.Would you partake in BMW brand events organised through the owners club?

There was strong support and agreement to partake for the BMW brand events through the owners club with 71% agreeing to partake, while 28% signified that would possible attend and only 1% declined to attend such an event.

Section 3: Engagement: Determine what the optimum level of brand participation the in the OBC ought to be, as determined by the members

Q12 The owners club should be officially approved and recognised by BMW.

Answered: 107 Skipped: 21

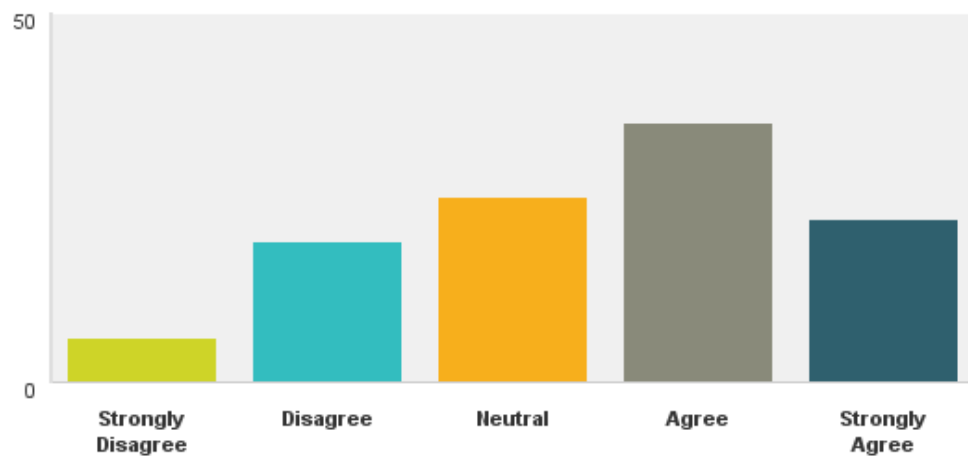


Figure 4.12

Q12. The owners club should be officially approved and recognised by BMW.

Overall the owners club was in favour that the club should be approved and recognised by BMW with 21 % strongly agreeing and 34% agreeing. 23% of members stated that they had a neutral opinion and 6% strongly disagreeing and 18% disagreeing.

Q13 BMW should offer products and services for sale through the owners club.

Answered: 107 Skipped: 21

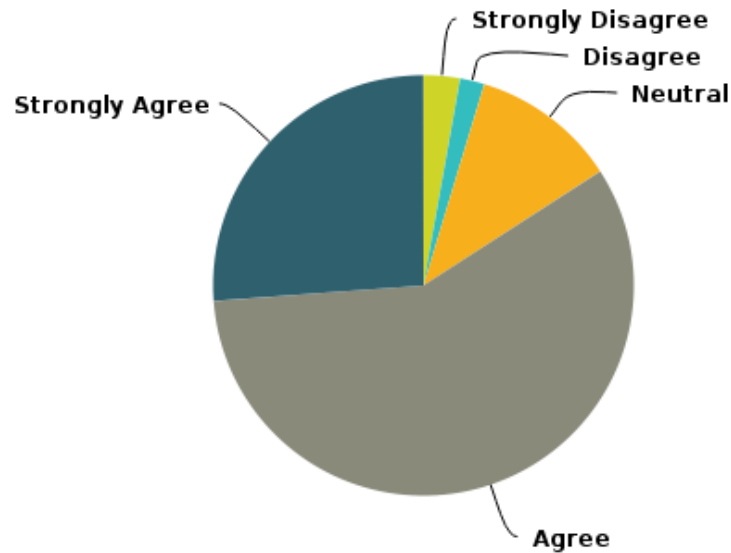


Figure 4.13

Q13. BMW should offer products and services for sale through the owners club?

Members expressed a majority agreement to the sale of products and services with 84% responding positive, with 26% strongly agreeing and a further 58 agreeing. Only 18% remained neutral and small percentage disagreeing, 3% disagreed and 2% strongly disagreed

Q14 BMW should organise offline members events with the owners club

Answered: 107 Skipped: 21

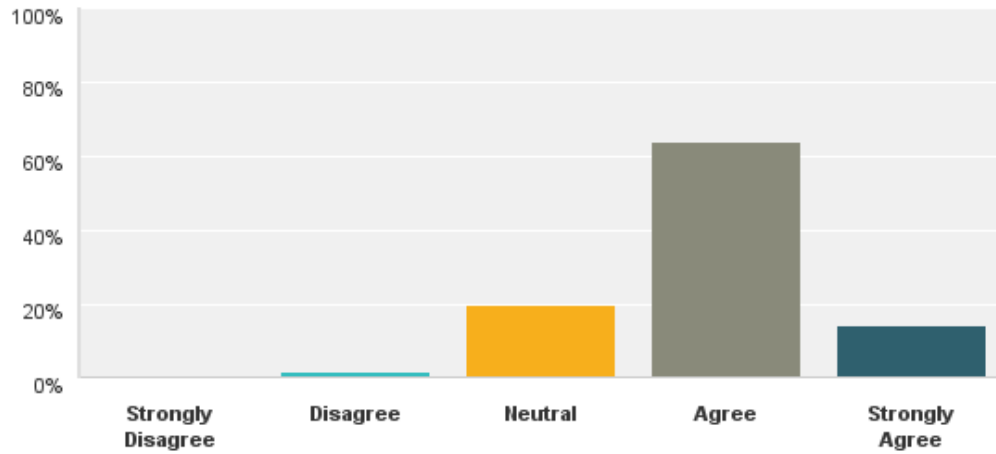


Figure 4.14

Q14. BMW should organise offline member's events with the owners club

Again strong support from the members to this statement with just 3% overall disagreeing to this statement regarding BMW organising offline events for members. 20% express no opinion and 63% were in agreement and 14% strongly agreed with this statement.

Q15 I would like to receive brand information from BMW through the owners club.

Answered: 107 Skipped: 21

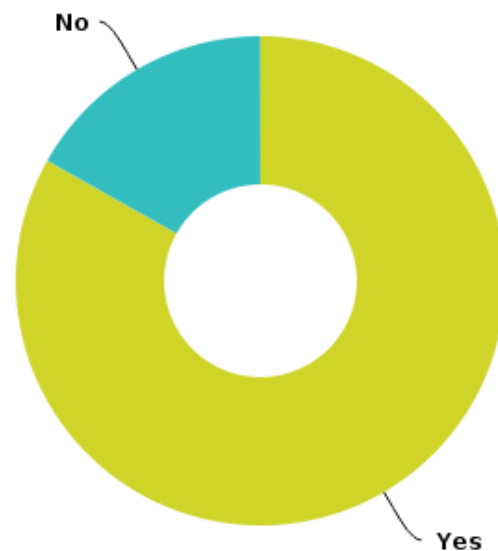


Figure 4.15

Q15. I would like to receive brand information from BMW through the owners club.

An overwhelmingly positive response by members to this statement with over 83% stating that they would be in favour of receiving BMW brand information via the club and only 17% responding negatively.

Q16 I would be interested in invitations to exclusive BMW brand events & access to advance brand announcements.

Answered: 107 Skipped: 21

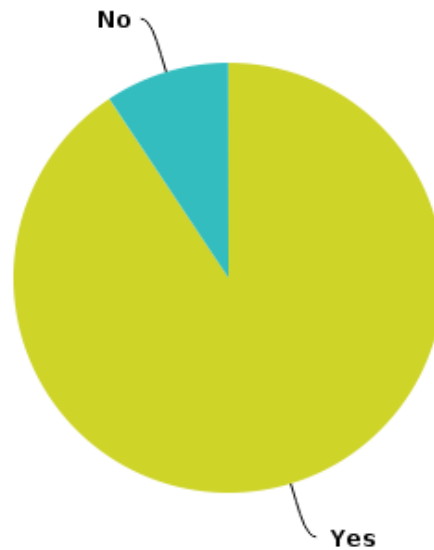


Figure 4.16

Q16. I would be interested in invitations to exclusive BMW brand events and access to advance brand announcements.

The majority of members, 91% answered yes to this statement with just 9% responding negatively.

Section 4: Brand loyalty: Measure the level of increase or decrease in brand loyalty amongst members as a result of their brand community involvement.

Q17 I feel more loyalty towards the BMW brand since joining the owners club.

Answered: 107 Skipped: 21

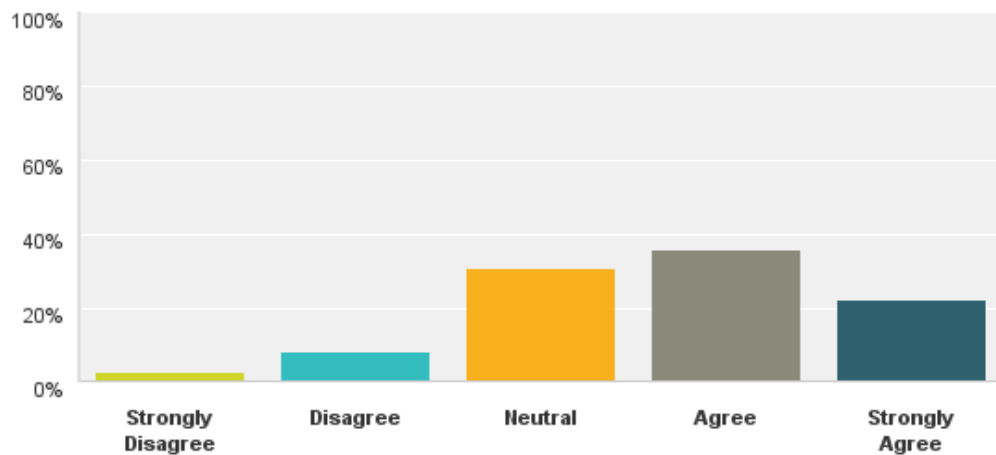


Figure 4.17

Q17. I feel more loyalty towards the BMW brand since joining the owners club.

In terms of loyalty overall members 58% expressing themselves as feeling more loyalty to the brand with since joining the members club with 22% stating they strongly agreed and 36% agreeing. 31% were of a neutral opinion and 8 % disagreeing and a further 3 % strongly disagreeing.

Q18 I have more trust in the BMW brand since joining the owners club.

Answered: 107 Skipped: 21

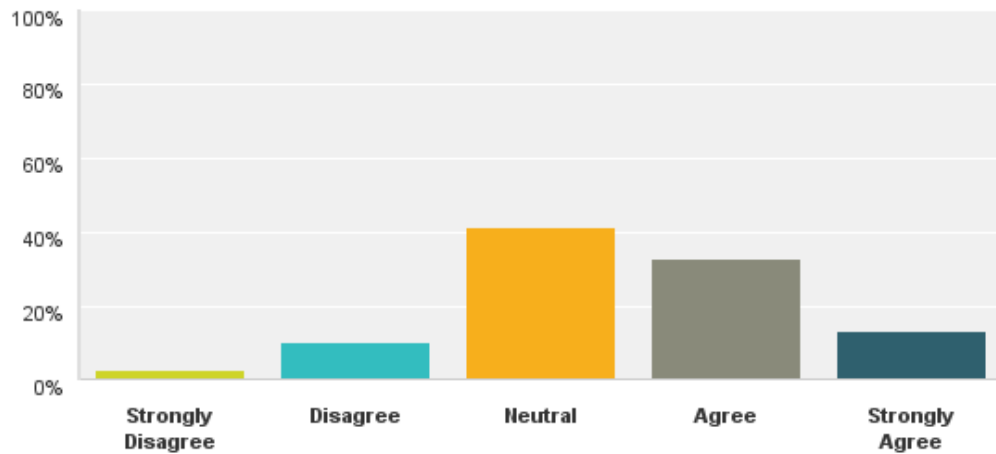


Figure 4.18

Q18. I have more trust in the BMW brand since joining the owners club

In terms of feeling more trust in the BMW brand, just 3% strongly disagreed, 10% disagreed and those of neutral opinion measured at 41%, the largest answer. 33% agreed they felt more trust while 13% strongly agreed.

**Q19 As a member of the BMW owners club,
I now feel more pride as a BMW owner.**

Answered: 107 Skipped: 21

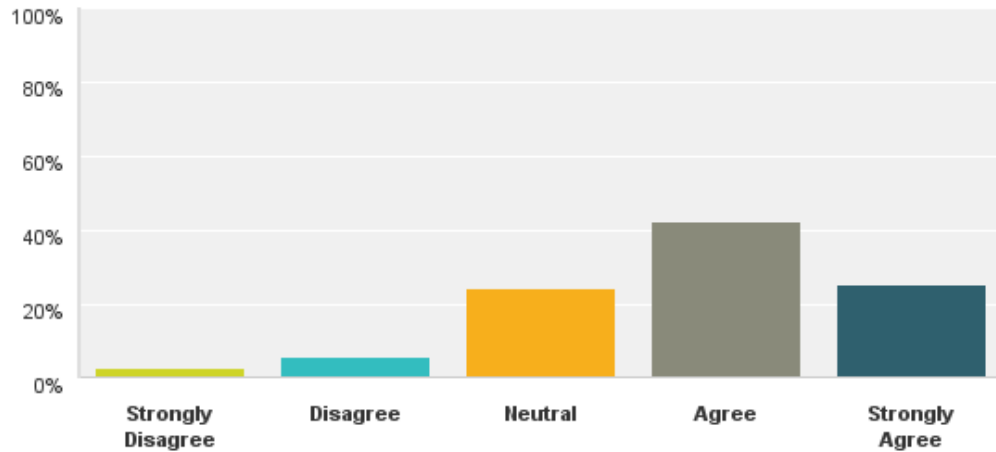


Figure 4.19

Q19. As a member of the BMW owners club, I now feel more pride as a BMW owner

In terms of feeling more pride, a measure of brand loyalty, just 3% of members stated that they strongly disagreed and 6% disagreed with the above statement. 24% expressed no opinion. However at 67% were in agreement, 42% said they agreed and 25% they strong agreed with this statement.

Q20 What is your current car?

Answered: 107 Skipped: 21



Figure 4.20

Q20. What is your current car?

Perhaps unsurprisingly for a survey of this sample 95% were currently BMW owners and 5% were not.

Q21 My next car will be a BMW.

Answered: 107 Skipped: 21

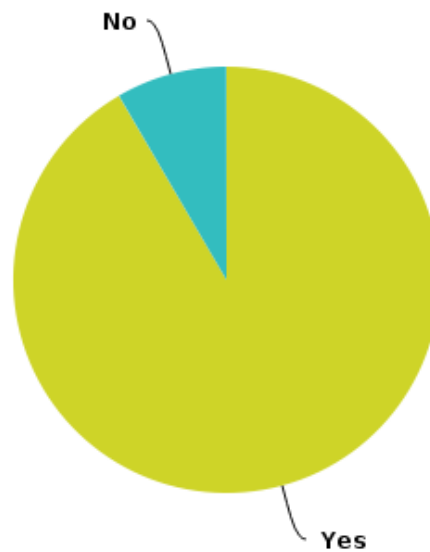


Figure 4.21

Q21. My next car will be a BMW.

In terms of re-purchase intention, a huge 92% stated that they would purchase a BMW as their car and just 8% declared that they would not.

Data Analysis

Introduction

In this section will analyse the data from our online survey relating it to the literature review, testing our hypotheses and outlining any findings of note uncovered during this research. 128 respondents attempted this survey but only 107 fully completed the survey and only completed responses have been taken into account. To deliver structure to this chapter each of the hypotheses stated in the research objectives in the methodology chapter will now be discussed on an individual basis

Research Aim

“To investigate if members of the BMW online brand communities in Ireland are in favour sponsorship and engagement by BMW? The main goal of this thesis will be to investigate if the BMW online brand community in Ireland want the BMW brand to sponsor their community and engage with them offline and if age, duration and level of participation are factors in this decision

H1”Younger OBC members i.e. members <34 years are more enthusiastic about the brand sponsoring their club”

Data Analysis

In relation to the main research aim, there was a consistency amongst the sample in their support for brand sponsorship. When asked directly about proposed sponsorship of the OBC by the brand, majority of respondents i.e. 64% were in favour, figure 5.7 highlights this result. Also as can be seen in Figure 5.8, at 77% agreed that the community would benefit from sponsorship from the BMW brand.

The most interesting responses in relation to type of sponsorship was demonstrated in figure 5.9 when only 5% opted for financial support only, while 35.5% wanted event sponsorship / support only. Only 1% opted for community management as a form of sponsorship while the biggest category was 39% where in support of full community sponsorship.

This level of support for sponsorship builds upon the assertion by Fournier & Lee (2009) that brand communities are willing to embrace sponsorship and that by “sustaining them with corporate-level commitment-firms can build fierce customer loyalty, increase marketing efficiency, and enhance their brand”

The sponsorship model of OBC engagement and this survey’s findings are aligned with the contention by Hatch and Schultz (2010) that “a shared governance model for the brand itself that is based on co-creation with the community.”

To investigate if age had any significant in members attitude towards sponsorship, the results of two questions will be discussed here. This will focus on any noteworthy difference between the age groups on this issue. The results detailed in Figs 22 & 23 provided the confirmation of 107 completed surveys and while 18-34 year old

groups have the largest amount of responses , they are also tend to be more positive in their attitude towards sponsorship than the older groups.

What is your age? * The owners club should be sponsored by the BMW brand. Cross tabulation

Count

		The owners club should be sponsored by the BMW brand.					Total
		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	
What is your age?	18 to 24	0	1	6	7	1	15
	25 to 34	0	2	14	18	11	45
	35 to 44	1	4	8	10	13	36
	45 to 54	0	1	0	5	2	8
	55 to 64	1	0	0	0	1	2
	65 to 74	0	0	0	1	0	1
Total		2	8	28	41	28	107

Fig 22

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	5.215 ^a	2	.074
Likelihood Ratio	5.325	2	.070
Linear-by-Linear Association	.021	1	.885
N of Valid Cases	102		

a. 1 cells (16.7%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 3.71.

Fig 23

An important point to note is that both the age variable and brand sponsorship variable had initially too many levels of measurement contained within the survey for statistical analysis. This resulted in a violation of the Chi-square Independence tests underlying assumptions. As results the data was merged at variable levels together to reduce the number of expected cell counts, that were less than 5, to a more reasonable number so that the overall percentage of observations affected would be less than 20%.

The fig 23 depicts the results from our Chi-square Test of Independence between the two variables: Age and Brand Sponsorship. The important statistic is the Pearson Chi-square row and in particular, the column labelled: Asymptotic Significance (Asymp. Sig.). This value is noted as 0.0. This represents the p-value associated

with this test. In essence, this indicates that this would reject the null hypothesis, that o variables are independent, incorrectly only approximately 7.4% of the time, which is within an accepted statistical tolerance of 10%. This result significantly points to a relationship between OBC member's age and their attitude towards sponsorship. So there this data that can reject the Null Hypothesis in favour of the Alternative Hypothesis that the variables are dependent (Chi = 5.215, df = 2, p = 0.074).

Conclusion

There is significant support for BMW sponsorship within the community in Ireland and there also reliable statistical evidence to suggest that younger members of the club are more in favour of sponsorship that older members of the community

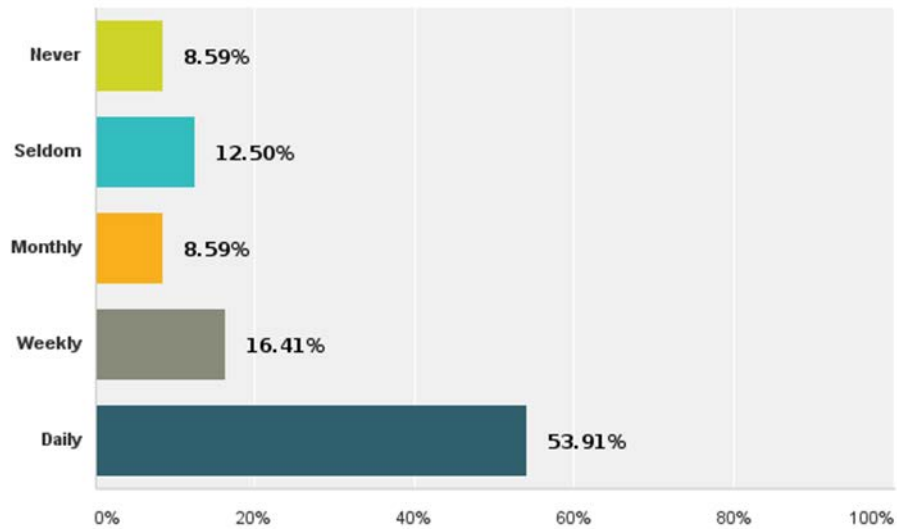
Sub Objective No 1

The first sub objective of this thesis will be to explore attitudes of OBC members in relation to brand sponsorship from BMW Ireland .We also need to examine how this relates to their participation within the community

H2: "The more frequent a member interacts with the brand community, the more receptive they are to BMW brand sponsorship".

Q1 How often do you interact with the owners club?

Answered: 128 Skipped: 0



As can be deduced for this fig 1, the majority of members, 88% of all respondents interact with the community on regular basis i.e. a daily or weekly or monthly basis, and 9% claim never interact to interact with the community. This analysis rejects the null Hypothesis in favour of the alternative Hypothesis,

How often do you interact with the owners club?

*** The owners club should be sponsored by the BMW brand.**

Cross tabulation

Count		The owners club should be sponsored by the BMW brand.					Total
		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	
How often do you interact with the owners club?	Never	0	0	1	4	0	5
	Seldom	0	0	9	2	3	14
	Monthly	1	1	2	3	2	9
	Weekly	0	2	8	5	1	16
	Daily	1	5	8	27	22	63
Total		2	8	28	41	28	107

As can be seen in Fig 24, this cross tabulation provides evidence of the very strong support from daily user members for sponsorship of their community whereas community who seldom or never interacting in the community where more neutral in their support for sponsorship

This unity and common purpose reflects the community engagement practices i.e. as cited by (Schau et Al, 2009:30-51) i.e. the practice of documenting that demonstrates their increasing engagement and allegiance to the brand community and daily engagement and even answering surveys is evidence of their support. , This along with their desire for external assistance for the community is another such demonstration. The results from our Chi-square test of independence between the two variables: interaction and brand Sponsorship can be seen below in Fig 24, which highlights the statistical difference of (Chi =33.406, df = 16, p = 0.007). This analysis rejects the null Hypothesis in favour of the alternative Hypothesis,

Chi-Square Tests			
	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	33.406 ^a	16	.007
Likelihood Ratio	33.552	16	.006
Linear-by-Linear Association	3.289	1	.070
N of Valid Cases	107		

a. 20 cells (80.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is .09.

Conclusion

The hypotheses is again supported in that community members who are more interactive within the community where more receptive in their attitude towards brand sponsorship

Sub Objective No 2

“To examine if membership duration of the BMW OBC membership has any influence on members attitudes towards BMW offline events

Hypotheses 3 (H3):” Established community members are more enthusiastic about BMW organising offline events”

In section three of the inline survey all questions related to engagement by the BMW brand with the OBC and the response from members was very positive towards these proposals. Overall 63% of members would agree to attend offline events organising by BMW, 83% were in favour of receiving information from BMW through the owners club. 91% answered yes to being interested in invitations to exclusive

BMW brand events and access to advance brand announcements and 84% thought BMW should offer products and services for sale through the owners club.

58% % of members also believed that their club should be officially recognised and approved by BMW.

These results reinforces the theory cited by (Schau et Al ,2009) that one the main motivating factors for the members joining and remaining in an OBC i.e. the opportunity for joint consumption by members and events are the perfect forum for joint consumption. The support and enthusiasm amongst the community for offline events echoes (Fournier & Lee, 2009:110).finding that the online channel does not replace other mediums entirely and that “physical spaces play important roles in fostering community connections”. Also as can be see the cross tabulation there is very strong support across all member profiles (duration) for BMW organising offline events.

How long have you been a member of the owners club?

*** BMW should organise offline members events with the owners club**

Cross tabulation

Count

		BMW should organise offline members events with the owners club					Total
		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	
How long have you been a member of the owners club?	Less 1 Year	0	0	7	15	1	23
	1-2 Years	0	0	6	15	2	23
	2-3 Years	0	0	4	12	5	21
	3-4 Years	0	0	3	10	0	13
	5 Years +	1	2	1	16	7	27
Total		1	2	21	68	15	107

Conclusion

In conclusion H3 proposed that there would be a noteworthy difference between members of different membership duration and their desire or enthusiasm for BMW to organised offline events for the community.

Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	16.049 ^a	8	.042
Likelihood Ratio	18.277	8	.019
Linear-by-Linear Association	1.054	1	.305
N of Valid Cases	102		

a. 9 cells (60.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is .13.

The results from the Pearson Chi-Square analysis again demonstrates the statistical difference; $X^2(8) = 16.049$; $p = .042$. The study results however do not confirm this hypothesis as the findings from this data shows no statistical difference, $P = .042$. As a result, there was no significant difference between members of different duration (years membership) and support for BMW offline events.

Discussion

Introduction

The aim of this thesis is the study of support amongst members of the BMW online brand community for BMW brand sponsorship and engagement

This self-administered questionnaire was delivered online via two BMW brand communities forums in Ireland (including Northern Ireland) resulted in 128 respondents, with 107 fully completed surveys. This response rate is deemed acceptable for a self-administered online survey. The overall results without exception suggest that there is strong support amongst members of BMW OBC's, for the brand to support and engage with the members via the community. It also suggests that members are more brands loyal as a result of their community membership. This research will also outline some additional findings that maybe of interest to the BMW online brand community, BMW brand and other marketers. This section concludes by summarising the limitations of this study.

Primary Research Aim

The primary research aim of this thesis was to verify and measure the demand for brand sponsorship and engagement amongst the brand community members.

The results of the survey through the dedicated sections on sponsorship, engagement and brand loyalty clearly demonstrated that there is a clear majority in the BMW online community in Ireland that are in favour of sponsorship by the brand and more engagement with the brand.

One of the most interesting answers was the question in relation to type of sponsorship required by the community. The single largest answer was for a full brand managed community at 39%, while event support had over 31% of all overall votes. This would indicate that members are ready for engagement and sponsorship. As multiple memberships of online brand communities is one trait of the phenomena there perhaps now sufficient demand perhaps for BMW to even create their own company generated BMW online community in Ireland.

This encouraging to BMW as (Hur et Al 2011:1194–1213) states that a “customers ‘participation often leads to brand loyalty activities” and this is the ultimate goal for a brand’s involvement in the OBC. Another important result was the fact that, (84% of OBC respondents responding positive when asked their opinion on BMW offering products and services for sale in the OBC.

The enthusiasm shown in these surveys for brand engagement is encouraging and relates back to Algesheimer et al., 2005:19-34) assertion that “stronger community engagement leads to stronger membership continuance and community recommendation intentions in a brand community”

Other notable features of this research are the high levels of daily interaction in the brand community amongst the survey respondents. 70% interact with the community on a daily or weekly basis. The age & gender of respondents is also noteworthy, in that 76 % were aged between 18 & 44 years and 94% were male

Sub Hypotheses testing

In conclusion this research is based on these surveys results and that brand sponsored and engaged is welcomed by brand community membership and this proves our hypotheses that membership of online brand communities in Ireland has an influence on members brand loyalty.

The results indicated through the four direct questions related to this area, is that there was a majority support for BMW sponsorship and / or support .In response to the direct question of community sponsorship, 64% agreed that the clubs should be sponsored by brand with only a cumulative 9% disagreeing or strongly disagreeing with this statement. In our follow up question examining if members believed if their club would benefit from such sponsor, 77% believed that club would benefit from such an arrangement. In regards to the type of sponsorship the brand should provide there was some variance in the answers with 5% requesting financial support only, 35% wanted event support only and 15% suggest that technical assistance was the brand support that they required. Community management as a standalone support only register 1% support and surprisingly 39% wanted all of the above as the main support mechanism by the brand.

In terms of hypotheses testing, this result for Hypotheses 1 significantly points to a relationship between OBC member's age and their attitude towards sponsorship

The testing for hypotheses 2 was proven to support the hypotheses that community members who are more interactive within the community, where more receptive in their attitude towards brand sponsorship. However for hypotheses 3 and its proposal that there would be a noteworthy difference between members of different

membership duration and their desire or enthusiasm for BMW to organised offline events for the community. It was found not proven as there was no significant difference between members of different duration (year's membership) and support for BMW offline events

Limitations of Study

Due to time and financial limitations which are a known trait of part-time study, this research will chose to concentrate mainly on the OBC members in Ireland in the main. Also the following points are an outline of other limitations with this study.

- The sample size was 107 for completed surveys was sufficient but had a geographic bias, in that the original concept was to include all OBC members in Britain, however due to complications in engaging with the British members, this research is limited to surveying only members of the Irish community, with a small number of British responses providing a control group.
- The lack of qualitative methods, denies this research the prospect of obtaining more in depth knowledge of the attitudes of members of the BMW OBC towards the BMW brand.

Conclusion

The purpose of this thesis was to investigate if members of the BMW online brand communities in Ireland are in favour sponsorship and engagement by the BMW brand. Fulfilling this purpose should enable us to provide an answer to our research question. Consideration was also given to member's age, duration and level of participation as influencing factors. The analysis of the data from the online survey provides us with categorical answers that indeed the OBC is receptive but is not unanimous and this is an important consideration for the brand in its strategy to engage with the OBC.

One important fact emerges from this research, that while there is a real appetite for the OBC to have more direct contact from the brand in Ireland whether that is in the form of engagement, sponsorship or both. Also the BMW Owners Club for Great Britain & Ireland which is official approved and recognised by BMW, has a very small local following and appears rather defunct, following some internal dissatisfaction, while another BMW club, BMW Driver is totally Irish based, more active and larger in member terms than its official counterpart, but receives no BMW support and this could provide a real opportunity for the brand. This is evidenced by the fact that over 80% of survey respondents were sole members of BMW.Drivert as opposed to the official club

In terms of brand loyalty indicators as evidenced in section 4 of the survey, there was high scores for pride, trust, purchase intention and loyalty to the brand as a result of membership and this is a critical barometer of member's attitude to both the brand and the OBCs.

In summary this research can recommend that the BMW brand will have a receptive audience in Ireland from the OBC that is ready to engage but perhaps some consideration must be given to the fact that the official club is near defunct and in this vacuum an organic club has evolved. With this mind, the BMW brand would be recommended to decide a cautious strategy to engage both audiences without alienating either.

Areas for Future Research

During the process of developing this thesis, the research has considered some areas that maybe applicable in additional studies on online brand communities particularly in an Irish context. With additional time and financial resources, a mixed method approach with quantitative and qualitative elements maybe more appropriate. This strategy would deliver greater insight about OBC members and their attitudes and behaviour. This research would also suggest that for further surveys that researchers should become more embedded in the BMW OBC and that this would deliver more assistance from that community in providing respondents for more in-depth studies, as the communities are usually very sceptical or defensive of intrusion by non-members analysing their community.

Another suggestion would be a direct investigation into brand loyalty levels amongst BMW owners who are members and non-members of the OBC and compare ratios to understand the real influence of brand community membership. Another area for future research would be a study of similar foreign OBCs, to appreciate if there is a connection with this survey's finding. Finally another area of research to be

considered is the financial implications for a brand supporting an online brand community and the cost benefit analysis and return on investing for their sponsorship investment.

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Appendix 1



BMW Owners Club Survey

Q1 How often do you interact with the owners club?

Never

Seldom

Monthly

Weekly

Daily

Q2. Which country are you currently resident in?

Ireland

England

Northern Ireland

Scotland

Wales

Channel Islands / Isle of Man

Other

Q3. What is your gender?

Female

Male

Q4. What is your age?

18 to 24

25 to 34

35 to 44

45 to 54

55 to 64

65 to 74

75 or older

Q5. How long have you been a member of the owners club?

Less 1 Year

1-2 Years

2-3 Years

3-4 Years

5 Years +

Q6. What type of owner club member, would you describe yourself as?

Visitor – Member but does not post information or attend events

Newbie – Newcomer but is committed to the club

Regular– Full committed club participant

Leader– A leader, sustains membership participation and brokers interactions

Retiree – Process of leaving the club due to new relationships, new positions, and new outlooks

Other

Other (please specify)

Q7. The owners club should be sponsored by the BMW brand.

Strongly Disagree

Disagree

Neutral

Agree

Strongly Agree

Q8. The owners club would benefit from BMW brand sponsorship.

Strongly Disagree

Disagree

Neutral

Agree

Strongly Agree

Q9. What type of sponsorship could the BMW brand provide to the club?

Financial Support

Event Support

Technical Assistance

Community Management

All of the above

Other

Other (please specify)

Q10. The owner's club independence would be compromised by BMW brand sponsorship.

Strongly Disagree

Disagree

Neutral

Agree

Strongly Agree

Q11. Would you partake in BMW brand events organised through the owners club?

Yes

Maybe

No

If No, why not ?

Q12. The owners club should be officially approved and recognised by BMW.

Strongly Disagree

Disagree

Neutral

Agree

Strongly Agree

Q13. BMW should offer products and services for sale through the owners club.

Strongly Disagree

Disagree

Neutral

Agree

Strongly Agree

Q14. BMW should organise offline member's events with the owners club

Strongly Disagree

Disagree

Neutral

Agree

Strongly Agree

Q15. I would like to receive brand information from BMW through the owners club.

Yes

No

If no why not ?

Q16. I would be interested in invitations to exclusive BMW brand events & access to advance brand announcements.

Yes

No

If No, why not ?

Q17. I feel more loyalty towards the BMW brand since joining the owners club.

Strongly Disagree

Disagree

Neutral

Agree

Strongly Agree

Q18. I have more trust in the BMW brand since joining the owners club.

Strongly Disagree

Disagree

Neutral

Agree

Strongly Agree

Q19. As a member of the BMW owners club, I now feel more pride as a BMW owner.

Strongly Disagree

Disagree

Neutral

Agree

Strongly Agree

Q20. What is your current car?

BMW

Other

Other (please specify)

Q21. My next car will be a BMW.

Yes

No

If No, why not ?

