Brand Community

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This article introduces the idea of brand community. A brand community is a specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relations among admirers of a brand. Grounded in both classic and contemporary sociology and consumer behavior, this article uses ethnographic and computer mediated environment data to explore the characteristics, processes, and particularities of three brand communities (those centered on Ford Bronco, Macintosh, and Saab). These brand communities exhibit three traditional markers of community: shared consciousness, rituals and traditions, and a sense of moral responsibility. The commercial and mass-mediated ethos in which these communities are situated affects their character and structure and gives rise to their particularities. Implications for branding, sociological theories of community, and consumer behavior are offered.

Community is a core construct in social thought. Its intellectual history is lengthy and abundant. Community was a prominent concern of the great social theorists, scientists, and philosophers of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (e.g., Dewey 1927; Durkheim [1893] 1933; Freud 1928; Kant [1781] 1996; Marx [1867] 1946; Nietzsche [1886] 1990; Park 1938; Royce 1969; Simmel [1903] 1964; Weber [1922] 1978; Wirth 1938), and has continued to be so among contemporary contributors (e.g., Bellah et al. 1985; Boorstin 1973; Etzioni 1993; Fischer 1975; Lasch 1991; Maffesoli 1996; Merritt 1966; Putnam 1995, 2000; Wellman 1979). In fact, for a century and a half it has been a staple of political, religious, scholarly, and popular discourse (Hummon 1990). This discourse is principally about community's condition and fate in the wake of modernity, market capitalism, and consumer culture. Yet despite its widely acknowledged significance, particularly in the context of consumption, community has rarely been mentioned in consumer behavior. This article seeks to address this peculiar absence.

We introduce the idea of brand community. A brand community is a specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relationships among admirers of a brand. It is specialized because at its center is a branded good or service. Like other communities, it is marked by a shared consciousness, rituals and traditions, and a sense of moral responsibility. Each of these qualities is, however, situated within a commercial and mass-mediated ethos, and has its own particular expression. Brand communities are participants in the brand's larger social construction and play a vital role in the brand's ultimate legacy.

To best reveal the idea of brand community, we first offer a very brief discussion of the historical, theoretical, and philosophical context in which it is set. Then we present data that we believe evidence brand community and some of its key facets. Finally, we note how it relates to previous conceptualizations of community.

COMMUNITY

The concept of community is historically situated in critiques of modernity. Early sociologists saw advancing nineteenth-century modernity not just challenging community, but destroying it. The very idea of society was defined largely in opposition to community, and throughout much of their history these two terms were essentially antonyms. Ferdinand Tonnies's 1887 classic, *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft* (roughly, *Community and Society*), formally distinguished between the customary, familial, emotional rural

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community and the mechanical, contractual, individualistic, rational urban society. The essential notion underlying this discourse was that something more natural and thus real (community) was being replaced by a more depersonalized, mass produced, and less grounded type of human experience (modern society). The received view was that anomie, dislocation, and disconnectedness were the result of modernity's fatal assault on the premodern community. Throughout the twentieth century and to this day, the legacy of community lost has informed, infused, and perhaps infected social thought. It is a grand narrative of the modern period, and one in which consumption plays a very significant role.

Commerce, the great engine of modernity, and advancing consumer culture are strongly implicated in this modernist tale of woe (Lasch 1991). The emerging consumer culture was one in which branded goods replaced unmarked commodities, where mass advertising replaced personal selling, and where the individual consumer replaced the communal citizen. The growing centrality of the individual consumer and his or her growing materialistic desires were (and are) said to be part and parcel of the loss of community. This belief pervades the critique of consumer culture to this day. Not incidentally, branded products were ubiquitous and primary symbols of this purported seismic shift in human consciousness and the resultant (alleged) loss of community (Leiss, Kline, and Jhally 1990; Marchand 1985). The brand, therefore, should have a central and prominent place in the discourse of modernity, community, and society.

Core Community Commonalities

While there are many definitions of community, a review of the sociology literature reveals at least three core components or markers of community, as well as the critical notion of imagined community (Anderson 1983). The first and most important element of community is what Gusfield (1978) refers to as consciousness of kind. Consciousness of kind is the intrinsic connection that members feel toward one another, and the collective sense of difference from others not in the community. Consciousness of kind is shared consciousness, a way of thinking about things that is more than shared attitudes or perceived similarity. It is a shared knowing of belonging (Weber [1922] 1978). The second indicator of community is the presence of shared rituals and traditions. Rituals and traditions perpetuate the community's shared history, culture, and consciousness. Rituals "serve to contain the drift of meanings; . . . [they] are conventions that set up visible public definitions" (Douglas and Ishwerwood 1979, p. 65) and social solidarity (Durkheim [1915] 1965). Traditions are sets of "social practices which seek to celebrate and inculcate certain behavioral norms and values" (Marshall 1994, p. 537). The third marker of community is a sense of moral responsibility, which is a felt sense of duty or obligation to the community as a whole, and to its individual members. This sense of moral responsibility is what produces, in times of threat to the community, collective action.

It is also critical to note that communities are no longer restricted by geography. Initially, community was thought of as a place, typically rural. However, the community notion soon overflowed those restrictions and spilled out into a much broader field of meaning. In much the same way that modernity was more than the rate of mechanical and scientific advancement, community became more than a place. It became a common understanding of a shared identity. Railroads, telegraphs, magazines, telephones, and national commerce fractured narrow notions of community and social consciousness (Carey 1989; Durkheim [1915] 1965; McLuhan 1964; Ong 1982). In fact, throughout the twentieth century the notion of community continued to widen (Wilson 1990), due largely to new communication technologies' ability to unite geographically dispersed individuals with a commonality of purpose and identity.

The fact that the rise of modern marketing, consumer culture, and the mass media follows near identical developmental trajectories is important here. A century ago, the rise of modern communications made modern marketing possible. Newspapers and magazines, then radio and television, enabled marketers to project brands into national consciousness. In large degree, brands transcend geography because media transcend geography. In fact, most of the rethinking of community has had to do with the rise of mass media. Mass media demonstrated that virtually all of the hallmarks of geographic community could be simulated, if not wholly or substantially replicated, in a mass-mediated world. The changes in computer-mediated communication currently under way are no different in this regard (Fischer, Bristor, and Gainer 1996; Jones 1995; Rheingold 1993).

In reality, many (perhaps most) contemporary communities must be imagined (Anderson 1983; Gellner 1983). Anderson (1983) suggests that all communities larger than small villages are, to some extent, sustained by notions of imagined, understood others. Even in a premodern context, distant peoples were united through the communal nature of shared religions such as Roman Catholicism. But with the rise of mass media, community is spread and reproduced very efficiently. This allows community members to possess a well-developed sense of vast unmet fellow community members, to imagine them. So, for most social theorists, but not all, community is no longer restricted to geographic copresence of members. For us, the concept of community is much larger than place. It is as Bender (1978, p. 145) defined it: "a network of social relations marked by mutuality and emotional bonds." This conceptualization is consistent with a social network analytic perspective of community (Granovetter 1973; Oliver 1988; Wellman 1979; Wellman and Wortley 1990), which stresses the functioning of primary ties over notions of local solidarity. Such an approach has also been referred to as a community-liberated perspective, with community being liberated from geography (Wellman 1979), due largely to the presence of inexpensive and accessible communication.

Consumption Communities

The idea of communal consumption is not new at all. Community members placing special emphasis on some type of consumption (e.g., food, drink, gifts) as part of a celebration, ritual, or tradition is the subject of considerable scholarship, as well as common lived experience. In consumer behavior, McGrath, Sherry, and Heisley (1993) documented the existence of a periodic community in a farmer's market. This communal site existed only during the Saturday mornings in which the market was in business, and united participants in the creation and consumption of an old-fashioned market experience (McGrath et al. 1993). Celsi, Rose, and Leigh (1993) noted that skydivers share a powerful communal bond that greatly affects their participation in this activity. McAlexander and Schouten (1998) report on brandfests of both Harley Davidson and Jeep that have communal elements. Yet, the study of communal consumption in which members are not physically proximal to one another is almost nonexistent, particularly when the communal center is a mass-produced branded good.

Schouten and McAlexander's (1995) ethnography of new bikers is something of an exception in that the authors stake out new ground in the form of a subculture of consumption, involving Harley Davidson motorcycle riders. These researchers demonstrate how Harley Davidson riders derive an important part of their understanding of the brand from the connection they share with one another. Yet, this understanding goes much further, to an actual way of life, or what they properly call subculture. This subculture has certain similarities with brand communities (e.g., shared ethos, acculturation patterns, status hierarchies), but important differences as well. It is not representative of the brand communities we describe below. For one, the Harley Davidson consumption subculture is characterized as having "outsider status" (Schouten and McAlexander 1995, p. 58), a significant degree of marginality, and an outlaw culture. Schouten and McAlexander (1995, p. 50) describe the Harley Davidson brand as being so powerful as to be "in effect, a religious icon, around which an entire ideology of consumption is articulated." While Schouten and McAlexander (1995) may well be describing a brand community, it is arguably peculiar in these aspects. In fact, this subculture is something considerably more unusual than the brand communities we describe. These same authors also employ a structuralist analysis that describes a brand with a socially fixed meaning (Holt 1997). We, however, see brand communities having an active interpretive function, with brand meaning being socially negotiated, rather than delivered unaltered and in toto from context to context, consumer to consumer. Finally, as Holt (1997, p. 346) notes, Schouten and McAlexander (1995) "claim that the consumption of Harley-Davidson motorcycles is unrelated to social collectives," and tend to minimize collective identities in favor of the transformation of self. While their more individual-centered approach is entirely consistent with the theoretical foundations on which they rest their work, we prefer a more social constructionist perspective.

Brand communities are not the same as marginal subcultures either. Hebdige (1979) explains that subcultures use the symbols that the larger culture defines in ways that are inconsistent with the meanings attached to these goods by the majority. For example, punk rockers took images from a variety of other subcultural sources and recombined them to effect an identity that stood in opposition to a majority culture. The meanings that subcultures create stand in opposition or indifference to the accepted meanings of the majority. Brand communities do not typically reject aspects of the surrounding culture's ideology. They embrace them.

Two other bodies of literature are particularly relevant to this research. First is work on urban neighborhoods, particularly Jannowitz's concept of communities of limited liability (Jannowitz 1952). Urban neighborhoods represent a relatively new form of community. They are communities bound together most frequently by shared interests, such as securing more resources like police, transit, and educational support. Beyond this, members share few ties. Communities of limited liability are intentional, voluntary, and partial in the level of involvement they engender (Hunter and Suttles 1972; Jannowitz 1952). Community commitment is narrowly defined. This is similar to brand communities, which are united predominantly by their common interest in a brand. Also, neighborhoods, like brand communities, are defined in contradistinction to one another. Hunter and Suttles (1972, p. 51) note that "residential groups gain their identity by their most apparent differences from one another," much the same way that brands are defined by differentiation. So, like other communities, brand communities are premised on differentiation, and also appear to be communities of limited liability.

Also relevant is recent work on neo-tribalism. Rooted in the work of Maffesoli (1996), neo-tribalists argue that we are actually experiencing a decline in individualism, a claim that runs counter to a century-and-a-half tradition of asserting just the opposite. The new tribalists say that we are now experiencing the reaggregation of hyperindividualist society in the form of "heterogeneous fragments, the remainders of mass consumption society" (Shields 1996, p. x). These neo-tribes are "characterized by fluidity, occasional gatherings and dispersal" (Maffesoli 1996, p. 76). They are thus not tribes in the strict anthropological sense, but are spoken of in terms of diffuse unions, and informed by the sociological notion of sociality, or a quality of diffuse, ephemeral, multiplicatus social aggregation. They form, they disperse, they re-form as something else, reflecting the constantly shifting identities of postmodern consumers. Building on Maffesoli (1996), and extending more into consumption realms, Cova (1997, p. 300) describes member of these neo-tribes as unbound to physical co-presence, but exhibiting "a local sense of identification, religiosity, syncretism, group narcissism." Extremely relevant for our consideration is the fact that one of the many things that could hold these tribes together is consumption practice.

While these literatures are relevant and valuable, we advance our own notions as well (Muniz and O'Guinn 1995).

For one, neo-tribes tend to be conceived as interpersonal and local. We see brand communities as liberated (Wellman 1979) from geography and informed by a mass-mediated sensibility (McLuhan 1964; Ong 1982) in which the local and the mass converge (O'Guinn and Shrum 1997). We also see brand communities as explicitly commercial. Moreover, this is not an occult or naive commercialism, but one that exists in full view, with communal self-awareness and self-reflexivity. We also see brand communities as less ephemeral and their members as more committed than the ones described by Cova (1997) or Maffesoli (1996). Brand communities can be relatively stable groupings, with relatively strong (but rarely extreme) degrees of commitment. Their moral responsibility may be a limited and subtle one, but it is a nontrivial one (Maffesoli 1996). While drawing important distinctions about whether or not hyperindividualism is an end-state or whether it is the beginning of a new era of social linking, virtually all communal theoretical formulations assume a homeless mind (Berger, Berger, and Kellner 1974) of one sort or another. We theorize that late twentieth-century consumers are very aware of the commercial milieu in which they live, and are more comfortable in their level of grounding than modernist tradition has been willing to grant. The postmodern consumer is in fact quite self-aware and self-reflexive about issues of authenticity and identity. Like Elliott (1998), we believe that attempts to build community through consumption practices are more than mere compensatory acts. We further hold that it is no longer requisite (if it ever was) to believe that members of society are of necessity more lost or homeless in their consciousness simply because the social organizing objects in question happen to be commercial. We believe it is time to adopt a theoretical stance more appropriate to the beginning of the twenty-first century than to the end of the nineteenth.

So from this theoretical perspective, brand communities may very well exist. We argue that brand communities are in fact legitimate forms of community, but communities of a particular stripe, and of their time. These communities may form around any brand, but are probably most likely to form around brands with a strong image, a rich and lengthy history, and threatening competition. Also, things that are publicly consumed may stand a better chance of producing communities than those consumed in private. The communities that form around brands need not be marginal, or stand in opposition to mainstream culture. They need not be plagued by false or homeless consciousness. Such communities, due to the ubiquitous nature of brands, may transcend geography and may include a multitude of consumer members. These social groups may be fairly stable and committed to both the brand and the group. They would be explicitly commercial and possess a mass-media sensibility. This very image of a large, geographically dispersed community, mass mediated and commercial in nature, significantly joins larger questions of social theory: that is, how will community be manifest in (post)modern times? Is community really dead, or could it actually flourish on the very ground on which consumer culture formed and fomented? What is the nature of this new community?

THE STUDY

The study had four major objectives: (1) to advance the theoretical notion of brand community; (2) to search for evidence of its existence; (3) to discover some of the manners, mechanisms, and particularities of brand communities; and (4) to situate these findings within the broader sociological, media, and consumer literatures. To these ends, our study had two phases: (1) a face-to-face component conducted in Fairlawn and surrounding environs, and (2) a phase conducted entirely in environments of computer-mediated communication.

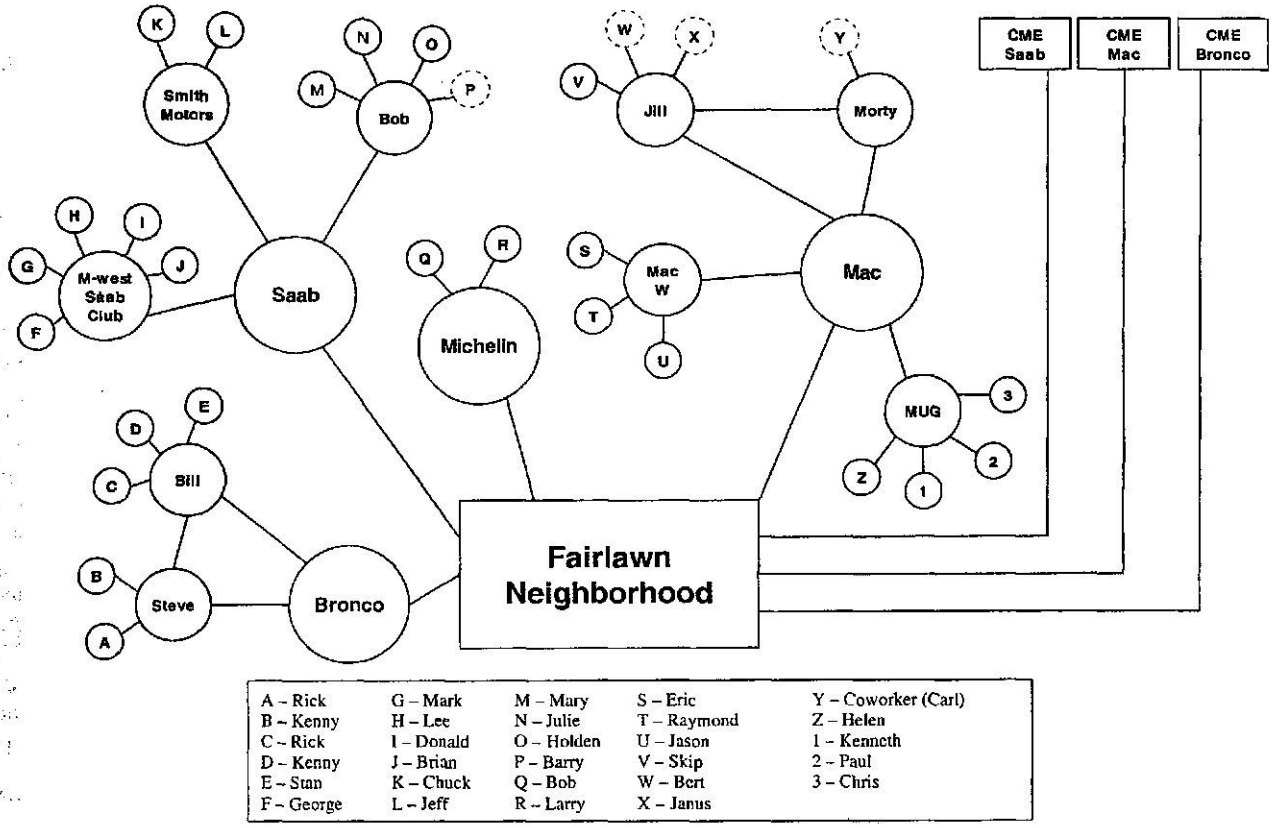
The general strategy was to begin at the most local level, a neighborhood, where the odds of seeing brand community would be lowest but the contextualized behavior would be the most natural. In this way it was a conservative sampling approach. In order to have a reasonable understanding of the brand communities, it is necessary to observe their enactment in everyday life. With this purpose, the research began with the study of four families from one neighborhood (Fairlawn) in a small Midwestern town, Bloomingdale (pop. 115,000). Fairlawn was chosen largely for convenience. In it we hoped to see evidence of extant brand communities within the everyday context of life in a medium-sized Midwestern town. Having discovered evidence of a few brand community members within Fairlawn, we then branched outward to individual members of those same brand communities who live outside the Fairlawn neighborhood, as well as to area collectives of brand community members such as users' groups, and important local brand communal sites such as dealerships (see Fig. 1). In these enclaves and at these sites, community interaction is still predominantly (but not exclusively) face-to-face. Also, brand communities discovered in Fairlawn were investigated on the World Wide Web, where neither interaction nor community was face-to-face or geographically bound.

Fairlawn and Vicinity

Fairlawn is a small neighborhood (14 homes). Its boundaries are reasonably uncontested and consensual. The neighborhood includes two families with grade school and high school aged children but is primarily composed of families in which either there were no children or the children have already left home. The heads of these families tend to be successful and somewhat advanced in their careers, most having achieved management status or its equivalent. Fairlawn is located adjacent to a local country club, but on the "poorer side of the street." Consequently, there are some large (>3,000 square feet) and well-maintained homes. However, the types of houses encountered vary, a fact noted by most informants from this neighborhood. Home prices range from $85,000 to $530,000. Most of the monied members of the neighborhood consider themselves "old Bloomingdale," but roughly a third of the neighborhood is made up

FIGURE 1

SAMPLING MAP



NOTE.—Large circles represent brand communities encountered in Fairlawn, medium circles represent important community focal sites or persons, small solid circles represent informants contacted via those focal sites or persons, small broken circles represent community members connected to those focal sites or persons who were not contacted, and small squares represent brand communities investigated in computer mediated environments.

of younger but affluent members who have lived in the town less than 15 years. There is one rental home, the occupants of which are typically referred to not by name, but as "the renters." Traveling more than three blocks in three directions from this neighborhood, one encounters a wider variety of homes, many being lower priced. To the west is the "really expensive neighborhood." Fairlawn is a terminal neighborhood—no members discussed moving to a more desirable location. Quite the opposite, most express contentment with the neighborhood, including some sentiment of having "made it" by living in such a place. Members of the participating households know many of their neighbors and are friendly with them, but only a few consider themselves close to any.

Social contacts with members of two Fairlawn households were used to gain entry and cooperation from other members of the neighborhood. Four total households participated for two to six months of data collection each. Data collection proceeded for 12 months. Members of the participating households were interviewed two to four times per month. Within households, participation was near complete. Only one member of one household was never interviewed despite repeated attempts. The Appendix describes the four households in more detail. Interviews with each household were recorded via interviewer notes. Some interviews were tape-recorded once a firm rapport had been developed between the researcher and informant. Field notes were typed immediately following the interviews. Other observations and interpretations were also entered at this time. This phase yielded over 100 hours of interview and observational data.

Questions dealt with the respondents' general consumption habits, as well as their work, family, neighborhood, and leisure activities, their interests and what was important to them. The researcher attempted to become familiar with the daily existence of the informants. A good amount of personal background and history were gained from the informants over the course of the inquiry. This allowed the findings to be judged in the context of the informant's particular

life circumstances, and how they understood these circumstances.

Brand community members in the Fairlawn neighborhood identified other brand community members outside Fairlawn, with whom they enjoyed face-to-face relationships. Often, the relationships based on the brand complemented other shared interests with the individual and served as the basis for wider relationships. Most of these informants lived within 20 miles of Fairlawn.

Critical Community Sites and Enclaves

Also identified in the Fairlawn data were local brand community collectives (e.g., local users' groups, clubs) and communal gathering sites. Two brand communities encountered in Fairlawn—Saab cars and Macintosh computers—were further explored at four area sites and collectives (see Fig. 1). These two brand communities were chosen as they appeared to be particularly robust examples. Brand community members were interviewed individually and in groups.

Beyond individual brand community members identified by Fairlawn residents, members of the Apple Macintosh brand community were approached via two local users' groups devoted to Macintoshes: the MacUsers' Group and MacWarriors. The first author attended meetings of both of these groups to secure interviews with individual members, to ask questions in a group setting, and to observe group dynamics. Researcher notes were taken at the meetings.

The MacUsers' Group (MUG) began as a face-to-face club, but had transformed itself into a computer-mediated group. Members now only physically get together once a month to have lunch; the remainder of community interaction is on-line. The first author attended MUG meetings to observe, ask questions in a group setting, and recruit informants for individual interviews. Most of the members of this club were older and had been working in their current line of work for over 10 years (involving computers to a substantial degree: programming, data management, publishing). Most were long-time devotees of Macintosh and Apple computers. The MacWarriors (MW) club provided another assortment of informants with varying brand and community histories. Members of MW were undergraduates at the local university. The MWs met once a week during the spring and fall semesters. Members were very active, and very "into their Macs." Most were engaged in tasks for the club, such as creating pieces of software or patches for the Macintosh. The first author attended meetings of this club to observe, ask questions in a group setting, and to recruit informants for individual interviews.

In the case of Saab, we visited Smith Motors, the local Saab dealer, and Midwest Saab, an area Saab club. Smith Motors was where Bloomingdale Saab community members had their cars serviced. A good deal of observational data were collected by both researchers at this site. Five visits included conversations with customers, mechanics, and the owner. Interviews were conducted in the showroom and shop waiting room, and once while standing over an open hood in the shop area. The owner, Frank Smith, explained the researcher's presence to customers, undoubtedly making participation less threatening. In addition, the first author sat in on meetings of the Midwest Saab club to observe, to conduct interviews at group and individual levels, and to recruit informants for more in-depth interviews. Individual interviews with club members were also conducted via telephone. This multicontext approach provided a rich assortment of informants with varying brand and community histories. Interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed for analysis.

Computer-Mediated Environments

World Wide Web pages devoted to Saab, Macintosh, and Bronco were downloaded and analyzed. Web pages selected for analysis were limited to pages created by individual users and clubs (i.e., no commercial brand sites were included). These Web pages were often quite elaborate and included text, pictures, and sound. Several of the pages were extensive, with over 30 pages of content. These pages were continually updated and modified, suggesting their importance in these consumers' day-to-day lives. Computer-mediated communication was an important facet of these communities. For example, one meeting of the Saab club was devoted to Saab resources on the World Wide Web. A guided tour was provided by one club member for those less experienced with the Web. Most of the sites visited were noncommercial sites developed by individual users or clubs, and included several that the researcher downloaded for analysis. Members enjoyed these sites, and they produced a great deal of discussion. A similar tour was provided at a meeting of the MacWarriors. These WWW tours represented an interesting melding of face-to-face and virtual community, all situated within the very widely accessible and familiar community ethos of mass-marketed brands.

Web pages were identified and collected in multiple ways to insure that a large enough variety of themes would be encountered. First, search engines such as Yahoo (www.yahoo.com) and HotBot (www.hotbot.com) were used. Keywords used included the brand and its various models (e.g., Saab 900, 9000). Over 50 individual sites and over 300 pages of Web data were analyzed. Eligible sites were also identified through links contained in the original pages downloaded in the first step, as well as from those visited in the user groups.

Analysis of the interview, observational, and CMC data was an iterative process of transcribing, interpreting, pursuing new questions and paths, collecting additional data, and challenging, rejecting, affirming, and refining emerging themes until the interpretations sufficiently stood the weight of the data. Field notes were typed as soon as each interview and observation was completed. Preliminary interpretations were generated and included in the notes at this time. Interpretations from earlier interviews guided subsequent interviews and interpretations. Data were read and reread, each time challenging existing interpretations. After many iterations, and refitting of interpretations to data, we believe

we achieved sufficient interpretive convergence. The data are summarized in Table 1.

The first author conducted the majority of the fieldwork, while both authors were actively involved in the interpretation of field notes and other data. It should also be realized that the second author was also an informant. His brand community membership was advantageous as it provided an important and unique perspective. The first author was a nonparticipant observer. These two different perspectives provided important and beneficial interpretive perspective and tension (Denzin 1998).

FINDINGS: MARKERS AND MECHANISMS

Our findings will be discussed in terms of the three traditional markers of community and the particularities of brand communities. In Fairlawn and beyond there is evidence of brand community. The brand communities are social entities that reflect the situated embeddedness of brands in the day-to-day lives of consumers and the ways in which brands connect consumer to brand, and consumer to consumer. Three essential markers of community (consciousness of kind, rituals and traditions, and moral responsibility) are present, but differences in their expression make brand communities something significant in their own right.

In our Fairlawn data, obvious examples of brand communities are not common, but neither are they rare. This is as expected. Five of the nine household informants are part of at least one brand community; others share less communal brand-based affiliations. Some brands are particularly marked by community, with Saab, Apple Macintosh, and Ford Bronco being the most prominent examples. Evidence of additional brand communities is found in Fairlawn: Michelin tires, Zippo lighters, Coca-Cola, *Star Trek*, and the *X-Files*. Brand community members possess a fairly well-developed understanding of their feelings toward the brand and their connection to other users. Members know it isn't the most important thing in their lives—not even close—but neither is it trivial. They know they share a social bond around a branded, mass-produced commodity, and believe it is reasonable to do so. They do not wish to be confused with indiscriminate zealots who are "weird nuts" occupying marginal positions.

Consciousness of Kind

The most important element of community is consciousness of kind, and it is evident in the brand communities encountered in this research. Members share what Bender (1978) describes as "we-ness." Members feel an important connection to the brand, but more importantly, they feel a stronger connection toward one another. Members feel that they "sort of know each other" at some level, even if they have never met. This triangular, rather than dyadic, social constellation is a central facet of brand community and echoes Cova's (1997, p. 307) assertion that "the link is more important than the thing."

TABLE 1

DATA COLLECTION SUMMARY

Informant name/ location	No. of interviews	Hours of interview
Fairlawn:		
Bill	3	6
Bob	12	25
Ella	4	8
Jill	11	20
Kathleen	5	11
Morty	8	16
Sam	4	8
Steve	5	7
Victoria	5	9
Total:		110
Community sites (Saab):		
George	3	4
Mark	3	4
Lee	2	2
Donald	2	2
Brian	2	2
Chuck	2	3
Jeff	1	2
Mary	3	4
Julie	2	3
Holden	1	1
Total		27
Macintosh:		
Eric	3	3
Raymond	2	2
Jason	2	2
Helen	2	2
Kenneth	2	1
Paul	2	2
Chris	2	1
Total		13
Community sites:		
Smith Motors	12	25
MW Saab Club	2	8
MUG	2	4
MacWarriors	2	5
Total		42
Total hours, interview and observation data		192

Members also frequently note a critical demarcation between users of their brand and users of other brands. There is some important quality, not always easily verbalized, that sets them apart from others and makes them similar to one another. Such a demarcation usually includes a reference to brand users being "different" or "special" in comparison to users of other brands. Such comments are common among brand community members and the Web pages these community members create. One Saab Web page describes itself

as being "made by a Saaber for other Saaber's . . . to enjoy." Others include references to "Saab spirit," or "the cult of Macintosh," or note that a Mac site was, like the brand, "for the rest of us." Such sentiments illustrate consciousness of kind in their recognition of a distinct social category (e.g., Saabers, Mac people). In this way, brand communities are just like any other community. But the shared consciousness of brand communities is also informed by an explicitly commercial and competitive marketplace ethos (e.g., Coke vs. Pepsi).

The consciousness of kind found in brand communities transcends geographic boundaries. This is apparent in observation at community collectives, as well as in analysis of Web pages. Brand communities are largely imagined communities (Anderson 1983). Members feel part of a large, unmet, but easily imagined community. The following field notes from a Saab club meeting reveal how the far-flung and place-liberated nature of brand communities is not only acknowledged but sometimes celebrated.

> The club president proudly shows a letter (postal) he received from a sixteen-year-old Italian boy who is a big fan of Saab, despite the fact that he doesn't drive yet. He got the club's address from their web page. The letter says that he is a fan of pre-changed 900, especially liking the '83 and '84 3-door models. He is seeking pictures of these cars that the club members might own. This letter is big news at the meeting and is shown to everyone over the course of the evening.

For members of this club, this incident reinforces the understanding that there are other members of the community, just like them, in other far away places. This incident also demonstrates the importance of computer-mediated communication such as the World Wide Web in this context. Most of the user-created Web pages include a registry or guest book where visitors can leave their name, address, and some brief comments for the page creator and others to view. The registries are often extensive, with hundreds of names from distant reaches of the globe. Viewing the registries, members can see just how far-reaching the boundaries of the community are.

Legitimacy. Legitimacy is a process whereby members of the community differentiate between true members of the community and those who are not, or who occupy a more marginal space. In the context of brands this is demonstrated by "really knowing" the brand as opposed to using the brand for the "wrong reasons." The wrong reasons are typically revealed by failing to fully appreciate the culture, history, rituals, traditions, and symbols of the community. Brand communities are generally open social organizations in that they do not deny membership, but like most communities they do have status hierarchies. Ostensibly, anyone who is devoted to the brand can be a member of the community, regardless of ownership. However, the devotion to the brand must be sincere and for the right reasons. Differentiating between those who are true believers in the brand, and those who are merely opportunistic is a common concern voiced by brand community members.

Many Saab community members view with skepticism the "new" drivers being attracted to the Saab brand. Moreover, they feel comfortable extending these characterizations to unmet others. The following is illustrative:

> *Donald:* During the 80's the yuppie attitude was really talked about quite a bit. A lot of people actually purchased the cars who I feel shouldn't have purchased them. There's a certain type of owner who is proper for the car and people who buy one just because it's something that they really don't have intentions of keeping for a long time.

According to Donald, to properly appreciate the car it is necessary to appreciate the long-term nature of the car—the fact that many Saabs have well over one hundred thousand miles on them. Donald disapproves of those who would buy the brand with little intention of making a long-term commitment (see Fournier 1998). Donald goes on to note that during the eighties, Saab was embraced by "the yuppies," appropriately lampooned in a poster as "SNAAB"s. This yuppie embrace bothers him because this group is attracted to the car for the wrong reason: trendiness.

Similarly, consider the following comment by Bill of Fairlawn (student, 17) concerning Ford Bronco.

> *R:* Who else drives Broncos at Buchannan High School?
>
> *Bill:* Who else drives Broncos? Guys like myself and guys who like engines. And preppy guys who drive them because they are in right now. My Bronco won't be popular with them [because it's not new], but I don't care.

Here, Bill recognizes a strong similarity between himself and other Bronco drivers, "guys like myself and guys who like engines." He has a well-developed understanding of what other Bronco community members are like, but he also recognizes others who drive Broncos for the wrong reasons—"because they are in right now." Bill feels that his restored 1973 Bronco will not be appreciated by them because they do not appreciate the appropriate aspect of these vehicles. They are only concerned with the trendiness of the current models. The tension between old and new, "real" and "faux" members is an important one in this brand sociology, and is entirely consistent with what one sees in traditional community interactions (e.g., Cornfield and Hodson 1993). This also creates a potential problem for low-share brands, where a small but extremely loyal group of consumers desires to keep the infidels out. Here, community asserts a tension against the market, against hegemony, and against the growth of the brand. Brand community members may define success quite differently than does the marketer.

Legitimacy is not found in all of the brands that support community. For example, it is not found in the Macintosh community. No Mac users complain about those who are using the brand for the wrong reasons. We offer four possibilities as to why this is the case. First, Macintoshes were not very trendy at the time these data were collected. Second, it could be a consequence of necessity. Macintosh has a very low market share, and community members express a great deal of concern about its possible disappearance from the

marketplace altogether. The community can not stand to lose many more members, legitimate or not. So, perhaps when a brand's very existence is threatened, the right-reason test may not be quite so severe. The third possibility is that a test of legitimacy would violate the Mac community's democratic ethos. If the Mac community is anything, according to its members, it is democratic. Fourth, because the Mac community is the most cohesive of the three, there may simply be no room for tests of legitimacy. Mac community members have a strong moral certainty, feeling that they are doing the right thing by resisting the Microsoft tide. It was, at the time of data collection, the most threatened of the three brands.

Oppositional Brand Loyalty. Oppositional brand loyalty is another social process involved in perpetuating consciousness of kind. Through opposition to competing brands, brand community members derive an important aspect of their community experience, as well as an important component of the meaning of the brand. This serves to delineate what the brand is not, and who the brand community members are not. Similarly, Englis and Solomon (1997) and Hogg and Savolainen (1997) reported that consumers use brand choices to mark both their inclusion and exclusion from various lifestyles. Wilk (1996) found that consumers in Belize defined themselves more by the products and objects they avoided than those they sought. It is also consistent with the findings in urban sociology in which neighborhoods are defined in opposition to one another (Hunter and Suttles 1972; Keller 1968) and Maffesoli's (1996) assertion of the significance of the other in community formation and maintenance.

Many members of the Macintosh brand community derived an important aspect of their community experience from their opposition to PCs, PC users, and PC software giant Microsoft. This opposition to Microsoft is an important source of unity among Macintosh brand community members. Evidence for this assertion comes from both the face-to-face data, as well as the computer-mediated communication data. The existence of a common enemy against whom to unite makes this brand community particularly strong. The threat from this enemy is made all the more real by the fact that it had succeeded in displacing the Macintosh and assimilating many former Macintosh users by appropriating aspects of the Macintosh operating system. It is standard for Web pages devoted to Macintosh to be quite extreme in their opposition to Microsoft. For example, one Macintosh page features an altered picture of Bill Gates (of Microsoft) that includes devil-style horns and is entitled "Save us from the Gates of Hell." Many Mac users comment on the wide market acceptance of Windows by noting that much of what makes Windows successful are things that it "stole" from the Mac. More than one Web page states that "Win95 = Mac 1984."

This opposition is also apparent in the understanding Macintosh community members have of the differences between Mac users and IBM users. Consider the following comment by Jill (academic, 40): "At that time, it was clear: IBM people were one way, wore suits and voted for Reagan, and Apple people were another, wore jeans and didn't vote for Reagan."

Jill feels that she understands what members of the larger, unmet community were like and how this difference manifests itself in terms of political ideology; IBM people are one way and Apple people are another. Even though Jill only knows a handful of Mac users, she is confident in her understanding of what they all are like. Moreover, she knows that these characteristics, a collective identity, set Mac users apart from users of IBM personal computers. Other Mac users, and their Web pages, illustrate similar understandings by stating that Mac people are more open-minded, and that it is this open-mindedness that leads them to choose a product that is not only different, but not favored by the mainstream. Mac community members again exhibit the characteristics of a threatened community: cohesion, trepidation, and outright anger at the competition. While enjoying, even reveling in their underdog status, but threatened by outright extinction, they can still not understand why the rest of the world does not appreciate what they have known for so long: the superiority of the Mac way of doing things. More particular to brand community, members fear abandonment by the commercial creator, Apple.

Similarly, Saab drivers share an opposition to Volvo. While not threatened by Volvo in the same way that Macintosh is threatened by PCs and Microsoft, Saabs are often confused with Volvos as both cars are manufactured in Sweden and both have reputations for safety. Saab drivers strongly resent this association and oppose the dullness of Volvos. Volvos are recognized as safe and well built by most members of the Saab brand community, but more importantly, Volvos are also seen as being dull and unattractive, as the following exchange with George (carpenter, 38) makes clear.

> *R:* Why do you like Saabs?
>
> *George:* They're the best car on the road next to a BMW, Mercedes, and Volvo.
>
> *R:* OK, why not drive one of them?
>
> *George:* BMW is relatively a thoroughbred, it's pricey to maintain, uh, Mercedes is way out of my price range, and Volvo because they're Volvos. They don't make tractors for nothing.

George's comments on Volvo are typical. The fact that Volvo also makes tractors seems to indicate something fundamental about the brand to George. George, like most members of the Saab brand community, recognizes safety as an important part of what Saab represents. But Saab has the benefit of also being fun, whereas Volvos are just safe and, by extension, dull. Saab, brand members are quick to point out, also makes airplanes and jet fighters, not tractors, like Volvo. Saab community Web pages echo this sentiment. In this case, oppositional brand loyalty distinguishes Saabs from the less exciting Volvo and reminds the community that safe need not be equated with dull and boxy. Still, as

opposed to the underdog ethos of Mac, Saab community members exhibit an understated stoicism, a type of optimism born of knowing that Saab will survive, and someday other like-minded people will come to discover Saab for themselves. Until then, they will be the ones who quietly understand what few others did, and that is OK with them.

Within the Bronco brand community, these oppositional tendencies are less evident and tend to be a little more vague. Rather than being directed at one brand in particular, opposition here is directed at other brands of 4 × 4s in general. Some of the Bronco Web pages take shots at other specific brands of 4 × 4s, but several also include such brands in their pages. For example, one Bronco page features pictures of the user's first 4 × 4, a Suzuki Fox, stuck in some deep snow with the caption, "The good thing about a stuck Suzuki is that it is easy to get it out, any thin rope and a 4 × 4 will do." Here, the user is suggesting that the Suzuki Fox is not as powerful as other 4 × 4s, including the user's 1974 Bronco, or is in fact not even a real 4 × 4 at all. Other pages simply note other brands in the category, but refrain from derisive comments. This difference in oppositional tendencies within the Bronco community suggests that other 4 × 4s did not diverge from the essence of Broncos as much as Volvo and PCs diverged from Saab and Macintosh, respectively. It also suggests that the Bronco brand community may be situated within a more generic consumption community of 4 × 4s. In this community, it appears that there are legitimate brands (Bronco, Jeep) and illegitimate brands (Suzuki Samurai) that differ in their strength, ruggedness, authenticity, and national origin. This may be more typical of communities of higher market share brands, where other legitimate and strong communities must be acknowledged, even honored, but still kept separate. The strongest communal distinction and derision is saved for the pretenders, the smaller Japanese faux-SUVs.

Such oppositional tendencies undoubtedly explain some of the strength of these communities. Communities unite to oppose threats, real or perceived. Many communities pull together and experience their tightest bonds during periods of distress or threat (Bensman and Vidich 1995; Hunter and Suttles 1972; Jannowitz 1952; Kephart and Zellner 1994). In Bensman and Vidich's (1995) study of neighborhoods, the authors note that the dominance of a neighborhood by one institution can create a countercommunity whose sole reason for existence is its opposition to the dominating institution. This effect may be more pronounced when there is another powerful community to oppose. Thus, a community may form simply to oppose another strong community, regardless of any real threat it may or may not actually pose.

Such a reaction may also explain another community encountered during the collection of computer-mediated communication data: a community directed against the Macintosh. While not really threatening the Microsoft community, the Macintosh brand community is a strong, proud, and confident community. Team MacSuck (an anti-Mac community) was encountered in the Web data during the search for Macintosh home pages. The primary reason it exists is to prove to "MacLovers that the anti-Mac community is not a minority." It is not so much a community of PC users as it is a community of Mac haters. Team MacSuck appears to have many of the same characteristics of other brand communities, including an extensive registry of members. The very existence of Team MacSuck certainly attests to the perceived strength (and threat) of the Mac brand community.

So, with respect to consciousness of kind, we find brand communities to be very consistent with other communities. There are, however, some observed particularities in how consciousness of kind is constructed in brand communities. For one, there is an interesting self-awareness and sensitivity concerning the commercial nature of the community. These consumers are aware that their feelings are about mass-produced and mass-advertised branded products. Members will even joke about their level of commitment, but only to a point. More than one community member prefaces a brand comment with something similar to Mark's: "it may sound kind of strange . . . but." Sometimes these become outright defensive: "Look, some people really like the Cubs, like to talk about the Cubs . . . so . . . no one thinks that's strange." These consumers know that their membership may be taken as signs of shallowness, fanaticism, materialism, and hedonism. Yet most feel that such judgments reveal an ignorance of the real value of the brand and its community: "not everyone understands, but Saabs are GREAT cars, practical, but fun." All this evidences a communal ethos, informed by a commercial and mass sensibility. In fact, brand communities generally seem more democratic and inclusive than many traditional face-to-face communities. Perhaps this is because they are so entirely situated in a relatively laissez-faire market force ethic, or the commercial ethos Scott (1993) calls the spectacular vernacular. Members tell you that race, gender, and class don't matter: "all you got to do is appreciate it [SAAB]." And, to a significant degree, brand communities do seem to be fairly open communities, where shared brand consciousness is primary. Still, it would be inaccurate to assert that the brand communities observed here were entirely outside the influence of social stratification. They were not.

Rituals and Traditions

Rituals and traditions are also evident in our brand communities. Rituals and traditions represent vital social processes by which the meaning of the community is reproduced and transmitted within and beyond the community. Some of these are widespread and understood by all members of the community, while others are more localized in their origins and applications. These rituals and traditions typically center on shared consumption experiences with the brand. All the brand communities encountered in this project have some form of ritual or tradition. These brand community rituals and traditions function to maintain the culture of the community. Here, for example, two members of the

Saab brand community discuss a very common Saab greeting ritual:

> *George:* If you drove a Saab, whenever you passed someone else driving a Saab on the road, you beeped or flashed your lights.
>
> *Mark:* Or you'd wave at each other. I did it today, I was driving around downtown Kenosha, and it was a four-door, nothing special, but that's OK. Hey, how you doing? Yeah I still flash my headlights at people.

These greeting rituals involve public recognition of other brand users and include a knowing nod, honking, waving, and asking them about their brand model. Such rituals may at first appear insignificant, but they function to perpetuate consciousness of kind. Every time such a greeting ritual is initiated or returned, members are validated in their understanding of the community. Community members appear to enjoy these greetings and conversations, although upon forced reflection they say they find it a little strange. Still, they feel that they are good things "you just do," and should continue. By constantly interacting with other brand users in these scripted interactions, community and the meaning of the brand are reproduced. In the Saab community, it may be relatively prominent due to the desired exclusivity of the brand, the gendered nature of car communities, or the very public nature of product use.

Celebrating the History of the Brand. The inculcation of history keeps communities vital and reproduces their culture. Saab, Macintosh, and Bronco all have colorful histories going back many years. For the Saab community, the history of the brand centers on the distinctiveness of the brand over time, its legacy of technological innovation, and important events and personages. Saab brand community members are very aware of the fact that the company also manufactures airplanes and fighter jets. They are quick to point out that this association with airplanes has informed the design of the car. When Paul from the Milwaukee Saab club explains why Saabs had such consistent design, he says, "They were engineers. They didn't change anything unless there was a good reason. They were building PLANES." A Saab ad campaign uses this aircraft connection and serves as the starting point for members to tell each other over and over again that Saab also builds airplanes. Macintosh users enjoy their history of outsider, underdog, and innovator. Bronco drivers enjoy the fact that even though sport utility vehicles have recently become "in" again, the Ford Bronco was one of the earliest SUVs and has remained relatively consistent in its design.

The importance of the history of the brand is also evident in the web pages devoted to each. The consistency with which this was evident across and within brands is remarkable. Saab pages feature extensive photographs documenting Saab's involvement in the manufacturing of airplanes over the years. Bronco pages focus on the experiences of years of off-roading, while Mac pages focus on the historical innovations of Apple. Pictures of older, classic models are frequently encountered. One Saab page bills itself as the Saab museum, and offers an extensive history of the brand and various models, complete with pictures. Consider the retelling of history for all three of the brands in the following, all by consumers.

> The history of Saab is colorful and interesting. There are dozens of stories that when brought together lead us to where Saab is today. The European situation of the thirties necessitated the creation of Svenska Aeroplan AB, born May 20, 1937. Current government philosophy was neutrality, yet one must defend its homeland. Saab was, and still is today, in charge of supplying Sverige with capable aircraft. But as the [war] wound to a close, Saab needed to find a non-war product. On the drawing board to choose from were aluminum boats, prefab houses, and modern kitchen appliances. The chiefs gave the green light on boats, of which around 250 were made. But nobody wanted boats, so they sunk them in local Lake Vanern. Then attention turned to automobiles.

Another page describes how the first Bronco model was designed and how it grew in popularity.

> The Ford Bronco was introduced to the public in August of 1965 to compete against Jeep's CJ-5 and International Harvester's Scout in the burgeoning recreational four wheel drive vehicle market. The first Broncos were very Spartan without options such as power steering or automatic transmission. The early Bronco today enjoys a cult like status among four wheel drive and collector car enthusiasts alike. Its simple, sturdy construction, V8 power and excellent maneuverability ensure good off road performance and provide a platform on which many modifications can easily be made. The popularity of the 1966–77 Ford Bronco will no doubt continue to soar in the years to come.

In a similar way, Mac pages provide background on the history of the company, evidence of shared beliefs of brand superiority, and Apple's long-held commitment to friendly and accessible technology. Consider the following excerpt from a Macintosh Web page:

> In 1974, Apple Computer, Inc. was founded by Steve Jobs and Steve Wozniak (also the founder of Unison). You can find out more about the history of Apple, but arguably its most important contribution to the world was introduced on January 24, 1984, under the leadership of founder and chairman Steve Jobs. Apple introduced Macintosh, the machine that would change the world.

Pointing to January 24, 1984, the day the Macintosh was introduced, marks an important communal date.

Appreciation of the history of the brand often differentiates the true believers from the more opportunistic. Knowing these things is a form of cultural capital (Bourdieu 1984; Holt 1998) within the brand community. It demonstrates one's expertise, secure membership status, and commitment to the larger community. These brand mythologies reinforce community values and serve to inculcate the proper perspective. The status members obtain from migration from

marginal to insider community status adds value to the consumption experience, and is an incentive for becoming a stronger and more informed brand advocate. Some marketers directly assist in the cause by publishing and distributing community socialization materials such as histories, important brand stories and myths, and insider talk in the form of marketing communications such as brand magazines. Again, we see accommodation and negotiation between marketer and consumer collective at work here.

Sharing Brand Stories. Storytelling is an important means of creating and maintaining community. Stories based on common experiences with the brand serve to invest the brand with meaning, and meaningfully link community member to community member. Communities traditionally create and retell myths about what happens to those who leave the safety of the community to venture out to the unknown world. The telling of these stories has a ritualistic character about it, and certainly represents a strong tradition within the brand communities.

Significantly, the same brand story will be told over and over again. The person hearing the story will act as if it they had not heard it before, or upon completion will say something like "I really love that story," or "cool story." When more than two members gather together, the telling of old brand stories is common. One type is the odyssey story. For example, Saab drivers tell of the cross-country journeys in their car, spending nights in either "hotel 99 or 900."[1] More than one informant proudly notes that they have slept in the back of their Saab. They tell of an eventful, sometimes harrowing, but always meaningful journey in their Saabs. In these stories, the Saab always comes through. Another is the "saved my life" story. Given that safety is a Saab community value, these stories are expected:

> *Chuck:* Well actually the car is more expensive than what I should be able to afford. But it's worth it, but I get better than a 100,000 miles on them. The car I had before this one, I was going down the road and a fella in a garbage truck made a left hand turn in front of me and I hit him broadside and totaled the Saab. The police sitting at the corner watching . . . having lunch saw it happen and he thought I was dead. I stepped out of the car and didn't have a scratch on me.
>
> *R:* Wow!
>
> *Chuck:* Yeah. It looked like an accordion. The whole thing just collapsed right up in front. Actually, it broke the door wheel on the garbage truck. Broke it off.

Members of brand communities also like to tell the "magic cavern" story. Consider the following comments by Brian (manager, 38).

> Not long after I got my first Saab . . . even the sedans, the seat falls down, and my mother needed new carpet for the house. So we went and bought some [carpeting] at the local department store. The guy said, "Should we deliver it?" And we said, "no, we'd take care of it." "Do you have a station wagon or a van?" "No, just a small sedan." He said, "you'll never get it in." I said, "Oh, sure we will, so don't worry about it." So he had it delivered to the curb and I brought the car around. Of course, he didn't see me pulling down the seat. I took this carpet and kept shoving it into the car until it was all in and I shut the door. He said, "If I hadn't seen it, I wouldn't have believed it." So, I made him a little more aware of Saabs, too.

Sharing brand stories is an important process as it reinforces consciousness of kind between brand members and contributes to imagined community. It also points to and assists in learning communal values. Further, by sharing the comments of other community members, any one member feels more secure in his or her understanding that there are many like-minded others "out there," a prime benefit of community. It also helps ensure the legacy and thus survival of brand cultures and their communities. Brand stories are evident in all three brands, but they are strongest in the Saab community. The Bronco community has the "Bronco Days" story where members talk about spontaneously getting everyone together and "just cruising on nice warm days." The Mac community has the "Mac immunity" story, a tale of tranquil times during virus plaques among IBM machines and users. This, of course, is attributed to Mac's superiority, and to a feeling of greater insularity (self-imposed quarantine) from the IBM herd.

One thing that distinguishes brand communities is that brand stories sometimes emanate from commercial text. In all communities, text and symbols are a powerful means of representing the culture of the group (Gusfield 1978; Hunter and Suttles 1972), but brand communities may further point to the significance of the image in contemporary consumer society. Brand community members share interpretive strategies, and thus also represent interpretive communities (Fish 1980; Scott 1994). In our brand communities, there are several sources of these text and symbols, including the product and its logo, both contemporary and classic, and images and text from advertisements.

Communal use of older logos is a good example. Beyond recognizing them as logos for Saab, Bronco, or Macintosh, community members understand the deeper meaning of these logos, pointing out features that identified what year it came from and the significance of those features. Thus, an old Saab logo with airplane-like fins on it makes the connection between Saab cars and airplanes and also reveals that the logo came from the 1960s. The Macintosh bomb logo is an important symbol that means that the machine has crashed. Most Macintosh sites include the bomb logo, frequently using it to designate bad news and shared pathos. The prominent display of these logos is common on Web pages. Of the three, the Mac community was the most iconic. Here the community uses (appropriates) a commercial popular culture text for creating its own communal pastiche,

[1]This refers to sleeping in either a 99 model or 900 model Saab. The passenger chair would recline fully, enabling one to drive while another slept.

again indicative of a very postmodern sensibility (Jameson 1991).

Advertisements play an important role in brand community rituals and traditions. Members are particularly concerned with ads as they represent the brand to those outside of the community, as well as to themselves. How the community is represented by these ads is important in that the advertiser becomes a community spokesperson. Saab drivers like to discuss Saab ads that make the link between Saab airplanes and cars. Apple members like to use the phrase "For the Rest of Us," ad copy from the introductory campaign for the Apple Macintosh. This ad copy also ends up being part of the lingua franca of the brand community. Brand community members negotiate communal interpretation, further blurring the perhaps illusory line between writer (marketer) and reader (consumer).

Brand community members are aware that these brands are made by corporations. At one level this is obvious, and at another deserves some further reflection. In the case of both Saab and Apple brand communities, corporate identity and ethos matter. With Saab, members feel that a more pure, even pristine, small Swedish company with a good consumer ethic was being taken over by a big American corporation (GM) known for its bigness and, in their view, incompetence and poor consumer ethic. In reaction, some brand community members spin out myths regarding how they think GM is largely "leaving Saab alone," but were still uneasy about it. The phrase "pre-GM Saab" is common, as is a communal nostalgia. Similarly, Apple community members celebrate their anti-establishment roots. Most see John Scully's reign as CEO as what led Apple astray: "the guy was way too corporate, he wasn't Apple." The preservation of what the brand is and stands for is important to the brand community. Members often feel that they have a better understanding of the brand than the manufacturer does. In fact, brand community members feel that the brand belongs to them as much as it does to the manufacturer. Brand community members are often quick to point out that the loyalty that they feel toward the brand is a discriminating one. They can be, and frequently are, critical of various aspects of the brand and/or its management. Paul, a Mac user, feels that blind loyalty was bad as it had lulled Apple into a false sense of security and, as a result, they did not feel the need to innovate and improve their product. In truth, Paul regrets Macintosh's overreliance on consumer loyalty because it led to negative consequences for the brand. Brand community members believe that manufacturers and marketers should be good and faithful stewards of the community's brand. This is where some of the issues of contested ownership of the brand and the fuller meaning of relationship (Fournier 1998; Price and Arnould 1999) are observed, and these demonstrate a self-aware and reflexive consumption ethic.

All of this highlights the active role brand community members have in the social construction of brand meaning, and thus the brand. This involves accommodation, negotiation, text rejection, interpretation, evaluation, and use of communal symbol systems. In our brand communities, the marketer is often regarded as having too much say in the brand's future. The brand's very ownership is contested. Thus, these rituals and traditions represent an important aspect of consumer agency, and point to the social negotiation between marketer and consumer in constructing a brand's meaning.

This is one way, however, that brand communities differ from other more traditional (perhaps utopian) communities. Brand community rituals and traditions exist in a hypertextual media environment, where the commercial canon is pervasive, proximal, and perhaps primary. While the presence of very strong external institutions, such as a church or religion, have engulfed other encapsulated communities, brand communities represent a historical moment and circumstance that is defined by the commercial. It is, however, still indicative of community.

Moral Responsibility

Communities are also marked by shared moral responsibility. Moral responsibility is a sense of duty to the community as a whole, and to individual members of the community. This sense of moral responsibility is what produces collective action and contributes to group cohesion. Moral responsibility need not be limited to punitive strictures concerning life and death matters, but rather everyday, but nonetheless important, social commitments. Moral systems can be subtle, and are highly contextualized. Such is the case with brand communities. In some ways they are similar to those that Jannowitz and others termed communities of limited liability (Hunter and Suttles 1972; Jannowitz 1952). Like Jannowitz's urban neighborhoods, brand communities are intentional, voluntary, and characterized by partial and differential involvement (Jannowitz 1952). Moral responsibility goes only so far in brand communities. This does not, however, decrease the significance of community in the context of brands, but rather reveals its boundaries. It is particularly evident in at least two critical and traditional communal missions: (1) integrating and retaining members, and (2) assisting brand community members in the proper use of the brand.

Integrating and Retaining Members. In traditional communities a prime concern is communal survival. Behavior consistent with this end is considered a basic responsibility of community membership. To insure long-term survival it is necessary to retain old members and integrate new ones.

In traditional communities there is the presence of a social moral consciousness. The communities formally and informally recognize the bounds of what is right and wrong, appropriate and inappropriate. While there is often more (or less) variability than is officially described by members of the community, there is a sense among community members that such a social consciousness and contract exists. This is true in brand communities as well. Consider Jill's comments regarding what she considers (more than half seriously) to be a moral failing of a former employee who switched to

an IBM clone. "Skip used to be a Mac person, but switched. I found this morally reprehensible . . . . He's kind of a Mac turncoat." Skip had joined the ranks of PC users, and Jill believes that it affected their personal relationship. Jill also sees Skip as a defector from a like-minded social group (community). In a similar fashion, Saab community members resent Saab drivers moving to another car and apply corrective coercion to prevent them from doing so. One informant, Mary, refers to one Saab driver who left the fold as having "betrayed the brotherhood."

Reasons for staying in the community are also publicly reinforced in computer-mediated communication. Most of this commitment centers on personal experiences using the brand as opposed to the competition, such as Mac pages providing horror stories about using a PC or listing the reasons Macintoshes are superior to PCs. This list includes the dangers of becoming a "faceless clone" using a PC. In a similar way, derisive comments made about lightweight import SUVs on Bronco pages serve to reinforce commitment to the brand and the community. While serving to elevate the brand, such pages also serve as a publicly posted reminder to stay loyal to the brand and a rehearsal of counterarguments against leaving the fold. To those well acculturated in the ways of the community, these reminders are not trivial. Taken collectively, these examples demonstrate a community-based process of perpetuating loyalty to the community and the brand.

Assisting in the Use of the Brand. Moral responsibility also includes looking out for and helping other members in their consumption of the brand. While limited in its scope, this assistance is an important component of these communities. Most of the informants report having helped others, both known and unknown. It was something they do "without thinking," simply acting out of a sense of responsibility that they felt toward other members of the community.

One of the ways this assistance manifests itself is through actions to help fellow community members repair the product or solve problems with it, particularly involving specialized knowledge acquired through several years of using the brand. For example, more than one Mac community member reports helping another to retrieve information off a broken hard disk drive. It is "just something that we do." They feel compelled to help, particularly when they themselves "had been there before." Also illustrative of this tendency is a Saab driver telling of stopping to help other Saab drivers who were broken down on the side of the road. Reports of such behavior are common.

> *George:* I get off the interstate and I see this car sitting there . . . I drove him into the gas station and had club cards with me and said, "Here, you want one of them?"
>
> *Mark:* Yeah, we see another Saab on the side of the road, we pull over to help, no matter what it is.

Mark adds that he does this sort of thing without even thinking; it just seems like the "right thing to do." That he does not stop to help drivers of all cars broken down on the side of the road, only those driving Saabs, suggests that he feels a strong moral responsibility to other Saab drivers. The fact that Mark, like other members, carries through on this feeling is noteworthy. Such tales are not uncommon, and their telling is often accompanied by a facial expression suggesting how unremarkable they find their acts of assistance.

The moral responsibility to provide assistance not only manifests itself in helping fix problems, it is also apparent in the sharing of information on brand-related resources. These resources contain preventative materials, devices to enhance the performance of the product or brand promotional materials such as images or information. For example, in the Macintosh brand community, Mac users share information concerning where to buy Mac computers or software or where to have them serviced. These are important considerations as fewer and fewer computer retailers are supporting Macintosh. These pages also contain user-generated promotional materials extolling the virtues of the brand and are well received by visitors: "Great page Brian!!!!! I'm new to the Mac, your page was of great help, and got me started on this new adventure. THANKS A LOT , and KEEP IT UP!!!"

In the Saab and Bronco brand communities, some of the assistance community members provide to one another includes information on recommended dealerships and parts suppliers, as well as sources for technical information. In some ways, the information provided by brand communities is more useful to consumers than information provided by marketers due to the lack of commercial self-interest. This again represents a blurring of the marketer-consumer role boundary.

Assisting in the use of the brand is one of the places where computer-mediated communication offers a great deal of information. These pages are typically replete with technical descriptions of the brand and related products, advice on solving problems and troubleshooting, and lists and links of service centers and suppliers for the brand. For example, Bronco pages include information on suppliers of discontinued parts and Saab pages include lists of dealers and places to get parts. This information in turn enables consumers to solve problems and have a better consumption experience, and demonstrates commitment to a collective.

We only occasionally see situations where brand community membership extends benefits similar to those typical of a traditional face-to-face setting. It is somewhat rare (but not unheard of) for a member of a brand community to do something for another member such as watch their kids while they go to the store, or help them with a task in the yard, just because they are both members of the same brand community. In the Saab brand community we actually observed a fair amount of a wider construction of moral responsibility. We see hints of it with Mac and Bronco, but in more modest degrees. We do, however, believe that brand community membership does raise the probability of helping with such tasks because felt likeness of kind is not so easily, cleanly, and totally parsed in human relationships. How

much such probabilities of wider responsibility are raised is a subject for further examination.

Brand communities are generally communities of limited liability (Jannowitz 1952). Much like an urban neighborhood, members' participation is voluntary and can be withdrawn at any time. But it rarely is, as opposed to the ephemeral neo-tribes proposed by Maffesoli (1996). And, it is true that the community sense of moral responsibility is bounded, but this does not obviate its importance or legitimacy. The type of support provided is entirely consistent with findings in urban sociology. The assistance provided between individuals sharing a communal bond is often specialized according to the primary nature of the relationship (Wellman 1990; Wellman and Wortley 1990). Thus brand communities exhibit moral responsibility, but a limited and specialized one.

DISCUSSION

> We have so dwelled on the dehumanization and the disenchantment with the modern world and the solitude it induces that we are no longer capable of seeing the networks of solidarity that exist within. (Michel Maffesoli 1996, p. 72)

Our research found evidence of brand community in both face-to-face and computer-mediated environments. Three traditional markers of community were observed, as were several more particular qualities of brand community. Brand communities are largely imagined communities. Brand communities represent a form of human association situated within a consumption context. In contrast to previous marketing research, they are not homogeneous lifestyle segments (e.g., Wells and Tigert 1971) or consumption constellations (Solomon and Englis 1992); here community is formed around one good or service, not many. They are explicitly commercial social collectives centered around a brand, not incidental contact with commercial space. Neither are they reference groups (Bearden and Etzel 1982), which again tend to be much more diffuse. This is about brands. This is the tie that binds.

Social critics have long seen modernity and commerce as strongly implicated in the destruction of traditional community (see Lasch 1991). The arguments take different turns, but generally hold that commerce is to blame for hordes of wandering spirits, experiencing only simulacra. So, are brand communities good for consumers, or just another sign of a commercial world bereft of real meaning and humanity? As with most things, the data reveal a mixed array. Sometimes community membership interferes with other social responsibilities, but this is only occasional. Outside of those in formal clubs (MacWarriors, Midwest Saab Club), participation does not require a large investment of time or attention. In some cases, the communities actually serve to strengthen family and other interpersonal ties. For example, Steve relies on his and his son Bill's membership in the Bronco community to strengthen their stepfather-stepson relationship.

At least three purely positive aspects were observed. First, brand communities as they were encountered represent a form of consumer agency. By virtue of their collective nature, and enhanced by new forms of computer-mediated communication, consumers simply have a greater voice than would be the case in more isolated and atomistic situations (France and Muller 1999). Second, brand communities represent an important information resource for consumers. Community members can more easily turn to one another in an established collective for information on the brand. Third, to the extent that communal interaction generally provides wider social benefits to its members, often affectual, brand communities likewise provide these.

Since consumer culture has long been accused of destroying real community, this is a significant turn. It is our position that brand community is neither any more nor less real than many other forms of community, and is simply an essential form humans invariably employ in their social existence. Much like the urban neighborhoods Jannowitz (1952) described, brand communities are a response to the postindustrial age. Consumers seek communal affiliation and are likely to foster it wherever they can. Given consumption's undeniable centrality in contemporary culture, to either ignore these communities of commerce or to dismiss them entirely as yet another of late capitalism's excesses diminishes the phenomenon and the experience to banality and entirely denies the humanity to be found where commerce resides (Scott 1993). In addition, it ignores a very real social phenomenon, one that we should understand if we are to fully comprehend the nature of contemporary community. We stake out the position that this phenomenon is far more complex than the received critical view, occurs in indifference to academic political fashion, and can produce good for consumers. At least within the confines of the research reported here, there was legitimate community found in the presence of the very forces typically blamed for destroying it.

Still, the rightful place of community in modernity has always been marked by contest and paradox. Elliott (1998), Maffesoli (1996), and Scott (1993) have recently suggested conceptualizations that offer a more humane and/or less simplistic (Miller 1998) view of consumption collectives with which we share some general points of contact. Of course we readily acknowledge that modernity and commerce have changed the world (and not always for the better), including forms of community. We also readily acknowledge that some may see the very existence of brand communities as evidence of the complete appropriation of real community. In response we would ask, When and where has community membership existed completely outside exchange? Where and when was it that something so pure existed? Where and when did members of communities not have to wear, display, or in some way do something as exchange to be part of a community? In fact, exchange has always been part of community (Mauss [1923] 1990). Obviously, the rise of consumer culture has changed the form and degree. It seems to us that beyond our era's particular love of nostalgia for

a fairly fictional past (see Coontz 1992), something has been lost. Yet we generally eschew the more nihilistic critical formulations (e.g., Foucault 1988; also see Rorty 1991, 1998) in favor of the position that community never really completely succumbed to modernity in the first place. That is, we reject the sweeping, reductivist, totalizing, and ubiquitous claim of simple appropriation. We think that what is going on here is far more complex and far less sinister than is typical in critical modernist thought. On the other hand, it must be acknowledged that communities have a social control function, which is not particularly liberating. But in contrast to the premodern face-to-face community, brand communities have a relatively hedonistic and liberatory ethos, where pleasure is more sanctioned than restricted, and where bounded individuality is celebrated. This article is about a contemporary and particular form of community, but a form of community nonetheless.

Branding Implications

This research has several implications for branding. First, it directly acknowledges the social nature of brands. It attempts to move thinking away from the traditional consumer-brand dyad to the consumer-brand-consumer triad. It argues that brands are social objects and socially constructed. It asserts that consumers are actively involved in that creation. It further shows that brand community clearly affects brand equity. Aaker (1991) conceptualizes brand equity as having four components: perceived quality, brand loyalty, brand awareness, and brand associations (Aaker 1991; Keller 1993). Brand communities directly affect all four of these components and are consistent with the trend toward broadening definitions of consumer brand loyalty in general (Fournier 1998; Fournier and Yao 1997; Lutz 1987; McAlexander and Schouten 1998; Olsen 1993; Sherry 1998). These new conceptualizations include more behaviors than mere repurchase; they widen the relationship with the brand to include the role of other consumers, including community (Cross and Smith 1995). In this way, developing a strong brand community could be a critical step in truly actualizing the concept of relationship marketing. A strong brand community can lead to a socially embedded and entrenched loyalty, brand commitment (Jacoby and Chestnut 1978; Keller 1998), and even hyper-loyalty (McAlexander and Schouten 1998). Brand communities are collections of what Gruen and Ferguson call "active loyalists," users of a brand who are "committed, conscientious—almost passionate" (1994, p. 3) about the brand. As such, they may be good places to look for lead users of the brand (Von Hipple 1986). But most important to remember is the fact that they are connected to other consumers through the benefit of community.

Community is arguably the fundamental social relationship, having its roots in the familial relationship often used to define relationship marketing. Thus, it provides a good template to overlay the relationship between the company/brand and those who consume. Moreover, a community framework is consistent with a number of traditional perspectives in marketing, particularly given its inclusion of other consumers in the relationship, such as the social interaction view of marketing, in which marketing is exchange between social actors (Bagozzi 1974), and the macro network approach, in which the relationship among the entire network of users and the brand is important (Iacobucci 1994). Deprived of their social connections, the value of these brands to consumers would certainly be diminished.

Relationship marketing stresses attracting, maintaining, and enhancing long-term customer relationships instead of focusing on individual transactions (Berry 1995). Such long-term relationships provide a competitive advantage and strategic resource for the firm (Webster 1992). However, it is not always efficient to maintain one-on-one relationships with customers as time spent developing the relationship can take away from time spent actually serving the customer (Gruen and Ferguson 1994; Iacobucci 1994). Yet brand communities carry out important functions on behalf of the brand, such as sharing information, perpetuating the history and culture of the brand, and providing assistance. They provide social structure to the relationship between marketer and consumer. Communities exert pressure on members to remain loyal to the collective and to the brand.

In our view, a brand with a powerful sense of community would generally have greater value to a marketer than a brand with a weak sense of community. However, it should also be recognized that a strong brand community can be a threat to a marketer should a community collectively reject marketing efforts or product change, and then use communal communications channels to disseminate the rejection. For example, many Saab owners did not approve of some Saab changes, such as the introduction of the 9000 model or modifications to the 900. Saab, recognizing the potential power of this community, attempts to appease and perpetuate the brand community by maintaining links with the brand's past. The Saab corporate Web page contains an extensive section on the Saab community, including history of the brand. Saab even supports user-created community sites by providing information and images for user pages.

For the more insular marketer, a more connected and empowered community can be a real problem. Brand communities, particularly those operating within computer-mediated environments, could pose enormous rumor control problems. Competitors could easily snoop on other brand communities and their internal communication. Brands could be sabotaged by competitors or brand terrorists misappropriating or subverting community values and interest. Also, a strong brand community may in some instances signal brand marginality. Consider Apple, with its underdog and marginal status (and low share), a source of pride among community members. Most likely, those marketing Apple see it another way. Brand communities may thus serve an important signaling function. Just as brand quality perceptions can be affected by alliances with other brands (Rao, Qu, and Ruekert 1999; Simonin and Ruth 1998), brand quality might be inferred from the character of the brand community.

Limitations

The research reported in this article has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, ethnographic research does not afford the same kind of generalizability that probability sampling does. Our neighborhood data overrepresented relatively affluent white families. Although there were women among our informants, the particular choice of automobiles and computers may have revealed a certain flavor of brand community and obscured others. These and other limitations undoubtedly colored our data and made themselves felt in the particular way brand community was socially enacted and expressed. How brand communities vary across social strata is a rich area for future work.

It must be acknowledged that two of the three brands studied had small market shares, while Jeep did not. Still, while it may be that brand community is most easily observed in threatened brands, we do not believe it is anywhere near that limited a social dynamic. Mark Pendegrast, in his history of Coca-Cola, says: "The most powerful Coca-Cola appeal has not, ultimately been sexual or physiological, but communal: if you drink Coke, the ads suggest, you will belong to a warm, loving, accepting family, singing in perfect harmony. If we can't quite succeed in finding that stress-free society today, never mind—we'll find it tomorrow. We'll build a better world for you and me, and everyone. It's a beautifully seductive message, because it's what we all want" (1993, p. 401).

We concur. While we believe more expansive future investigations will demonstrate this, we cannot make that case empirically at this point and must situate our findings in their particularities. We suspect that in the case of more popular (i.e., higher market share) brands such as Coca-Cola, communal feeling may be considerably more subtle, less formally organized, but nonetheless powerful. Very subtle, but very socially embedded practices and feelings can be the most powerful of all. We believe that there are many, many brands around which community can and does coalesce.

Conclusion

It is also our hope that this article has implications beyond the more narrowly realized consumer behavior community (see Miller 1998; Ritzer 1999). We believe the notion of brand communities has value to the larger discourse on community, modernity, and consumer culture. We hold that brand communities are significantly situated historically and theoretically (Gainer and Fischer 1994). The brand is itself a thoroughly modern invention, in fact, as good an icon of modernity as there is. If it is true that modernity has brought with it what Weber ([1922] 1978, p. 177) called "the disenchantment of the world," is it possible that community could coalesce around brands of things, to satisfy (successfully or not) a yearning for a "reconstructed and re-mystified community" (Barber 1995, p. 161)? We believe so. Perhaps brands do this in part due to their ability to mediate the inherent tension between highly stylized consumer lifestyles (Simmel [1903] 1964; Warde 1994) and underlying conformity (Firat 1991). This then places brand community in the line of sociological tradition from Kant's *sensus communis* ([1790] 1980), to Simmel's ([1904] 1981) discussions of style and sociability, to Blumer (1969), to Lyotard (1988), and significantly to Bourdieu's (1984) habitus. Do brand communities mark and signify this long recognized and central tension of modernity? We believe they do, yet they simultaneously allow individuals to successfully negotiate a preferred social space, a preferred consumption collective (Holt 1997). Economically, it is true that the actions of some brand community members may yield profits for non-community corporate shareholders, while receiving no share of profit themselves. Whether by virtue of lesser economic means or by the sway of habitus, this surely occurs. In other cases, the enhanced agency of the brand community may threaten these same corporate interests. We do not, however, believe brand community members to be simple dupes or boosters of a false consciousness who foolishly exchange economic participation for limited cultural capital and social connection. Rather, we believe in what Marshall Berman (1988, p. 32) called the "affirmative vision of modernism, to open oneself to the immense variety and richness of things, materials and ideas that the modern world inexhaustibly brought forth." This vision is marked by its playfulness, its rejection of the too somber and too self-righteous modernists and, most relevant here, its informed celebration of mass material culture (Berman 1988). We believe brand communities exist in this spirit.

Brand communities reveal the socially situated nature of brands as something more than a summation of attitudes or impoverished critical stereotypes. While the meaning of a brand is acknowledged as an important quality (Dobni and Zinkhan 1990, Fournier 1998, Gardner and Levy 1955; Levy 1959), it has been given surprisingly little research attention, and even less from a sociological perspective. We hold that brands are undeniably and fundamentally social entities, created as much by consumers as by marketers (Firat and Venkatesh 1995) in a complex and fascinating dance of social construction. This intersection of brand—a defining entity of consumer culture—and community—a core sociological notion—is an important one. Perhaps most significantly, this may be a place where consumer behavior can contribute something beyond our narrowly defined field and more fully engage the larger scholarly project.

At this moment in the early twenty-first century, the notion of community occupies a particularly important space. The things that community has traditionally represented are sites of considerable contestation in the postmodern world. At this moment we seek to understand community's existence, persistence, endurance, and constant reinvention in the postmodern consumption space where enormous changes in human communication reside. At this nexus we introduce the idea of brand community. We believe brand communities to be real, significant, and generally a good thing, a democratic thing, and evidence of the persistence of community in consumer culture.

> What is great about this country is that America started the tradition where the richest consumers buy essentially the same things as the poorest. You can be watching TV and see Coca-Cola, and you know that the President drinks Coke, Liz Taylor drinks Coke and, just think, you can drink Coke too. A Coke is a Coke and no amount of money can get you a better Coke than the one the bum on the corner is drinking. All Cokes are the same and all the Cokes are good. Liz Taylor knows it, the President knows it, the bum knows it, and you know it. (Andy Warhol, 1975, p. 101)

APPENDIX

PARTICIPATING HOUSEHOLDS IN FAIRLAWN

HOUSEHOLD 1

Bob, Jill, Kathleen, Victoria: Bob (40 years old) and Jill (42 years old) had been married approximately one year prior to their participation in this study. Both were academics at the university. Kathleen (12) and Victoria (9) were Jill's children from a previous marriage. Bob knew most of his neighbors, but did not feel particularly close to most of them. The main exception to this was his neighbor to the west, Morty. Morty and Bob had been good friends since Bob had moved into the house, sharing a lot of activities such as secrets on yardwork, lawn equipment, and working out together at a local health club.

HOUSEHOLD 2

Morty: The researcher was introduced to Morty by Bob. Morty had lived in the neighborhood for about 10 years. He had moved into the neighborhood with his wife, Jennifer, and their three-year-old daughter, Abbey. Jill and Abbey had recently moved to Arizona so that Jill could take a "better job." Morty was a salesman with a transportation firm and an extremely likeable guy, who never seemed too bothered to be interviewed. Jill was a librarian.

HOUSEHOLD 3

Steve, Meriam, Bill: Bob introduced the researcher to Steve. Steve and Meriam had lived in the neighborhood for several years. Steve had served in Korea and had lived in town for his entire life. Steve was a retired retailer, having operated a clothing store in the university's student shopping district. Steve had a great lawn, which several people in the neighborhood (e.g., Bob, Morty, and Sam) attributed to his being retired and having a lot of time to devote to it. Meriam worked as an educational coordinator at the university's art museum. Bill was a senior in high school (17 years old). Bill called Steve dad, but also referred to his "real dad." Bill and Steve were working on restoring a 1973 Ford Bronco, a project that was very important to both of them.

HOUSEHOLD 4

Bob had introduced the researcher to Sam and Ella; and Steve had also approached them about being interviewed. Sam and Ella had lived in the neighborhood the longest of any interviewed, for over 20 years. Sam was a retired track coach from the university. Ella was a retired schoolteacher. They were both healthy and active, spending their time on a variety of projects (gardening, hunting, tennis, golf, and doing volunteer work for their church). Sam, his son, and his grandson had all played football at the local university.

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