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How Brand Communities Have the Power to Energise Sports  
Brands: An investigation into loyalty behaviour

By:

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# How Brand Communities Have the Power to Energise Sports Brands: An investigation into loyalty behaviour

*Stefanie Schnee, Oliver Jones & Fiona Frevel*

## Abstract

**Purpose:** The purpose of this paper is to show how communities benefit brands by creating loyalty behaviour and to study how the actions undertaken by the community influence loyalty dimensions and antecedents. The paper further investigates whether consumers are loyal towards the community or the brand, and thereby closes a gap in the literature.

**Design/methodology/approach:** A multi-method design is used consisting of a thorough literature review, a focus group discussion as well as qualitative, semi-structured interviews with members of sports brand communities.

**Findings:** Communities add value to a brand and the consumers by creating emotional bonds and trust through joint experiences. This results in loyalty towards the community which ultimately drives brand loyalty.

**Research implications:** This study demonstrates the need to further investigate other dimensions of brand loyalty and to increase the scope by looking at a bigger sample of communities.

**Practical implications:** Brand managers have to understand the value of creating sports brand communities. The findings of this study suggest that the activities need to be implemented and managed thoroughly to ensure consistency with the brand identity and to create a committed customer base.

**Originality/value:** The paper is first of its kind to do research into the effect of brand community actions on members' loyalty behaviours within sports brand communities.

**Keywords:** Brand Loyalty, Commitment, Sports Brands, Brand Communities, Attitudinal Loyalty, Behavioural Loyalty, Trust, Affect

## Introduction

Companies are currently facing an era shaped by a 'new brand management' approach, requiring brands to go beyond essence towards engagement (Kapferer, 2012). Consumers have an increasing number of brands to choose from, therefore, in order to create value for consumers, brands can no longer be reduced to a single benefit but need to inspire, be aspirational and talked about (Kapferer, 2012).

One way for brands to create value, which has recently increased in popularity, is to create a shared experience around the brand by actively building brand communities

(McAlexander, Schouten & Koenig, 2002). This can be done either online or offline. Online community members share their brand experiences and thoughts on a platform or on social media, whereas offline communities meet and interact in person. It is argued that providing the opportunity of a shared brand experience and engaging consumers creates a sustainable competitive advantage for the firm, as it leads to increased loyalty behaviours among community members (Marzocchi, Morandin & Bergami, 2013; McAlexander, Schouten & Koenig, 2002).

Sports brands are increasingly seeing the benefits of having an engaged group of

consumers through personal interactions and joint workouts. Major sports brands like Nike and Adidas, but also the emerging brand Lululemon, strategically build their communities and create consumer engagement through training sessions, events and other forms of direct brand experience. However, the way in which the communities are organised and managed differs between the brands.

One possibility for communities to create a competitive advantage for the brand is by strengthening consumer loyalty behaviours (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001). This, in return, is found to be possible if consumers feel that the community experience strengthens the brand and adds value to their lives. To gain an understanding of how the community activities influence the creation of loyalty behaviours, the dimensions (Oliver, 1999) and antecedents of loyalty (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001) should be researched. Obtaining knowledge of the loyalty dimensions and behavioural actions serves as an important input for brand management as it provides implications on how communities need to be implemented and managed.

To gain deeper insights into the field, this paper examines the brand communities of the sports brands Nike, Adidas and Lululemon as case studies. A qualitative approach is taken to investigate how community activities influence the creation of loyalty behaviour through establishing emotional commitment and trust. A focus group discussion and several interviews offer insights into how the loyalty behaviour is formed and expressed. Accordingly, this research paper extends the literature-based framework on loyalty dimensions, antecedents and behaviour, by adding the effects of sports brand community actions.

The nature of different community concepts, set-ups and activities influences the degree of value experienced by its members. This consequently affects how the members show brand loyalty in terms of repurchasing behaviour, reduced switching

intentions and positive word-of-mouth, which offers a benefit for the brand in return.

Literature agrees that loyal customer behaviour provides a competitive advantage for the brand. The research question to be addressed is therefore *how community actions create loyalty behaviour and thereby energise sports brands*. Moreover, this paper goes even further by investigating whether *consumers are loyal towards the community or the brand*.

## Literature Review

### *Brand Communities*

This section aims to introduce the essence of brand communities and the evolution of relevant theory over time. Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) state that communities can be characterised as having a shared identity through a common understanding within a group. McAlexander, Schouten and Koenig (2002) develop this point of view by saying that communities are often identified on the basis of commonality or identification amongst members.

The traditional theory of the customer-brand relationship focuses on a rigid two-way view of a customer's interactions with the brand (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) developed the concept further by introducing a model including the customer-customer relationship. The model highlights the changing function of the brand by giving focus to customers' interactions with one another.

McAlexander, Schouten and Koenig (2002) add to existing theory by saying that the existence and meaningfulness of the community is focused on the experience rather than the brand around which the community evolves.

Important elements of communities have been identified as being a consciousness of a kind (Gusfield, 1978), meaning a feeling of 'we-ness' (Bender, 1978) as well as sharing brand stories (Muniz & O'Guinn,

2001). Whereas the 'we-feeling' emphasises that community members feel a connection to the brand but an even stronger connection to each other, the element of storytelling explains how both the community feeling and the brand's meaning can be strengthened (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). This occurs by sharing stories about experiences with the brand with other community members (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001).

### ***Brand Loyalty***

Loyalty can be defined as a consumer's dedication to repurchase a product, therefore also a brand, repeatedly in the future, despite being exposed to the marketing actions of competing brands (Oliver, 1999). Brand loyalty is seen as one of the key measures in marketing since it enables a company to sustain a competitive advantage (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001).

To build loyalty, the utilisation of brand communities is increasingly becoming an integral part of a company's marketing strategy (McAlexander, Schouten & Koenig, 2002). The initiation of a dialogue enables the firm to not only build long-term customer relationships at comparatively low cost, but also leads to customer interactions, which have positive effects on loyalty behaviours (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001; McAlexander, Schouten & Koenig, 2002).

Researchers agree that an important connection between brand loyalty and brand community exists, however, there is no unified perspective on the elements considered and the measures chosen (Dick & Basu, 1994).

There have been many contributions to the definition of brand loyalty dimensions, but discussions remain whether a one-, two-, or three-dimensional approach is most appropriate (Bloemer, de Ruyter & Wetzels, 1999; Lutz & Winn, 1974; Oliver, 1999). Most scholars agree that an approach solely based on behavioural components is not sufficient and that the psychological

meaning is of equal importance (Jacoby & Chestnut, 1978; Lutz & Winn, 1974). Therefore, these researchers define attitude and behaviour as the dimensions to measure. Over time, some scholars started to suggest adding a third, cognitive component, thereby assessing loyalty by a tri-dimensional approach consisting of behavioural, attitudinal and cognitive loyalty dimensions (Bloemer, de Ruyter & Wetzels, 1999; Lee & Zeiss, 1980; Oliver, 1999).

*Behavioural loyalty* refers to the actual purchases made by consumers over a defined time period (Mellens, Dekimpe & Steenkamp, 1996). Consequently, loyalty from a behavioural perspective measures repurchase probability, purchase frequency and switching intentions (Jones & Taylor, 2007). In order to fully explain the rationale behind the motives of consumers to repurchase products from a certain brand, another dimension, attitudinal loyalty, needs to be examined (Jacoby & Chestnut, 1978).

*Attitudinal loyalty* measures the preference for a brand, the psychological long-term commitment to repurchase the brand (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001). Commitment can be seen as a mediator for loyalty behaviour (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001; Jacoby & Chestnut, 1978) since it creates a positive affection towards the brand (Mellens, Dekimpe & Steenkamp, 1996). This cognitive component distinguishes loyalty behaviour from repeat purchases because it determines the likeliness of consumers to recommend the brand to others, to spread positive word-of-mouth, (Bloemer, de Ruyter & Wetzels, 1999; McAlexander, Schouten & Koenig, 2002), but does not necessarily involve an actual purchase (Mellens, Dekimpe & Steenkamp, 1996). Academics agree on the existence of a strong competitive advantage for companies provided by such proactive behaviour (Hur, Ahn & Kim, 2011).

Our research focuses on repurchase and switching intentions, as well as word-of-mouth as forms of loyalty behaviour,

therefore, a two-dimensional approach is applied and our analysis is based on the behavioural and attitudinal components.

The question remains on how to organise the dimensions in a framework. Some scholars argue that attitudes drive behaviour (Uncles, Dowling & Hammond, 2003) and consequently consider attitudinal loyalty as an antecedent of behavioural loyalty (Marzocchi, Morandin & Bergami, 2013). Therefore, they define attitudinal loyalty, repurchase intentions and word-of-mouth as interlinked outcomes of brand community commitment (Mannukka, Karjaluoto & Tikkanen, 2015). Other researchers disagree and argue that even if there exists a positive affection towards a brand, it still cannot result in a purchase behaviour due to other constraints, to mention purchasing power as an example (Mellens, Dekimpe & Steenkamp, 1996).

Some scholars go further and examine the antecedents of loyalty behaviours, brand trust and affect (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001; Dick & Basu, 1994; Morgan & Hunt, 1994). They can be defined as separate components of social exchange that are both related to purchase loyalty and attitudinal loyalty (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001; Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Moreover, some scholars highlight that affect has a stronger impact on attitudinal loyalty than trust (Marzocchi, Morandin & Bergami, 2013).

*Trust* describes the customer's willingness to fully rely on the brand power itself, therefore expecting the brand to fulfil its named function (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001; Marzocchi, Morandin & Bergami, 2013). Trust as a cognitive component results from a consumer's evaluation of the brand's offerings and is based on direct experience with the brand (Casalo, Flavián & Guinalú, 2007). In addition, Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001) mention that trust reduces uncertainty in an environment characterised by a high degree of risk. Further research puts trust and communities in one context by saying that community members rely on information shared within

the community and thereby create trust among the group (Ba, 2001).

*Affect* emphasises consumers' spontaneous emotional responses resulting from interactions with the brand (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001; Dick & Basu, 1994). Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001) state that brand affect is consequently based on an experience with the brand and leads to brand commitment. Hur, Ahn and Kim (2011) extend this finding in saying that affect not only positively influences the brand commitment, but consequently also the community commitment.

As mentioned, some researchers argue that community commitment acts as a mediator for brand loyalty (Hur, Ahn & Kim, 2011; Jacoby & Chestnut, 1978). That is why it is suggested to actively and carefully manage the brand by spreading trustworthy information in order to help consumers to create an emotional bond with the brand community as well as the brand itself (Hur, Ahn & Kim, 2011).

Overall, limited research exists that fully investigates the connections between brand trust and affect and the different loyalty behaviours in communities.

#### *Loyal to the community or the brand?*

Although literature provides sufficient evidence that brand communities have a positive impact on loyalty behaviour, the question still remains whether this loyalty is towards the brand itself, or the community. Marzocchi, Morandin and Bergami (2013) found that the consumer-consumer relationship, the identification with the brand community, tends to be a stronger predictor for loyalty behaviour than a consumer-company relationship, the connection between consumer and brand. However, the authors argue that both relationships are interlinked, where the consumer-company relationship has a stronger impact on brand trust, the consumer-consumer bond triggers emotional dimensions.

McAlexander, Schouten and Koenig (2002) touched upon this phenomenon in their

work, stating that being part of a brand community and interacting with others strengthens positive attitudes towards the product and the brand. According to their findings in the ‘Jeep community’, the value for consumers lies primarily within the community and the relationships to other members. This statement is supported by an evaluation of relationships within European car clubs, where the brand is considered to bring people together in the first place and thereafter leads to the creation of an emotional involvement within the group (Algesheimer, Dholakia & Herrmann, 2005).

Community members can freely express emotions and establish a strong connection to others in the community, thereby reinforcing the positive emotional arousal associated with the membership (Marzocchi, Morandin & Bergami, 2013). As these relationships become an increasingly integral part in consumers’ lives, the tie to the community gets closer and the loyalty to the brand strengthens (McAlexander, Schouten & Koenig, 2002). Therefore, the researchers again highlight the role of brand affect, which positively

influences brand community commitment and consequently brand loyalty.

To establish long-term impacts of brand communities on loyalty behaviours, community-building efforts, in terms of events, activities and other forms of personal interactions with the customers are required on a regular basis (McAlexander, Schouten & Koenig, 2002).

Literature clearly emphasises the benefits of creating brand missionaries who spread the message of a brand outside the community environment into other personal communities (McAlexander, Schouten & Koenig, 2002). The more dedicated and emotionally attached an individual feels towards the community, the higher the possibility that this member spreads the word about the brand community (Dick & Basu 1994; McAlexander, Schouten & Koenig, 2002). However, there is no explicit indication in existing literature whether members refer the community or the brand to others. The following model (figure 1) provides an overview of the previously described main findings from literature.

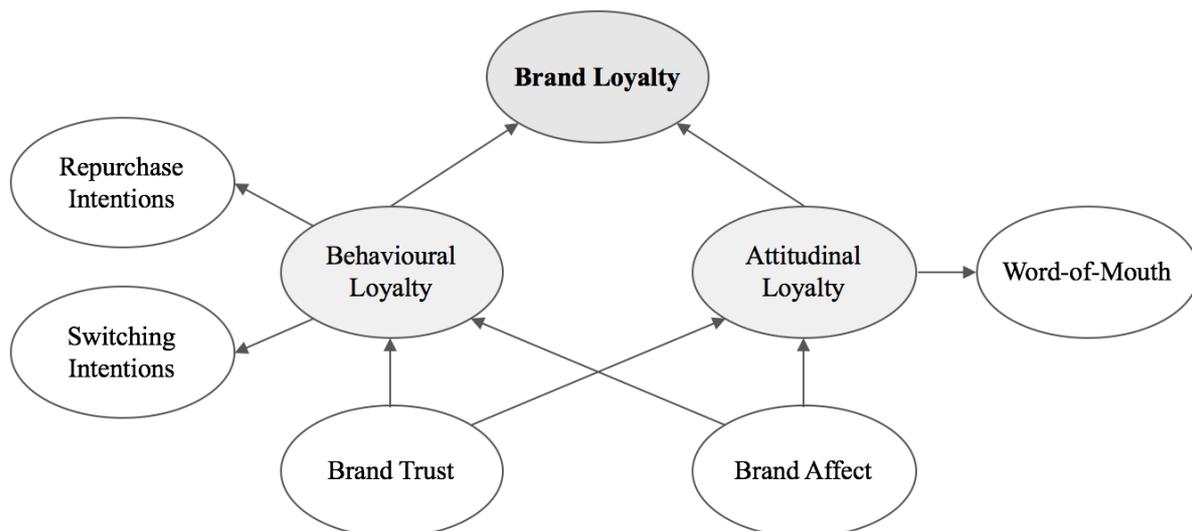


Figure 1: Dimensions and antecedents of brand loyalty

Recently literature has shifted towards brand communities in an online context (Arvidsson & Caliandro, 2016). However, as brands need to find new ways to

differentiate themselves, offline communities increase in popularity and should therefore not be neglected. A gap in research has been identified, capturing the

effect of brand communities and their activities in creating loyalty behaviour. Offline sports brand communities, in particular, have not been a focus in literature. Therefore, this paper extends the brand loyalty framework within the context of sports brands and further identifies to whom the members are loyal, the community or the brand.

## **Methodology**

The foundation of the research is formed by an extensive literature review, starting by defining the characteristics of brand communities, followed by analysing the elements needed to create loyalty behaviours. The purpose of the literature review was to gain an overview of existing research and to develop an understanding of the dimensions and antecedents of loyalty behaviour.

A qualitative approach was deemed most effective as this method of research is useful when studying people's experiences and perspectives in more depth (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). A focus group discussion was undertaken to identify key trends and topics to help formulate the questions for the interviews. The semi-structured focus group consisted of six participants and lasted 45 minutes.

The second stage was a series of ten interviews, lasting 45 minutes each, with participants who are or have been active members of Nike's, Adidas's or Lululemon's brand communities. The questions focused on four topics: behavioural and attitudinal loyalty, degree of community commitment, perceived trust and affect, and the relationship with other community members. All of the topics were analysed by a series of questions with the intention of finding out how the actions undertaken by the brand community influence the members' relationships with the brand and consequently their loyalty behaviour.

## **Case Description**

The leading sports brands Nike and Adidas have strongly focused on building their offline communities, as they have identified the value that it provides for both customer and the brand (Schau, Muniz & Arnould, 2009). Lululemon have pioneered a similar concept but pursue a different focus than Nike and Adidas, which will be explained in the following section.

### ***Community Characteristics***

*Nike:* Nike has a global community located across seven continents in some of the biggest cities in the world. The Nike community places focus on 'pushing its members to their limits' and providing expert guidance to people of all athletic abilities through Nike running clubs, which provide coaches and pacers at all sessions (Nike, 2017c).

*Adidas:* Adidas describe their community as an 'extended family' in which 'fun is taken seriously' (Adidas, 2017b). Their community provides a 'global running movement' which unites, supports and energises runners all over the world (Adidas, 2017b). Adidas add that they are not just a sports club but a 'community of friends' across the world (Adidas, 2017b).

*Lululemon:* The brand unites and connects people through a common interest and has instilled a supportive community network to give consumers a feeling of exclusivity and belonging (Lululemon, 2017b).

### ***Community Activities***

#### ***Weekly workouts***

The aforementioned brands offer free workouts several times a week for different sports types such as running, functional training and yoga, which are either open to everyone or aimed at engaging different segments within the community (Adidas, 2017b; Lululemon, 2017a; Nike, 2017c).

*Nike:* The Nike running club offers regular sessions that cater for all skill levels (Nike, 2017c). In addition, Nike+ Training Club

(NTC+) is available exclusively to women by providing support, a comfortable atmosphere and expertise to achieve personal goals (Nike, 2016).

*Adidas:* Adidas runners focus on several running events per week using the message ‘we run – your city’ (Adidas, 2017b). In addition to this, Adidas also provide supplementary classes including core workouts and yoga sessions, all designed to enhance the running performance (Adidas, 2017b).

*Lululemon:* On average, there is one yoga session per week in the centre of the Lululemon showroom. In addition, there are a number of other yoga classes and running events for different skill levels and segments, including men only, families and couples (Lululemon, 2017c).

#### *Product trials and free products*

Brand communities give plenty of opportunities to try and receive new products at community events. At Lululemon, members of the community get to use the brand’s yoga mats and Adidas and Nike often provide t-shirts, goody bags, and offer the opportunity to work out in their latest shoes (Adidas, 2017b; Lululemon, 2017a; Nike, 2017c). At Nike NTC+ the latest shoe is always provided in all sizes and Adidas runners bring latest running shoes to the sessions to let members try them during the run. Nike occasionally incentivise taking part in certain running events to give people access to the limited-edition shoes at a reduced rate (Nike, 2017b).

#### *Strategic selection of store location and concept as well as atmosphere created*

*Nike:* For classes at the NTC+, which mainly take place in Nike’s flagship stores, members have to navigate through the entire store to get to the class. The Nike running club frequently meets and finishes the session outside the stores (Nike, 2017c).

*Adidas:* Adidas running clubs often meet at a variety of designated locations in major cities. Starting points are marked by

different flags and banners to ensure brand exposure. Pacers and crew members are always in attendance and dressed in Adidas athletic wear from head to toe (Adidas, 2017b).

*Lululemon:* Lululemon also start and finish running events outside their showrooms and put big efforts into creating a comfortable, inclusive atmosphere for community members after yoga sessions. It is commonplace that tea and small healthy snacks are provided after the sessions, encouraging members to stay, talk to each other and browse through products (Lululemon, 2017a).

## **Results**

The analysis of the responses from the interviews illustrate that three types of community members can be distinguished, based on their degree of commitment to the group. This commitment is defined according to the importance of the community in members’ lives, measured by the frequency of community event participation.

Occasional:	< 1x per week
Consistent:	> 1x per week
Extreme:	> 3x per week

### ***Dimensions of Loyalty Behaviour***

#### *Brand trust*

The responses show that members do not actively evaluate brand trust, however they do reflect whether the brand community characteristics match the brand identity, meaning that in case of Lululemon no sign of competitiveness is experienced within the community. All interviewees agree that trainers are reliable sources of information. This finding matches participants’ perceptions of the brands as knowledgeable and competent. Moreover, the brands are all seen as honest, influenced by the fact that the brands are not perceived as the centre of the community, even though free product trials are offered, which at the same time increase members’ perceived

trustworthiness of the brands. Furthermore, it is noticeable that members not only share their experiences with each other (extreme members even talk about the latest product innovations), but also rely on product recommendations from others.

### *Brand affect*

To determine the reasons for the development of emotional relations with the brand, the primary motives for joining and going back to the community were analysed. Community feeling, motivation, fun, personal challenge, support and free workouts were mentioned by the interviewees. The empirical results show that the degree of brand affect developed by members heavily depends on their level of community commitment. Extreme members tend to develop a strong emotional connection to the brand, the brand becomes part of their everyday life:

“The brand becomes an experience, I wear my Adidas shirt and think of the fun times within the community.”

Occasional members, in contrast, do not develop a strong emotional connection, however, one interviewee states that the brand image changes in a positive way by interacting with the brand:

“The brand no longer is a black box to me, I can connect an experience to the brand now.”

Being able to touch, feel and wear products while training helps most respondents to develop an emotional connection with the brand. Moreover, in developing an affectional relationship with the brand, interviewees expressed that the choice of location can also be seen as a crucial element, explained well by a statement of one respondent about the Lululemon yoga location:

“It is like having a coffee with your friends, you just enjoy being there. It is a very relaxed atmosphere, you feel comfortable and there are no signs of competitiveness.”

Moreover, it was mentioned that walking through the Nike store before and after

every NTC+ session makes members more inclined to purchase products, since the store serves as a source of inspiration.

Overall, the analysis of responses shows that community activities help in creating an emotional bond with the brand. Steady and extreme members talked a lot about the products, exchanged experiences and recommended them to others. One of the extreme members explains the behaviour as follows:

“[...] we started to talk about the products in the marketing language, for example we emphasised the great stability of the latest shoe.”

### *Behavioural loyalty*

Behavioural loyalty was measured by asking questions concerning the purchasing behaviour of consumers before joining the community, during the time of being a member and, if applicable, the change in behaviour after leaving the group. The responses show significant differences between the three types of members. Consistent and extreme members tend to buy considerably more products of the respective brand during the time as an active community member. Moreover, the answers show that members often unconsciously repurchase the brand and are surprised when counting the number of products bought while being part of the community.

Interestingly, the purchasing behaviour is also influenced by the fact that there is a tendency to feel uncomfortable wearing other brands, even though that is, based on the findings from the interviews, not forced upon from others, but rather due to the person's individual feeling. For some, being a visible member of the community is desirable.

Furthermore, the interviews show that the emotional connection often leads to less switching behaviour. This is because the brand is very prominent in consumers' minds after joining a community, mainly due to the mentioned activities undertaken by the community:

“You suddenly see the brand everywhere, even if you are not actively looking for it.”

### *Attitudinal loyalty*

To get an understanding of the degree and characteristics of attitudinal loyalty, the word-of-mouth behaviour was examined in more detail. The analysis of the responses shows that the activities performed by the community, namely strategic choice of location, free products and trials as well as regular meetings, increase members' commitment and make them share their experiences.

The degree of commitment depends not only on the frequency of participating in community activities, but also on the motivations for joining the community. Consumers joining because the community offers free workouts seemed to be less committed, whereas members who see the community as a source of motivation and support become very involved. Overall, all members recommended the community to others. In addition, all members heard about the community either through a recommendation from a friend or through Facebook events.

### ***Loyal to the Community or the Brand?***

Various questions were asked to analyse the motivation of members to visit certain events and training sessions regularly and to get an idea about what attitudes and emotions people connect with the community. Questions like “what do you like most about the community” or “did you make new friends” aimed at uncovering the emotional commitment towards the community. As has been introduced in the section regarding attitudinal loyalty, the word-of-mouth behaviour is mostly in regard to the community, not the brand. The interviews clearly show that for members, the community comes first, the brand second:

“The community is about people, the brand comes second, but consumption connects.”

This can be explained by the fact that for extreme and consistent members the community is often a very important part of their active and even private life:

“The community is like a family to me, I even bought a shirt before going abroad to keep the emotional connection.”

Moreover, interviewed members mentioned that the offline community can spread into an online community, meaning that members follow each other on social media, share, like and comment photos and keep a personal connection. This behaviour shows to some extent how strongly the community loyalty can develop.

The responses indicate that community loyalty ultimately leads to brand loyalty, at least for extreme and consistent members. The ‘brand becomes the experience’ and ‘joint consumption connects’ are phrases mentioned by interviewees when asked about their attitude towards the community and brand. For occasional members, the loyalty is mainly to the community and not the brand. ‘The city turns into a showroom’, this statement by an extreme member describes the relationship between brand and community well.

## **Discussion**

The primary objective of our study was to analyse loyalty behaviour within sports brand communities. Sports brand communities create an experience among the members through their actions. This helps members to develop trust and emotional connections with the brand and consequently leads to forms of loyalty behaviour. The findings on the nature of community actions taken and their effects on creating loyalty behaviour are summarised in figure 2, an extension and adaptation of the framework from the literature review.

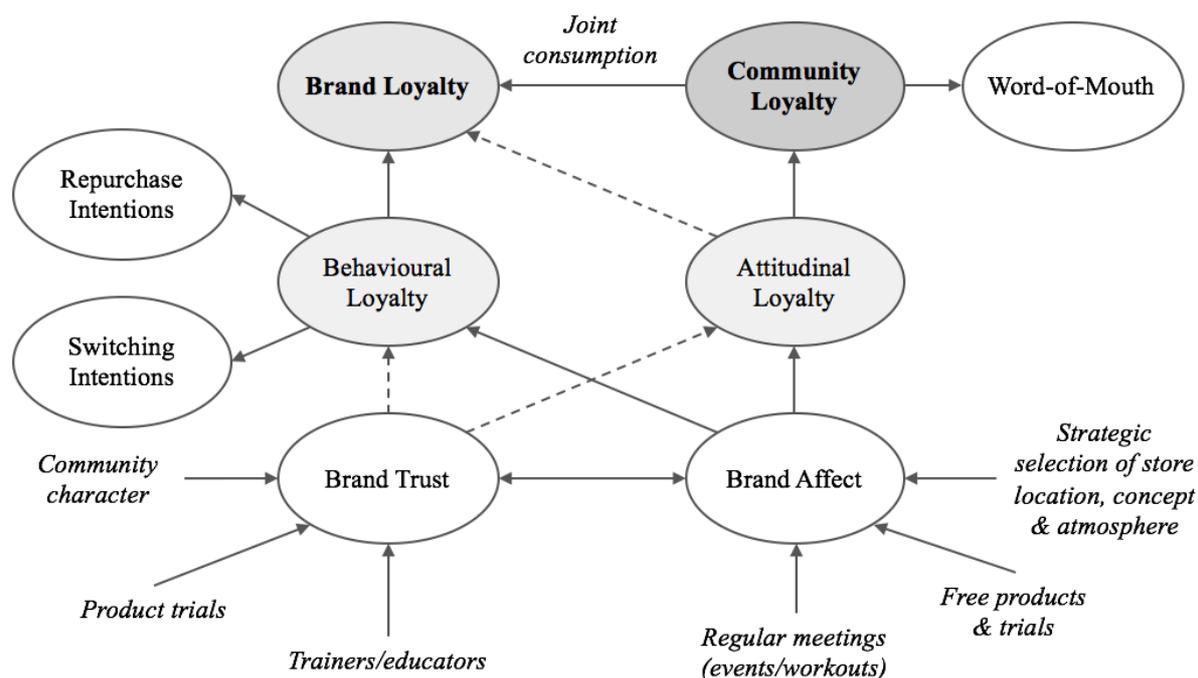


Figure 2: Dimensions of loyalty behaviour in sports brand communities

In accordance with literature, our work confirms that communities help to create consumer engagement (Kapferer, 2012) and can be used to strengthen loyalty behaviours among members (McAlexander, Schouten & Koenig, 2002). Our results revealed that the more frequently members participate in community activities, the stronger the emotional connection and importance of the community in the person's overall life, and the higher the experienced added value. The behaviour of extreme members reflects how community activities can create affective responses and lead to high commitment (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001) and therefore strengthen loyalty behaviour. For extreme members, community and private social life blend into each other, mainly because community members turn into actual friends.

Our research found that members evaluate whether the community's character fits the respective brand's identity. For Lululemon, a feeling of support and belonging was mostly mentioned as the distinctive characteristic. This matches the brand's identity, which can be described around the term 'empowerment' (Lululemon, 2017a).

Experienced trainers play an essential role within the Nike community, as the brand can be characterised as competitive and energetic (Nike, 2017a). In the case of Adidas, the entire community is built around running, emphasising the brand's focus on performance (Adidas, 2017a).

Members perceived the brand as trustworthy if a conformity between community character and brand identity was seen, meaning that their expectations of the brand community experience were met. Therefore, the results confirm that trust develops if consumers are given the ability to rely on the brand power (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001; Marzocchi, Morandin & Bergami 2013). For members who did not have a distinct idea of what the brand stands for, the community experience helped to actually create a brand image.

Additionally, we found that trainers play a crucial role in building brand trust, as the ability to rely on their expertise and advice was described as an essential requirement for a respected brand community. The study further confirms that members, extreme ones in particular, recommend products to

each other and thereby create a feeling of trust among the group (Ba, 2001).

Brand trust, however, was not consciously seen as a loyalty driver by community members. This might be due to the fact that trust could serve to a certain degree as a prerequisite for consumers to decide to become brand community members and it can be argued that joining a brand community does not involve a high degree of risk, reducing the importance of evaluating trust (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001).

The actions taken by the analysed brand communities focus on creating a distinct brand experience, based on their unique character. Their core concept is the same and is based on engaging, inspiring and motivating consumers. All offer regular free workouts and events to bring people together, which according to McAlexander, Schouten and Koenig (2002) positively influences loyalty behaviour, as it creates value for the members. Overall, the possibility to personally talk to trainers, try on products, and to be surrounded by the brand (choice of location, creation of distinct atmosphere, trainers wearing the brand's athletic apparel) leads to the fact that members build an emotional connection with the brand and no longer see it as a 'black box'. The brand becomes approachable due to the community activities undertaken. Consequently, this was identified to lead to loyalty behaviour in forms of repurchase and reduced switching intentions.

Offering free products and trials in particular was mentioned to have a strong influence on both affect and trust. The ability to touch, feel and experience the product helps members to create an emotional connection with the brand. Product trials create a feeling of trust, members felt that the brand has 'nothing to hide'. Our research shows that members tend to purchase the products tried and a few members spread positive word-of-mouth about the brand if satisfied. Consequently, both loyalty dimensions,

attitudinal and behavioural, can be confirmed and strengthened through brand community actions (Jacoby & Chestnut, 1978; Lutz & Winn, 1974).

Overall, sports brand community activities seem to mainly lead to affect (Dick & Basu, 1994; Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001). Brand affect was further identified to be the antecedent for both attitudinal and behavioural loyalty, even though a stronger impact on attitudinal loyalty could be observed (Marzocchi, Morandin & Bergami, 2013).

Interestingly, in contradiction to the statement that brand trust and affect are separate constructs by Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001), our research indicated that they in fact influence each other. As can be seen in figure 2, brand trust seems to impact brand affect, as trust can build the foundation on which emotional connections develop. This was shown by the fact that trust was to a certain degree seen as a prerequisite for joining the community. On the other hand, once a member develops an emotional connection with the brand, the likelihood to trust that the brand fulfils its stated function increases.

The interviews confirmed that all activities performed by the communities have in common that they evolve around the brand without making it the focus (McAlexander, Schouten & Koenig, 2002). This approach was seen to be beneficial for building behavioural and attitudinal loyalty. Members not only unconsciously bought more products due to being surrounded by them, but also confirmed that the established emotional connection led to reduced switching behaviour (Jones & Taylor, 2007).

#### *Loyal to the community or the brand?*

Regarding the question to whom community members are loyal, our study showed that loyalty towards the community and loyalty towards the brand should be looked at as separate, but related concepts, as can be seen in figure 2. Community loyalty was mainly expressed

through the attitudinal loyalty dimension, which in turn is strongly affected by the community's actions. Brand loyalty on the contrary, was mainly shown through repurchase and reduced switching intentions.

For attitudinal loyalty, expressed through word-of-mouth, it was found that the level of commitment to the community determines if the members are more loyal to the brand or the community. All types of members, occasional, consistent, and extreme, recommended rather the community than the brand to others. All of them mentioned the community experience itself, when telling others, not part of the community, about the activities and events. Findings from literature were confirmed as the results showed that the stronger the emotional attachment towards the community, the higher the possibility that positive word-of-mouth is spread about the brand community by the member (Dick & Basu 1994; McAlexander, Schouten & Koenig, 2002). Additionally, consistent and extreme members, who are more committed to the community, also recommended the latest products to other members and therefore expressed brand loyalty as well. This is in line with McAlexander, Schouten and Koenig (2002), who state that community commitment positively affects brand loyalty. Moreover, by talking about the products and sharing experiences the community feeling strengthens as well (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001).

The more dedicated and emotionally attached an individual feels towards the community, the higher the possibility that this member spreads the word about the brand community (Dick & Basu 1994; McAlexander, Schouten & Koenig, 2002).

The importance of building community loyalty to strengthen brand loyalty was identified as a main finding of the study. Community loyalty acts as a moderator, since it affects and strengthens the relationship between attitudinal loyalty and brand loyalty. This re-emphasises the brand community triad introduced by Muniz and

O'Guinn (2001) and highlights their finding that members feel a connection to the brand but an even stronger connection to other members.

Another noteworthy finding was that the relation between community loyalty and brand loyalty is driven by joint experience. The positive experiences arise due to a consciousness of a kind or a we-feeling (Gusfield, 1978; Muniz & O'Guinn 2001) as well as the actual community activities undertaken, like regular workouts and events amongst other. However, the community activities and therefore the experiences always evolve around the brand and consequently strengthen brand loyalty as well. Therefore, even if the brand is not the main focus of a community, it is always the core, the reason why the community exists.

'Joint consumption connects', a statement which highlights that brand communities have an impact on both, brand loyalty and loyalty to the community members. The degree of loyalty depends on the level of commitment to the community, meaning that the consumers' loyalty extends with rising commitment from community loyalty to brand loyalty. Since communities create joint experiences, they are an efficient tool to strengthen brand loyalty.

### ***Limitations***

One of the limitations of this paper can be attributed to the scope of the research. First, only three sports brand communities formed part of the study and second, only ten participants were interviewed limiting the generalisability of results.

Furthermore, the results are based on a single point in time and are thereby not accounting for the changing behaviour of community members over time. By carrying out a study over a longer period the results could potentially be improved. Consumers could be interviewed before joining a community, after the first month of being a member, and lastly, after being part of the community for several months.

Another limitation of the research derives from the vast scope and complexity of the loyalty concept, which only allowed for a partial analysis of specific loyalty dimensions and behaviours. Although several distinct community activities were identified and analysed, clear distinctions between the loyalty dimensions could not always be made.

### ***Theoretical Contribution***

This paper contributes the first research into the effect of brand community actions on members' loyalty behaviours. The research focuses on sports brands, highlighting the importance of joint experience in this industry. The main findings are summarised in a theoretical framework (figure 2), illustrating the dimensions and antecedents of brand loyalty within the context of sports brand communities. Additionally, the phenomena of joint experience and consumption as well as the resulting moderating role of community loyalty are analysed and depicted. The framework creates a solid foundation to understand how brand loyalty can be built by implementing specific community activities.

### ***Future Research***

The scope for future research opportunities is vast, given the increasing popularity and importance of sports brand communities. One area of future research could focus on how offline communities spread and extend into online communities. Understanding this process would help guide brand managers to amalgamate both communities.

During the interviews, a common theme was that brands should not be the focus of the community. Therefore, research could be conducted to find out the degree of brand visibility still being accepted within the community without impacting loyalty behaviour negatively.

Lastly, future research contributions may be done by expanding the study into the fields of perception and identification, as

indications for a connection between the topics could be found.

### ***Implications for Brand Managers***

The paper presents a broad framework which can be used and developed by brand managers in order to understand how community activities influence loyalty behaviour and therefore create an added value for the brand.

Brand managers should be aware that the community needs to be set up in a consistent manner to align with the brand identity. An area of high importance is that the community only evolves around the brand but focuses on the joint experience, so that members do not feel pressured to purchase the brand's products.

The study suggests that the following activities should be done to help increase loyalty behaviour; organise regular meetings and events, offer product trials, choose the location and atmosphere strategically, and provide access to experienced trainers. By giving out free products, brands can lower the threshold to buy and incentivise to repurchase.

### ***Conclusion***

It can be concluded that the brand communities of Nike, Adidas and Lululemon illustrate the positive effects of implementing and managing brand communities on loyalty behaviour. The qualitative research conducted found that communities add value to a brand and the consumers by creating emotional bonds and trust through joint experiences. Community activities including regular workouts, events, free product and trials, and experienced trainers help to create emotional connections between consumers and consumers, as well as, consumers and the brand. This was identified to lead to loyalty behaviours, shown through repurchase behaviour, reduced switching intentions and positive word-of-mouth.

As mentioned, members start to connect an experience to the brand through the community activities and create a strong bond with other members, leading to a loyalty to the community in first place. However, as all activities evolve around the brand, the loyalty is also directed to the brand. Depending on the degree of the members' commitment, the strength of brand loyalty varies. Ultimately, it can be highlighted that 'joint consumption connects', therefore loyalty towards the community drives brand loyalty, so that overall, brand communities lead to loyalty towards both, the brand and the community.

The concept of a well implemented and managed brand community can have a number of positive outcomes for the brand and the community members. Moreover, brand communities provide content for consumers to talk about and set the brand apart from competition. Companies should therefore focus on creating unique experiences between the consumers and the brands. However, as brand communities increase in popularity, for communities to stand apart, they need to inspire and be developed consistently.

All in all, it can be argued that for the sports brands Nike, Adidas and Lululemon brand communities serve as an enhancement for building brand loyalty, *which shows how brand communities, if well managed, have the power to energise sports brands.*

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