

A Work Project, presented as part of the requirements for the Award of a Master's degree in  
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Community-centric Brand Building:  
Developing a Strategic Framework for Startups in the Sports Industry

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## **Abstract**

This thesis investigates community-centric brand building in the sports industry. Utilizing literature review and empirical data through expert interviews and consumer surveys, the research examines how brand communities influence customer loyalty and brand differentiation. The findings highlight the value of online and offline community engagement and the consumer's willingness to pay a premium for brands with strong communities. The study presents a practical framework for sports brands while validating hypotheses on differentiation, loyalty, and ownership. This basis offers substantial contributions to academic and industry understanding of brand communities by empowering sports startups to effectively use community engagement for growth.

## **Keywords**

Business Model, Community-Building, Brand Management, Community-Centricity

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# **1. Introduction**

## **1.1. Background and Importance of the Research Problem**

The onset of the 21st century marked a paradigm shift in business practices and changed the science behind brand management. Moving away from traditional, one-dimensional marketing approaches towards creating dynamic, interactive relationships between brands and their customers. This evolution began with the work of Pine and Gilmore's (1999) 'experience economy', describing the shifting emphasis from a product-centric model towards engaging values and resonant experiences.

The digital revolution has transformed behavioral economics. Today's consumers have unprecedented access to information and are overloaded by brand-related stimuli. This abundance of data has reduced the influence of single individual retailers, as the average attention span of people is dwindling. In such a landscape, the challenge for brands to capture and maintain consumer attention has intensified (Goldhausen 2018).

Recent trends showcase the craving of deeper interactions with companies and between consumers of the same products or services. Notably, a study revealed that nearly 80% of startup founders recognize the importance of building a user community, with 28% considering it as their competitive edge. Leading brands like Apple, Google and Amazon have significantly invested in both digital and in-person community engagement, highlighting its growing importance in business strategies (Bussgang, Bacon 2020). This alteration process in the business-consumer relationship is encapsulated by the perspective of Howard Schultz (Founder and former CEO of Starbucks): "We are not in the coffee business serving people, but in the people business serving coffee" (Starbucks, 2008). This statement underlines the importance of focusing on the modern-day approach of focusing on consumer experience and relationship management as the core of business strategy.

At the heart of this new business paradigm lies the concept of Brand Building. The perceived quality of a brand, which influences long-term profitability and consumer loyalty, is a testament to how well a brand meets consumer expectations (Bharadwaj, Tuli, and Bonfrer 2011). In this ecosystem, the brand experience enables a multisensory approach to reach long-lasting connections with consumers (Brakus, Schmitt, and Zarantonello 2009).

In the sports industry, where passion and allegiance are substantial, understanding and leveraging these brand experience dimensions can be particularly impactful. This paper aims to shed light on the success formula of building long-lasting and effective customer-brand relationships through the creation of brand experiences by leveraging its community. The sports industry provides a unique platform for startups to engage with their communities in a transformative and multidimensional way that transcends traditional marketing tactics.

## **1.2. Objectives for this Research**

This research delves into brand communities within the sports industry, aiming to reveal how sports startups can effectively leverage these communities for brand development and growth. Utilizing a mixed-method approach, including expert interviews and a consumer survey, the study explores strategies for building and nurturing brand communities and provide insights into enhancing brand loyalty and consumer satisfaction through community-centric strategies. The paper examines the roles of customer-brand relationships in shaping consumer perceptions and behaviors, their impact on brand loyalty, and the strategies used to engage and grow a community. It explores how effective communication, brand experiences, and value creation contribute to community vitality. Additionally, it investigates how brands can foster ownership and pride among community members, leading to stronger emotional bonds and commitment. The research contributes to the academic and practical understanding of brand communities in the sports industry, by effectively merging and contrasting the perspectives of brands and customers. It aims to fill a gap in the current literature by providing a comprehensive framework

for sports startups that currently rely on a trial-and-error method for community building. By bridging theoretical knowledge with practical empirical research, the aspiration is to offer a guideline that helps sports brands harness the power of their communities to achieve sustainable growth and success in a competitive marketplace environment.

## **2. Theoretical Analysis**

To effectively construct a framework for sports brand communities in the applied context, the initial step is to understand the theoretical models and state-of-the-art literature. This foundational basis is crucial for understanding the complex relationship between a brand and its customers. It's necessary to first define key terms and highlight factors critical for maintaining strong relationships. The exploration will delve into brand communities, examining intentions and expected outcomes from both the brand's and customer's perspectives. This includes the role of collective value creation and other pivotal strategies for the success of brand communities. The resulting in-depth analysis will provide a comprehensive overview of the elements that characterize successful communities. Furthermore, this section will investigate the evolving dynamics of customer-brand relationships in the sports industry, in light of technological advancements and the shifting patterns of consumer behavior.

### **2.1. Customer-Brand Relationship**

Customer-brand relationship (CBR) refers to the ongoing interactions and emotional connection between a customer and a brand. This relationship is characterized by a mutual exchange of value where the customer derives satisfaction, identity, or utility from the brand, and in return, the company benefits through purchase-willing customers based on loyalty, advocacy, and receives direct feedback for its work (McAlexander 2002). These relationships evolve over time and can be categorized into four major pillars.

The Brand Relationship Wheel offers a categorization of the CBR, which can be segmented according to four key dimensions: Rational components (reflecting consumers' thoughts about the brand), emotional/affective aspects (capturing emotional responses by the consumer), communicative elements (what they articulate about the brand), and the transactional component, which describes their actions with the brand (Fetscherin 2020, 59). These dimensions collectively reinforce the strength and durability of brand relationships by underlining the critical role of brand identity creation and its resonance with consumers. The extent of emotional attachment and loyalty that customers hold towards a brand, shaped by its personality, values, and the overall experience provided, is a key concept towards determining the brand's long-term success and competitive edge (Fetscherin 2021).

Fournier and McAlexander's early research on brand relationship quality points out that strong connections are built over time and are based on trust, commitment, and understanding (Fournier 1998; McAlexander 2002). Keller's model of Brand Equity, also known as the Customer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) model, enriches this perspective and explains how a brand's value is created through customer experiences and perceptions. It illustrates the critical role of steering brand awareness and associations, which influence consumer decision-making (Keller 1993).

### **Brand Authenticity and Brand Experience**

The notion of brand authenticity plays a pivotal role in forging a strong brand identity. Arya et al. discuss how authenticity can be achieved through crafting a distinctive emotional brand experience. Factors such as continuity, originality, reliability, and naturalness are crucial in forging a robust brand image. When effectively implemented, these elements significantly enhance emotional attachment to the brand, which results in a higher emotional connection that often translates into increased purchasing behavior and, ultimately, fosters greater customer loyalty (Arya et al. 2019).

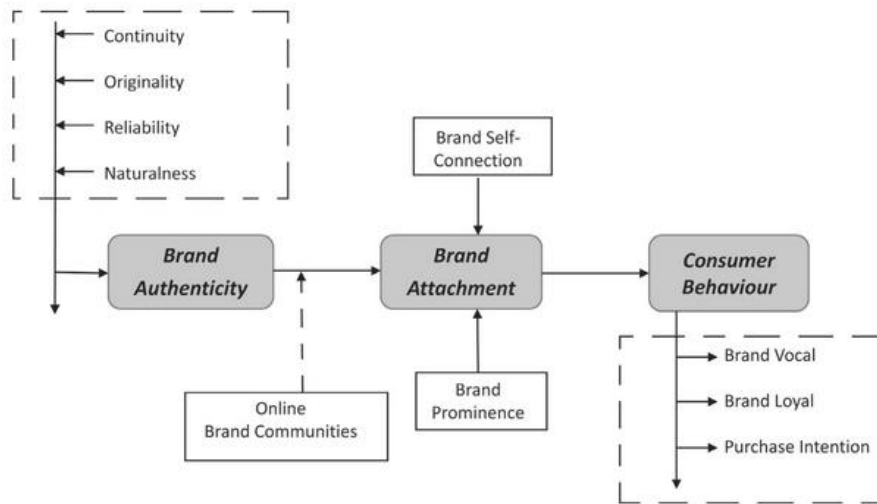


Figure 1: Arya et al. 2019, 92

This experience can be categorized on a scale into sensory, affective, behavioral, and intellectual dimensions, each contributing to the overall authenticity perception and relationship with the brand. Furthermore, brand experience is in fact the most significant predictor of consumers' buying behavior (Brakus, Schmitt, and Zarantonello 2009).

### Evolution in the Digital Age

In the digital age, the dynamics of CBR have undergone a significant transformation. The advancement of digital technologies has revolutionized consumer interactions with brands while fostering deeper and more individualized connections. As brands adopt more comprehensive omnichannel strategies and increase engagement with consumers nowadays, the link between an individual's self-congruence and emotional brand attachment strengthens (Malär et al. 2011). Similarly, digital platforms have created new opportunities for fostering brand-customer relationships, underlining the importance for brands to provide personalized and engaging online experiences, while also maintaining effective real-world communication (Gensel et al. 2013).

## **2.2. Brand Communities**

Text A brand community can be defined as a ‘specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relationships among admirers of a brand’ (Muniz and O’Guinn 2001, 412).

Brand communities play a pivotal role in creating a strong brand experience, contributing significantly to heightened brand authenticity, which was outlined in the prior section. These communities serve as a hub for information and experience exchange, reinforcing the brand's cultural norms and values. This process aids in crafting a distinct brand identity. Previous research showcases the effectiveness of those communities in building long-lasting CBR and in the benefits of active usage as a strategic brand development tool. (Hakala et al. 2017).

## **2.3. Intentions and Outcome of Brand community building**

### **2.3.1. Customer perspective**

In general, Coelho et al. separate the concept of brand communities into two main ideas: Identification and Commitment (Coelho et al. 2019). Identification is about the emotional and psychological sense of belonging that individuals feel towards a brand community. This sense of belonging is not just about using a product or service, it's deeply intertwined with a person's self-concept. The brand becomes a part of one's personality, aligning with their values and interests, and connecting them with others who share similar affinities. This strong identification encourages active participation within the community and fosters positive relationships among its members. On the other hand, brand community commitment delves into the deeper, psychological attachment that members develop towards the community. When people perceive that a brand mirrors their personality, enhances their self-esteem, or improves their social status, they tend to form a long-term commitment to it. This commitment translates into tangible actions, such as consistently choosing the brand and actively contributing to the community. The strength of this bond with the brand and the community leads to a high level

of satisfaction, fostering a commitment that often resembles a form of brand love. When people identify strongly with a brand community, it's more than just a preference for a product; it's an integral part of their identity and social life. This identification and commitment shape their behavior and loyalty, creating a dynamic and supportive community (Coelho et al. 2019). Additionally, research indicates that consumers or members within the co-consuming groups of a brand community engage in the social network with two primary objectives. Firstly, they have individual goals, which include gathering information, being part of an experience, building personal relationships and engaging in social interactions. Secondly, they pursue collective goals, such as nurturing a sense of community or group identity, contributing to the collective resources of the group, which supports and promotes the culture of a brand (Pongsakornrungrungsilp, Schroeder 2011). A survey with 8.000 Gen Z and millennial participants from the US, UK and Canada revealed insights that align and supports the previously outlined goals of consumers participating in brand communities (Forbes Business Council 2022):

- Having a voice and social capital within the community
- Brand communities shape a sense of self and a desired way of living
- Search for values-based communities providing inspiration and empowerment
- Communities are a gateway to enjoyment, relaxation, and entertainment

### **2.3.2. Brand perspective**

Whereas the prior section highlighted the behavioral economics and psychological research aspects on customer identities, the intended outcomes of community-building from the brand's perspective are equally relevant. Previously it was already discussed that brand communities create stronger brand experiences, which will lead to higher brand authenticity, attachment, and loyalty. Apart from that, there are several other factors contributing to a successful outcome of community-building efforts in the perspective of brands:

**Brand Engagement creates loyalty:** Brands open the space through communities where customers feel a sense of belonging and possibilities for interaction. The activation of consumers often translates into increased brand loyalty, as members develop a stronger emotional connection with the brand. Members become loath to abandon a community over time, which results in increased retention and improved lifetime value for the brand (Muniz & O'Guinn 2001; Harvard Business Review 2020).

**Expanding Market Reach and Customer Acquisition:** Vibrant communities not only retain existing customers but also attract new ones. Through organic growth and member referrals, these communities can expand a brand's reach effectively (Schau, Muniz, Arnould, 2009).

**Gaining valuable Consumer Insights:** Brands get access to direct feedback and interactive discussions that occur within their community and gain real-time insights into customer preferences and behaviors, which can be substantial for future product development and marketing strategies (McAlexander, Schouten, Koenig, 2002).

**Fostering Advocacy through Word-of-Mouth Marketing:** Brand communities often turn customers into brand advocates. Engaged community members are more likely to share their positive experiences and recommend the brand to others, thus leveraging the power of word-of-mouth marketing (Algesheimer, Dholakia, Herrmann, 2005).

**Content Creation through Brand Storytelling:** The omnichannel strategies of modern-day brands allow effective storytelling and is considered an effective way to deliver the brand narrative. The brand community provides authentic material of customer-brand interactions that brands can utilize in their marketing across different channels (Hollebeek, Glynn, Brodie, 2014).

**Cost-effective Marketing:** Enthusiastic members of a brand community help acquire new members, resulting in a domino-effect and lower customer acquisition costs in the long-term (Bussgang, Bacon 2020).

## **2.4. Online vs. Offline communities**

The landscape of community engagement has evolved significantly with the possibilities on the internet and specifically social media. Online communities primarily operate through digital channels across different channels and platforms while offering a global reach that transcends geographical boundaries. This virtual nature allows greater accessibility and convenience as well as low entry barriers for its members to interact at any time and from any location. In contrast, strict offline communities are often a regional phenomenon with interactions occurring through physical meetings and offline events. These face-to-face events are more personal and allow deeper connections between their attendants with the brand (Blanchard 2008; Kumar, Lim, Han 2019).

However, online and offline communities can't be viewed as separate entities, they are rather complementary and can be interconnected. Smartphones and social media have blurred the lines between these two spheres, allowing for seamless transitions between online and offline engagements. For example, interactions that begin in an online form can lead to physical meetups, enriching the overall community experience. Additionally, online platforms can enhance the engagement and reach of offline communities by providing additional communication channels and interaction opportunities. This interconnectedness reflects a modern reality where online and offline community experiences are synergistic for creating a meaningful brand experience, each enhancing the value and reach of the other (Haythornthwaite & Kendall 2010; Wellman et al. 2003; Kaplan & Haenlein 2010).

## **2.5. Specifications of sports brand communities**

Sports communities share several key characteristics while also possessing distinct traits from other brand communities. They both put social interaction and consumer engagement in the centre. Whether through online platforms or physical events, these interactions foster a strong sense of belonging among members. Engaging activities, both online and offline, are vital in

reinforcing connections across different types of communities (Funk, Alexandris, McDonald 2016; Kumar, Lim, Han 2019).

However, despite these similarities, there are notable differences. Members of sports communities develop a strong emotional connection with the brand through their shared passion for physical activities (Carlson, Suter, Brown 2018). Another key distinction is the role of competition in sports communities. Unlike non-sports brand communities, physical participation or spectating at sports competitions is often a central element of those communities, emphasizing a unique aspect of engagement (Warner, Kerwin, Walker 2013). Moreover, sports communities often exhibit a strong local identity, which is tied towards a specific team or region, while also maintaining a more global fan base online (Wann et al. 2017). The performance aspect of the team or athletes also uniquely influences some sports communities. The mood and activities within these communities can fluctuate significantly based on outcomes, which is less prevalent in other types of communities (Yoshida, Heere, Gordon 2015).

## **2.6. Methods for Sports Brand Community Engagement**

After examining the fundamental concepts of creating strong brand experiences through community engagement and understanding the intended outcomes on both sides, it is inevitable to analyze the different methods that sports brands can use to complete this picture. As mentioned before, the goal of creating meaningful relationships with customers through experiences is only possible through direct interactions with the end consumer to give them a sense of belonging and create an authentic brand identity.

The concept of collective value creation within brand communities represents a significant shift from traditional, company-centric brand building to a more collaborative and participatory approach. Modern marketing strategies increasingly involve co-creation, where customers are not just passive recipients anymore. Instead, they get actively involved in the content creation.

Ambassadors, influencers, and user-generated content (UGC) are the three most common practices for this. Co-creation allows brands to tap into the creativity and enthusiasm of their customers, which results in more authentic and resonant marketing messages (Cova, Dalli 2009). User-generated content contributes to the brand narrative, enriching the brand's story with diverse perspectives and experiences. While this practice is usually cost-free for brands, the activation of influencers is usually done by payment or sponsorships (Schau et al. 2009; Keller 2013; Kumar, Lim, Han 2019). Brand ambassadors play at the intersection of this as they can develop out of both sides and are meant to embody the corporate identity in appearance, values, and ethics. The key elements of brand ambassadors include their ability to influence a large audience and have the trustworthiness to be credible and embody the brand identity (Keller 2013).

Social networks act as an accelerator in this process to make brand communities thrive, enabling the exchange of information, experiences, and values. Social media activities further enhance community engagement and provide a space for the co-creation of content to flourish (Kozinets et al. 2010; Fetscherin, Veloutsou, Guzman 2021; Gensler et al. 2013).

Offline events are an essential part of community building as they offer irreplaceable opportunities for face-to-face interaction and engagement. These gatherings build stronger, more meaningful CBR than online events through personal communication and a shared real-life experience. The immersion and exclusivity of being physically present at events deepen emotional connections with the community through a multisensory approach. Additionally, they can provide hands-on learning experiences and help in reinforcing the community's culture and values (Young, Takeda, Cuellar 2011; McCully et al. 2011).

Loyalty programs are a key element for brand communities because they offer much more than customer retention. These programs enhance customer engagement by incentivizing interactions with rewards and exclusive benefits, keeping the brand at the forefront of

customers' minds. Beyond transactional advantages, they foster emotional connections, making customers feel valued and part of a community. Additionally, loyalty programs provide valuable insights into customer preferences, which enables brands to tailor experiences and improve offerings. In a competitive market, a distinctive loyalty program can set a brand apart while attracting and retaining members with unique experiences (Rosenbaum 2005; Nastasoiu, Vandebosch 2019)

Question and Answer (Q&A) sessions are an invaluable tool for two-sided engagement within brand communities. They provide a direct line of communication between brands and their audience and facilitate a deeper understanding and connection. Various forms, such as polls, questionnaires, and live streams, enable diverse and interactive ways to conduct Q&As. Polls and questionnaires offer structured feedback mechanisms, allowing brands to gather specific insights about consumer preferences, opinions, and experiences. These tools are beneficial for market research and also make community members feel heard and valued, as their input directly influences brand decisions and strategies. Live streams, on the other hand, bring an even more dynamic and immediate aspect to Q&As. They create an interactive and real-time environment where community members can engage with brand representatives, ask questions, and receive instant responses. This format is particularly effective in building a sense of connectedness because it leads to more personal and engaging interactions (Forbes Agency Council, 2022).

### **3. Methodology**

After analyzing fundamental literature on the understanding of CBR and pointing out the relevance of brand experiences through community-building, the distinction and similarities of sports brand communities were discussed and actionable methods from the external secondary data were derived. In this process, the picture emerged that most valuable sources around this

topic are older than 2015 and the alignment with the fast-paced modern culture can't be guaranteed. In addition, the research basis on academic work around sports brand communities is comparably small.

This research paper aims to find relevant and new data on this topic to verify hypothesis, build a common framework for sports brand community-building and challenge the current status quo.

### **3.1. Research Design**

Therefore, Expert Interviews (n=5) and a Consumer Survey (n=50) was conducted to enrich the literature perspectives and gain further insights. In addition, three Hypothesis were derived as key points from the theoretical part that are being tested through both research methods:

- Startups in the sports industry that prioritize community-building can differentiate themselves from competitors and achieve higher growth rates.
- Brands that actively engage in community-building efforts experience strong loyalty and attachment among their customer base.
- Involving the community in brand-building efforts plays a significant role in fostering a sense of ownership among consumers.

#### **3.1.1. Design of the Expert Interviews**

Qualitative expert interviews are a methodical survey instrument that aims to retrieve expert knowledge (Wassermann 2015, Tomaszewski, Zarestky, Gonzalez 2020). In this research, the knowledge is surveyed using a semi-structured interview guide as a primary data collection technique (Edwards, Holland 2013). The interview guide begins after a quick introduction about the research background and idea with an opening question based on the protocol of Kaiser (2014), which documents essential information about the expert who was interviewed, such as the functions and areas of responsibility in his company, as well as organizational aspects such

as the date, place, time, and duration. At the beginning of the interview, it was also pointed out that all person-specific information will be anonymized in the process of writing this master's thesis, so it can be viewed as an academic research paper.

The technical part of the interview structure can be divided into three sections: The first part contains questions about the general relevance of brand community-building for the expert. The aim is to receive information about the time and budget that is spent on community-building efforts and about his awareness and understanding of the topic. Secondly, the questions shift towards methods and strategies in use of the expert's company. The last section focuses on the intentions and targeted outcomes of community-building from the perspective of the expert.

### **3.1.2. Design of the Consumer Survey**

The survey's purpose was to gather quantitative data on consumer preferences, behaviors, and attitudes relevant to sports brand community-building. The consumer survey was designed as a cross-sectional study, which involved collecting data from a sample of the target population at one point in time. This approach was chosen due to its effectiveness and its practicality in terms of limited time and research resources (De Leeuw, Hox, Dillman 2008).

The survey instrument was developed through a comprehensive review of existing literature mixed with the first responses from the qualitative interviews. The questionnaire has two demographic and seven thematic questions in a solely closed-ended format. A demographic age-group scale is used by definition of the Pew Research Center (2019), which allows a classification of the respondents in addition to a question about sports behavior. Multiple-choice questions, rankings and likert scales from 1-5 (where 1 always been the highest, and 5 the lowest rating option to avoid biases) have been the preferred options for the technical section to maintain time efficiency for the respondents while gathering lots of information. The questions were clear and concise to ensure ease of understanding and response accuracy while avoiding biases (De Leeuw, Hox, Dillman 2008, Groves et al. 2009).

## 3.2. Sampling Procedures

### 3.2.1. Sampling of the Expert Interviews

Interview partners have been chosen according to their experience and expertise in the sports industry. Those experts are characterized by their subject-specific knowledge, so-called "special knowledge" (Hefferich, 2019; Kaiser, 2014). The main objective was to receive valuable information from C-Level or Founders of sports brands across different industry sections about community-building. In this research, five experts were interviewed to conduct a holistic picture of the multifaceted sports industry and its view on sports communities.

Number (E=Expert)	Date, Time and Duration	Company-Type	Function/Position of the Expert
E1	17.11.2023, 8:37 AM, (22m 45s)	Functional Fitness Gym, Community	CrossFit Owner, Sports Scientist, Personal Trainer
E2	01.12.2023, 10:04 AM, (27m 59s)	International sports club (football)	Head of Marketing & Sales
E3	17.11.2023, 3:49 PM, (33m 51s)	Sports Nutrition/ Supplement Brand	Head of E-Commerce
E4	15.11.2023, 8:05 AM, (18m 57s)	Sports online-coaching, Running community	Self-employed Entrepreneur, Performance Coach
E5	15.11.2023, 15:03 AM, (20m 16s)	Sports apparel brand, Running club	Startup Founder & CEO, Serial Entrepreneur, Running Coach

*Table 1: Expert Interviews Overview (own illustration)*

### 3.2.2. Sampling of the Consumer Survey

The survey targeted adult consumers aged 18 and above, which all belong or participate in at least one sports brand community and practice sports on a regular level (at least 1-2 times a week). This could be ensured by solely spreading the survey link with members of one specific Running Club Community in Lisbon and Munich. This group is representative as the running community incorporates over twenty different nationality backgrounds from all over the world. To avoid biases, the survey was structured to ask general questions without mentioning any

association between the survey and the specific Running Club Community. The total sample size was determined to be 50 respondents. The whole data collection process took place between 19<sup>th</sup> of November, 2023 and 28<sup>th</sup> of November, 2023.

### **3.3. Data Collection and Data Analysis**

The analysis of the interview data was fully qualitative, due to the exploratory approach of the research. Before initiating the analysis, it was essential to organize the data due to the variety of different questions covered in the interviews. To achieve this, the interview transcripts were segmented into three main pillars after the thematic analysis model by Clarke and Braun (2017). The research questions have been derived from the secondary literature research and then clustered into three clusters, which have been already described in the prior section. All interviews were conducted, recorded and transcribed virtually online on Microsoft Teams by the researcher and lasted on average around twenty to thirty minutes, depending on the expert's availability.

The Data collection of the consumer survey was conducted through an online survey platform (Google forms) to facilitate an easy access and cost-effective data gathering. The survey link was distributed via email and through the community group to individuals in the consumer database. Quantitative data from the survey responses were analyzed using statistical software (Excel). Descriptive statistics were used to summarize the data and analyze averages and standard deviations, while the rankings were analyzed through the ranking orders and percentages. The analysis aimed to identify significant patterns and trends in consumer behavior regarding the response to community-building efforts by sports brands.

Both research methods adhered to ethical standards by ensuring the respondent's anonymity and confidentiality. All participants were informed about the purpose of the research and participated deliberately.

## **4. Results**

The results of the research are structured into the analysis of the Expert Interviews to obtain a deep understanding of the brand's perspective across different sectors within the sports industry and the analysis of the Consumer Survey to gain insights of the customer perspective. The analysis follows the thematic method described in the methodology section to divide the content into three sub-clusters.

### **4.1. Brand Perspective – Analysis of Expert Interviews**

The relevance of brand community-building, as highlighted by the five experts, showcases both shared convictions and distinct approaches reflective of their unique contexts. A unanimous agreement on the high importance of community building is evident, rating it at the top of their priority scale, indicating a shared understanding of its critical role in brand success (E1, E2, E4, E5). E3, while also acknowledging its importance, offers a nuanced view, differentiating between elite sports and non-elite sportsmen, suggesting that the relevance also vary depending on the target audience and specification of the product (E3). In terms of investment, there's a considerable variation: E1 dedicates about 15-20 hours per week and 5% of the marketing budget to community efforts, whereas E4 allocates 20-30% of their time and 30-40% of their budget. E5 stands out by dedicating all of their time and budget towards community-building, highlighting it as the center of the brands activities. E2 and E3 do not provide specific budget figures but emphasize substantial time investment. (E2, E3). Another interesting contrast is in the perception of community building's role within the broader marketing strategy. While some see it as central to their overall efforts (E1, E4, E5), E2 and E3 imply that it is one of several important components, with E3 specifically pointing out the product's quality as an even more relevant factor for brand building (E2, E3).

The methods and strategies of brand community-building employed by the five experts reveal both common approaches and distinct tactics tailored to their specific needs. A recurring theme is the significant role of social media and digital platforms in fostering community engagement. E1, for instance, regrets not utilizing social media more effectively from the start and later rectified this by hiring a part-time content creator for a better online community presence (E1). E2 also relies on various digital methods, including live streams and newsletters, to engage with his community (E2). E4, operating entirely online, prioritizes newsletters, community forums, and competitions as key strategies (E4). However, the importance of offline engagement is also recognized. Some emphasize the role of physical spaces and events for deeper community interaction (E1), and balance of online activities with offline events like autograph sessions (E2). E5, too, places the highest importance on offline events, followed by loyalty programs and advertisements (E5). The supplement brand offers a slightly different approach, focusing on engaging with elite athletes, who work as brand ambassadors to bridge the gap between elite and amateur sportsmen (E3). The use of user-generated content and co-creation is another strategy, in which the apparel brand owner notably leverages influencer marketing and co-created content of the community (E5). E3 sponsors events of other communities to promote local subcultures and relies on authentic athlete stories, preferring genuine engagement over direct promotion (E3). Interestingly, some experts prioritize these strategies differently. E4 ranks newsletters as the most crucial tool (E4), while E5 views offline events as the most effective method (E5). This diversity in prioritization reflects the unique contexts and objectives of each expert's brand.

The intentions and outcomes of brand community-building, as outlined by the five experts, display a blend of shared objectives and unique goals tailored to their specific use cases. A common intention among the experts is to promote their product and spread their brand message, who emphasize using community-building to enhance product awareness and brand

identity (E1, E4, E5). Additionally, inspiring and motivating the community is another shared goal, particularly highlighted by E5, who places it at the forefront of their efforts (E5). In terms of outcomes, there is a consensus on the importance of brand loyalty and positive word-of-mouth promotion. Most experts prioritize these aspects, viewing them as crucial indicators of successful community engagement (E1, E2, E4). The supplement brand's approach differs slightly, with a more focused intention on educational aspects, reflecting their emphasis on product quality and technical knowledge (E3). Similarly, while other experts view sales and growth as key outcomes, E3 prioritizes education, seeing it as foundational to achieving other business objectives (E3). However, there are differences in how these outcomes are measured. E4, for instance, relies heavily on word-of-mouth referrals and social media analytics, whereas E2 uses a combination of ticket and merchandise sales data, along with social media engagement rates. E5 measures effectiveness through sales, offline event attendance, and direct customer feedback.

#### **4.2. Consumer Perspective - Analysis of Consumer Survey**

In the survey conducted on brand community building in the sports industry (n=50), the demographic and sports engagement insights reveal a youthful and active respondent base. The majority of participants are from Generation Z, accounting for 56% of the responses, followed by Millennials at 36%, and a smaller representation from Generation X at 8%. Therefore, there won't be a specific analysis for Generation X as the number of answers is not significant. The respondents exhibit a high frequency of sports engagement: 46% practice sports 5-7 times per week, 44% do so 3-4 times per week, indicating a strong commitment to regular physical activity. Only a small fraction of 10%, engage in sports 1-2 times per week while no one answered with 'not at all'.

Across generations, product quality consistently emerges as the most important factor influencing the buying behavior of sports products. The importance of other factors like

community, sustainability, branding, and values varies. Older generations (Generation X and Millennials) tend to value branding and values more, whereas Generation Z gives them less priority. Similarly, individuals who engage more frequently in sports tend to place a higher emphasis on quality and branding, while sustainability and community aspects are less decisive in direct purchase behavior. Overall, community has the highest standard deviation (1.2) indicating that people have very different opinions about its relevance as a direct purchase decision driver.

The survey data on what respondents value in joining a sports brand community reveals multifaceted preferences, with notable differences when analyzed by generation and sports activity level. Overall, the most important Top 3 aspects across all respondents include meeting new people (64%), followed closely by inspirational/motivational aspects (62%) and shared values with the brand (52%). This indicates a strong preference for social connections, inspiration, and value alignment within brand communities. When dissected by generation, Millennials prioritize social interactions, valuing meeting new people the most, and also hold a significant regard for inspiration and belonging. Generation Z, on the other hand, shows a balanced preference for shared values, inspiration, and social connections. Looking at sports activity levels, those who engage in sports 1-2 times per week highly value meeting new people and inspirational aspects equally high. Respondents practicing sports more often find shared values and meeting new people most important.

The survey responses to relevance of community-building efforts reveal insightful preferences that vary across generations and levels of sports activity. Overall, offline events emerge as the most valued effort, commanding a significant 78% of the total responses, indicating a strong preference for physical, real-life brand interactions, followed by loyalty programs, UGC and brand advocacy (38-46%). This trend holds true across all generations and sports activity levels, though with varying degrees of emphasis. For instance, older generations highly value loyalty

programs, contrasting with Generation Z's stronger inclination towards user-generated content and brand advocacy. In terms of sports activity, those engaging in sports 1-2 times per week favor co-creation of content alongside offline events the most, whereas more frequent sportsmen place greater importance on brand advocacy and user-generated content.

Regarding the willingness to pay a price premium, there is a significant 80% of respondents that are willing to pay a price premium for a brand that offers a strong community. 56% of the total sample are willing to pay between 5-20% more for a product of a sports brand with a strong community, whereas 10-20% was voted as the most chosen option (by 30%). There was no significant difference among the different generations or the level of sports activity regarding this question. Still, there was a small tendency towards Generation Z being willing to pay a higher price premium.

## **5. Discussion**

The research focused on exploring the role of community-centric brand building in the sports industry to answer three hypotheses addressing differentiation, loyalty, and ownership. The insights from expert interviews were enriched by consumer survey data, providing a comprehensive understanding of these concepts:

### **5.1. Interpretation of Expert Insights and Survey Findings**

The research insights cohesively highlight the critical importance of brand communities in influencing consumer perceptions and fostering loyalty within the sports industry.

Interestingly, while the majority of survey respondents did not explicitly recognize community-building as a direct factor of general purchasing behavior, it becomes evident that the audience is subconsciously influenced by community-building efforts. This effect subtly shapes their preferred set of brands, and significantly, it emerges that consumers are inclined to pay a premium for brands that successfully cultivate a strong community ethos.

1. **Community Building as a Differentiator:** The unanimous agreement among experts (E1-E5), supported by an average rating of 1.2 for strong agreement, aligns with survey findings where 62% of respondents (top-2-box) identified community-building as a key differentiator. This synergy between expert opinion and consumer perception underscores the strategic value of community-centric approaches in the sports industry, resonating with marketing literature that emphasizes unique brand identity through community engagement (Keller, 2013; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001).
2. **Community Building and Customer Loyalty:** Both experts and survey respondents strongly agreed (average expert rating of 1.2) that community engagement is pivotal in fostering brand loyalty. This finding is particularly relevant in the sports industry, where emotional connections drive allegiance. The survey data revealed that consumers who felt part of a brand's community were more likely to remain loyal, with 76% of respondents (top-2-box) agreeing with the statement. This insight is crucial for startups looking to establish a foothold in the sports sector.
3. **Community Involvement and Ownership:** While experts generally agreed on the importance of community involvement (average rating of 1.9), they acknowledged the complexity of such engagement, especially in product-centric scenarios. This was mirrored in the survey results, where respondents valued being part of brand decisions with 74% agreement of respondents (top-2-box).

These nuanced perspectives reveal the subtle yet profound impact of community building on consumer decision-making and brand allegiance. Additionally, the described willingness to pay more for community-backed brands suggests that consumers value the intangible aspects of a sports brand, such as the sense of belonging and identity that a robust community provides. This aligns with the concept that consumers don't just buy products for their functional attributes but also for the symbolic value and identity offered by the brand community (Keller,

1993). The slight trend of Generation Z for higher price-premium indicates a shift in consumer values toward community engagement, supporting the theories of social identity and brand communities proposed by Muniz and O'Guinn (2001). The empirical results align with the theoretical models of Arya and Fetscherin that highlight the importance of emotional connections in CBR to create brand attachment through brand communities (Arya et al. 2019, Fetscherin 2020). The mutual positive agreement between experts and the customer perspective on the hypothesis indicates the deep impact of these communities on consumer perceptions and decision-making processes, which was theoretically described before (Coelho et al. 2019). The willingness for a price-premium is a tangible indicator of the value consumers place on brand communities, transcending the traditional product-centric view of brand value and reinforcing the concept that community-building is not just a marketing strategy but a core component of brand equity in the sports industry.

## **5.2. Strategic framework for sports brand community building**

The interpretation of the empirical data combined with theoretical foundations, lays a clear path for successful sports brand community building. The proposed model synthesizes these insights, presenting a straightforward yet comprehensive framework. It encapsulates the key aspects of brand community building, integrating practical expert opinions and insights of consumers from a behavioral economics perspective:

## Sports Brand Community Building Strategic Framework

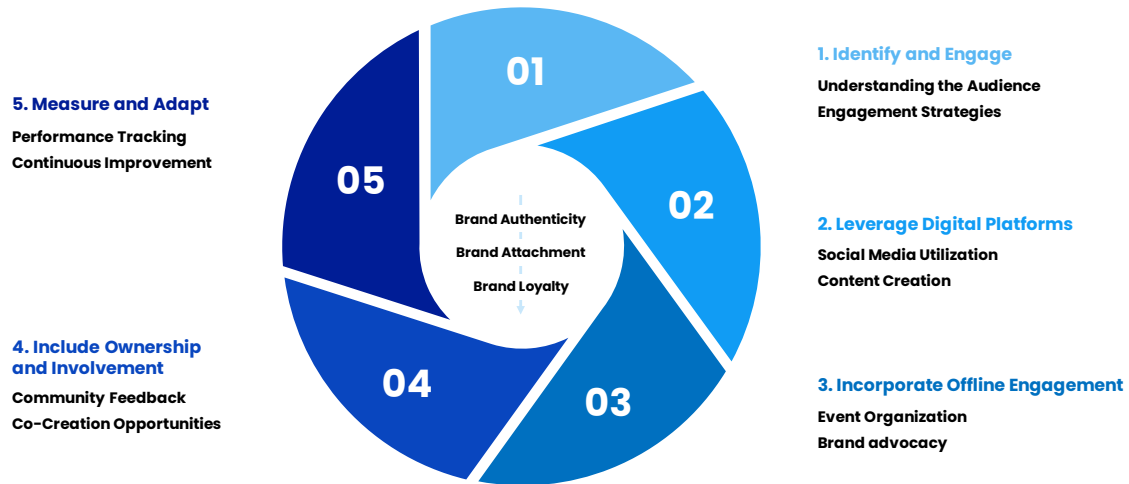


Figure 2: Sports Brand Community Building (own illustration)

The model above streamlines the intricacies of community-building by offering a practical, five-step guide for sports brands. Firstly, understanding the target audience and crafting a compelling, shareable brand narrative is crucial, as emphasized by McKinsey (2022). The empirical consumer research indicated that each demographic group has distinct preferences and values, which must be considered. Secondly, leveraging digital platforms is essential for facilitating interactive, two-way communication in today's digital era. User-generated content is identified as the most effective tool for digital community building, aligning with both consumer perspectives and expert opinions. In addition to digital strategies, a robust community-building approach should incorporate offline engagement activities. Survey respondents rated these as the most significant tool for community development, echoing the literature on the importance of real-life experiences in creating stronger brand connections (Young, Takeda, Cuellar 2011; McCully et al. 2011). It's important to prioritize values and community members, sharing the brand's ethos rather than merely focusing on product marketing and education, as suggested by the interview experts. The consensus among experts and consumers regarding the importance of fostering a sense of ownership and involvement by

including customers in decision-making processes underscores its necessity in this framework. Lastly, community-building efforts should be constantly measured and adapted, trusting the insights of industry experts. Engagement rates, event attendance, and direct feedback are key metrics to track the effectiveness of these efforts. Based on these outcomes, brands should continuously refine their strategies in response to feedback, market trends, and performance data, which can be derived from the expert interviews.

### **5.3. Implications and Limitations**

This framework is designed as a practical guide for sports brands and enriches the existing literature. It introduces new empirical data and is unique in the area as it combines insights from both experts and consumers. This dual-faceted, mixed-method approach adds substantial value and credibility to the developed framework and existing literature. However, the study faces certain limitations. The relatively small size of the survey might impact the generalizability of the findings. While the diversity of the expert interviews offers a holistic and broad perspective, it also introduces potential biases, as it represents only one subjective opinion per subsection of the sports industry. Furthermore, the research's focus on the sports industry might not fully translate to other sectors while time and resource constraints restricted broader interpretation and more extensive data collection.

## **6. Conclusion**

The literature review in this thesis underscored the importance of community-building by elucidating key aspects of customer-brand relationships. It emphasized achieving brand authenticity through the creation of immersive brand experiences, leading to heightened brand attachment and customer loyalty. The review highlighted the unique interplay between online and offline communities, particularly in the sports industry, where emotional connections are forged through a shared passion for physical activity, sports competition, and local identity.

The relevance of brand community-building, methods and strategies for its implementation, and the intentions and outcomes were explored through expert interviews. These interviews provided a nuanced understanding of how different sports brands approach community building, underlining the significance of both online and offline engagement and the need for genuine connections beyond mere product marketing. The survey offered insights into consumer behavior and preferences. It indicated a willingness among consumers to pay a premium for brands with strong communities, highlighting the tangible value of community building. The survey also shed light on the aspects that consumers value in brand communities, such as meeting new people, shared values with the brand, and inspirational elements. The thesis synthesized these findings into a practical framework for sports brand community building. This framework encapsulates the critical aspects of understanding the target audience, leveraging digital platforms, incorporating offline engagement, fostering a sense of ownership and involvement, and constantly measuring and adapting processes. Ultimately, the three hypotheses, which are grounded in the literature research, were validated by both experts and customers in their applicability to the sports industry.

Future research could expand on this study by exploring diverse consumer segments, examining the long-term impacts of community-centric brand building strategies, and adapting the findings to other industries. Additionally, a more extensive empirical data collection and interpretation could further enrich the understanding of brand community dynamics.

In conclusion, this thesis contributes significantly to both academic and practical understanding of brand communities in the sports industry. It offers a strategic framework for sports startups to utilize their communities effectively for brand development and growth, bridging theoretical knowledge with practical applications. This study paves the way for sports brands to harness the power of their communities, ensuring sustainable growth and success in a competitive marketplace.

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## **Appendix**

**Appendix 1: Expert Interview E1**

**Appendix 2: Expert Interview E2**

**Appendix 3: Expert Interview E3**

**Appendix 4: Expert Interview E4**

**Appendix 5: Expert Interview E5**

**Appendix 6: Interview Structure**

**Appendix 7: Survey Structure**

**Appendix 8: Survey Results**

## Appendix 1: Expert Interview E1

Mario Kuhnt started transcription

Mario Kuhnt 0:11

Alright.

So thank you very much E1 for joining this morning for this interview for my master thesis, and 1st question is it fine for you if we record this interview?

E1 0:21

Yes, for sure.

Mario Kuhnt 0:22

Perfect. Alright, then let's jump right in. I'd like to give you a quick overview of my master thesis, titled "Community-Centric Brand Building." The focus is on identifying strategies for companies to leverage their community as a brand development tool within the sports industry. I aim to explore this from two perspectives: the brand's point of view, examining how companies build and strengthen their communities, and the customer's perspective, investigating whether a community matters to them and if it influences their willingness to pay a premium for a brand with a strong community connection.

Now, let me start by asking you to introduce yourself. Could you share your role, what you're currently doing, and the company you work for?

E1 1:26

Thanks for having me. I'm E1, 39 years old, and I'm a sports scientist. I started my career 15 years ago and have been working in the fitness industry since then. Currently, I work as a fitness coach and personal trainer, both online and offline, for over 12 years. I've been the owner of [company name] Munich for more than 10 and a half years. That's the gist of it.

Mario Kuhnt 2:18

Alright, perfect. Thank you very much. This interview is structured into three parts. First, I'd like to understand the relevance of brand community building from your perspective. Then, we'll delve deeper into the methods and strategies of brand community building. Lastly, we'll discuss the intentions and outcomes—why you are actively involved in brand building.

E1 2:46

Yeah.

Mario Kuhnt 2:46

If you were to assess the relevance of community building for [company name] Munich on a scale from one to 10, where one indicates it's the most important brand development tool for the growth of the community, and 10 means it's not important at all for the brand, how would you rate it?

E1 2:56

Yes.

I would rate it actually a 1.

Mario Kuhnt 3:13

You said one?

E1 3:14

Yes.

Mario Kuhnt 3:14

Alright. And how much time and how much budget do you currently spend on community building efforts? If you can just give me a rough estimate in percentage maybe.

E1 3:26

It's a bit hard to pinpoint with a specific number because the training itself, our primary service, plays a significant role in community building.

Mario Kuhnt 3:40

Hmm.

E1 3:40

In a more traditional sense, not factoring in the training itself, I'd estimate it takes about one to two hours per day, roughly. On some days, maybe even more. So, I'd say around 15 to 20 hours per week.

E1 4:05

Excluding events that occur, I'd say once a month or so, those are additional.

Mario Kuhnt 4:15

And concerning the budget, do you have any insights into the percentage allocated to community building efforts compared to the overall marketing budget?

E1 4:26

Umm, I would say around 5%.

Mario Kuhnt 4:34

And do you think they should put even more effort into community building or they are already doing a great job at [company name] Munich?

E1 4:42

I believe the key lies in putting in more effort rather than relying solely on money as the driving force. It's about the effort itself and the creative ideas you can implement to build the community. I don't think you necessarily need more money to achieve that.

Mario Kuhnt 4:57

Alright, perfect. The next question is, what recommendation would you give to yourself in terms of community building if you were starting the brand from scratch again? Imagine joining [company name] Munich in its early beginnings, around 10 years ago. Are there specific tips or strategies you would recommend to grow the community faster, some speed tips you would give yourself?

E1 5:30

Yes, considering 10 years ago, social media, especially platforms like Instagram and TikTok, were not as developed as they are today. I would definitely leverage them more for community building.

Mario Kuhnt 5:39

Hmm yes.

E1 5:41

We began utilizing social media effectively maybe around three years ago, possibly at the onset of the pandemic. That's when it really started to gain traction. Before that, it was more of a necessity, and to be honest, it was poorly executed. Moving forward, I would approach it with more professionalism and invest more effort into it.

E1 6:04

Perhaps even consider hiring someone, maybe on a part-time basis, with professional equipment to create high-quality videos and photos. Ensuring that the people involved can effectively convey the message and showcase our community even more to the world.

Mario Kuhnt 6:22

Additionally, apart from social media, is there another aspect to consider?

E1 6:35

Certainly. [company name] inherently revolves around a community-driven training and service model. It's inevitable that a community forms when people work out together, share the challenges, and support each other. It's an integral part of the [company name] experience.

I wouldn't emphasize events, but instead, I would focus on creating a space where the community can thrive together. For example, having a bar or a designated hangout area. Unfortunately, in the initial stages, we didn't have the space to implement such features.

Mario Kuhnt 7:17

Mm-hmm.

E1 7:19

Our available space wasn't sufficient for this kind of setup. If given the chance, I would either find a larger location or explore ways to make it happen. Additionally, I would organize even more community-driven events.

Mario Kuhnt 7:39

What do you mean by that, what could be a community-based event?

E1 7:42

While the community naturally forms during training, which may be just one hour per day or a few times per week, community-based events allow for more extended interaction, spanning 3-4, maybe even five hours, or even an entire evening.

Mario Kuhnt 7:54

Hmm got it.

E1 8:02

Currently, we have an event called "Friday Night Lights" where we gather on Friday evenings, work out together, and it extends beyond just one hour of training. It's about having fun together, maybe having a beer, having a BBQ, and similar activities. Looking back, I would have started merchandising products earlier. People want to identify with what they do, and even though it's not primarily revenue-driven, it fosters a sense of community. Having the first T-shirt with the [company name] Munich logo came in quite late, and I would have initiated that from the beginning.

Mario Kuhnt 8:24

Hmm.

E1 8:42

When people wear your branded merchandise, it becomes a conversation starter. They hang out with friends who might not be into [company name], and naturally, the question arises: "What are you doing?" It's a simple yet effective way to spread your message and expand your community. If I could go back, I would incorporate this strategy much earlier.

Mario Kuhnt 9:00

Yeah, really good points. Thank you so much. And then if we hop onto the next question, it's basically about the hypothesis I built based on my theoretical research from the literature I read on this topic and I just want to get your opinion if you agree on the statements.

E1 9:17

Yes.

Mario Kuhnt 9:18

So if you give a one, it would mean you strongly agree, two is agree, three would be neither, four would be disagree and five is strongly disagree.

E1 9:26

Yeah.

Mario Kuhnt 9:30

So the first statement is startups in the sport industry that prioritize community building can differentiate themselves from competitors and achieve higher growth rates.

E1 9:40

A 1.

Mario Kuhnt 9:43

Alright. The second: Brands that actively engage in community-building efforts experience strong loyalty and attachment among their customer base.

E1 9:53

I would say 2.

Mario Kuhnt 9:55

Hmm. And the last one: Involving the community in brand-building efforts plays a significant role in fostering a sense of ownership among community members.

E1 10:06

Uh, I would say 1.5. So yeah, but it's hard to say like with a scale of 1 to 10, I would rate this as a 2.

Mario Kuhnt 10:18

And now the second part, the methods and strategies to build the community. I want to ask you, what are the methods you use to interact with your community and if you can rank those regarding their importance. I can quickly share my screen, so I think it's easier if you see them, especially to rank it.

E1 10:38

Yeah.

Mario Kuhnt 10:44

Can you see the screen?

E1 10:48

Uh, yes.

Mario Kuhnt 10:49

So, here is the list of different items already provided. If any points are missing, feel free to add them. Later, we can proceed with the ranking.

E1 11:03

Yes, so currently, we don't have ambassadors, at least not in the classical sense. Our coaches play a role, but it's not structured as ambassadorship. We do leverage user-generated content extensively. However, we don't utilize influencer marketing. On the positive side, we actively engage in offline events. Additionally, we make use of polls and questionnaires, and we incorporate live streams into our strategy.

Mario Kuhnt 11:42

Hmm. You don't have loyalty programs? If somebody comes more regularly then they get something special for example?

E1 11:55

No, not at all. During the pandemic, as a gesture of appreciation for those who stuck with us, we offered a free loyalty package. There was a shirt, and stuff like this, but not an ongoing way.

Mario Kuhnt 12:13

Ok. Hmm.

E1 12:16

And uh, if you go more often, it's cheaper, but that's not a loyalty program.

At least in my opinion, so I would say no.

Mario Kuhnt 12:24

Yes I agree.

E1 12:25

We incorporate live streams into our strategy, and we've put a considerable amount of effort into it.

While it's not perfect, it's significantly better than it used to be. Our interaction on Instagram and other social media platforms has also improved considerably.

E1 12:49

We actively create content for our social media pages and engage with our customers and the community. Additionally, we have something akin to an advanced calendar, perhaps related to Christmas and similar festivities.

I think the biggest one is Christmas, but also like during fall and easter, there are special activities.

Mario Kuhnt 13:36

What do you call those activities? Also events or just like little gimmicks?

E1 13:42

I would describe it more as gimmicks. During these times, we have events and activities, including giveaways similar to an advent calendar. Sometimes, we collaborate with partners, where they contribute, and we give items away. We may also incorporate challenges, such as achieving specific training goals or the best time in workouts, during these periods.

Mario Kuhnt 13:46

If you were to rank these strategies in terms of importance, starting from one (most important) to how, how would you prioritize them?

E1 14:23

Umm, I would say the offline events are one.

User generated content I would say is 2.

Interaction on social media 3. Seasonal special activities for giveaways 5 and Polls questionnaires 6.

Mario Kuhnt 15:02

And the live streams?

E1 15:03

Sorry, I forgot about those. I would say they are number 4, so you can place that in between.

Mario Kuhnt 15:24

Alright, then I'll adjust the rest.

And do you think there is a difference between having an online and an offline community for you or is it kind of the same that you see online on social media and also offline?

E1 15:43

So as we don't have an online product the offline community is way more important for us, for sure. But online plays a way bigger role in attracting new customers for us, but it's not so important for community building compared to offline.

Mario Kuhnt 16:04

And do you think that the people who follow you online are the same who show up at the classes and are active at the community events or is it a different community?

E1 16:14

No, it's the same.

Mario Kuhnt 16:26

And do you think there's a difference between building a community in general and building a community in the sports sector?

E1 16:36

Building a community in the sports sector, I would say, is way more important and also easier, especially when you have offline interactions. Sports inherently is a social activity that binds people together, and that's why it's crucial. In the sports service or training sector, competition is fierce, and people can easily switch, making community building essential.

Mario Kuhnt 17:09

Hmm.

E1 17:11

Having a good community ensures that people will stick around and stay engaged for a longer duration. It's easier because when you work out together, sweat together, and spend a significant amount of time together, a strong community naturally forms. So, not only is it more important, but it's also comparatively easier, especially when compared to building communities in other sectors.

Mario Kuhnt 17:35

Alright, thank you for that.

Now, for the last part, exploring the intentions and outcomes of brand community building. First, I'd like to ask about your intentions. Please select the top three that apply the most, and we can later rank them. After that, we can go through the list of different items related to brand community building.

E1 17:47

Yes.

Mario Kuhnt 17:54

So just about the intention first, why are you doing something in community building and then maybe you have something in mind that I'm not listening in here.

E1 18:05

I would say for sure, let's say promote product. So our product is the training itself.

So this is number 1; 2 is connect with people with the same interests, which hopefully leads to sales in the end.

Mario Kuhnt 18:20

Hmm alright.

E1 18:32

#3 is I guess, inspire and motivate.

Mario Kuhnt 18:37

And is there something I forgot? Or do you think the list is complete?

E1 18:44

Umm so for that's enough. I think it's OK.

Mario Kuhnt 18:56

All right.

And then, because the intention is something you can change or something you actively do, now what is the desired outcome you want to have for your brand?

And maybe again, you can rank the items from one to six.

E1 19:14

OK. So number one for us is brand loyalty. And 2.. so they're all really important.

It's hard.

Mario Kuhnt 19:33

Of course. Yeah.

That's why I wanted the ranking, because I knew like most people would say, everything is important.

E1 19:40

Yeah, yeah. I would say brand attachment is #6 so last one I guess.

Mario Kuhnt 19:47

OK.

E1 19:58

Positive word of mouth is #2. Maybe it's even the other way around. Maybe brand loyalty is 2 and positive word of mouth one, it's hard. So, yeah, let's change it.

Mario Kuhnt 20:12

Gonna change it now.

E1 20:21

Then growth is #3. Brand authenticity is #4 and sales is #5.

Mario Kuhnt 20:36

But then again, is there something missing?

Or do you think the list is fine like this for outcomes you want to achieve with community building?

E1 20:46

No, I think it's complete, but for now it's I think it's really good.

Mario Kuhnt 20:50

And then last question of the interview, how do you measure the performance and progress of your community? How can you see if it's growing? How do you track it?

E1 21:01

For our brand community building intentions, the top three priorities are Subjective assessment on one, questionnaires and polls on second and event retention on third, measured by the number of people signing up or attending seasonal events.

Mario Kuhnt 21:47

And what do the questionnaires and polls consist of?

E1 21:56

Yeah, I'm not familiar with all the questions, but it's centered around certain aspects. The initial focus is on the service itself: the satisfaction with training and potential improvements. Then, there's consideration for liking the coaches and events. A broader view on the overall service, including programming, facility satisfaction, and finally, a reflection on what improvements can be made across all these aspects.

Mario Kuhnt 22:33

Alright then thank you very much for the interview and then I can stop the recording here.

Mario Kuhnt stopped transcription

## **Appendix 2 : Expert Interview E2**

Mario Kuhnt started transcription

Mario Kuhnt 0:31

E2, first of all, thank you for participating and for the interview for my master's thesis. The first question is, is it okay for you that we record this so that I can create the transcript afterwards?

E2 0:37

You are welcome.

Mario Kuhnt 0:45

Great, let's dive right in. I'll share my screen with you to display the interview files. First off, I'll give a brief introduction about my project and its purpose.

E2 0:52

Yes.

Mario Kuhnt 0:59

My project centers around my master's thesis at Nova SBE, focusing on 'Community-Centric Brand Building'. It explores how various brands work to build a community, highlighting the importance of having a strong community presence for a brand. This is examined from multiple perspectives. For instance, you represent the perspective of an association, right? Additionally, I've looked at brands in sectors like sports apparel and supplements manufacturing—different niches within the sports industry—to understand their approaches to community building. Concurrently, I conducted a survey with consumers to gauge their interest in brand communities, investigating how crucial community engagement is for them, whether it's a decisive factor in their purchasing decisions, and if they're willing to pay more for brands with a strong community. That's a brief overview of my research. Perhaps you could start by introducing yourself, detailing who you are, what you do, and where you work.

E2 2:10

Absolutely, my name is E2 . I'm currently 26 years old and have been working as Head of Marketing and Sales at [company name] since last year. For my undergraduate degree, I studied Sport Management and then pursued a master's in Sports Marketing. After that, I started working in Hamburg at a small boutique agency. There, I primarily managed our client Visa, the credit card company, and was responsible for activating their sports rights. At my agency, I handled Visa's account, focusing on leveraging their various sports rights, including the NFL, women's football, men's football, the Olympics, and more. Last year, I was involved in activating the NFL rights in Germany, including the first game in Munich.

Mario Kuhnt 3:07

Alright, cool. For this interview, let's focus solely on your role with [company name], addressing all questions from the perspective of the club, of course through your viewpoint. The interview is structured into three parts. In the first part, we'll briefly discuss the relevance of community building for you. How important is community building for your organization? Then, in the second part, we'll explore the methods and strategies you use. And in the final part, we'll delve into the intention behind these efforts—why do you do it, and what outcomes or goals are you hoping to achieve?

E2 3:43

Yes.

Mario Kuhnt 3:44

Starting with the first question, on a scale of 1 to 10, how would you rate the importance of community building for the [company name] brand? Where 1 means it's the most crucial aspect of what you do as a brand, focusing on effective marketing, and 10 means it's not relevant for you.

E2 4:03

I would say it's definitely between 1 and 2, actually. The reason is simple: Without a community to engage with, and I consider our fans as our community, we couldn't achieve much.

Mario Kuhnt 4:10

Alright.

E2 4:20

Without these fans, there wouldn't be anything else. In other words, if we didn't invest in the community, our stadium would be empty. We wouldn't have any value, no fans to buy merchandise. There would be no spectators, and essentially, it just wouldn't exist. Therefore, it's crucial that all our marketing efforts really reach our defined target audience, to always get the best possible results for the brand. This means creating awareness, attracting attention, and also sparking interest so that we might gain new fans who come to the stadium and experience a game. So, it's definitely very important for creating a connection between fans and the club, or in our case, the franchise. We are not a traditional club. By doing this, we also foster loyalty, which is extremely important.

Mario Kuhnt 5:10

Yes, very good, and if you were to say, how much time and budget do you spend on driving forward community building efforts? Of course, it's challenging to quantify.

E2 5:50

Of course, I can't give you an exact figure for the budget, but it's relatively low compared to other clubs and sports companies, like Eintracht Frankfurt, for example.

Mario Kuhnt 5:55

Yes.

E2 6:04

Frankfurt, it's probably just a fraction of what they invest in marketing. It's a very small six-figure amount, that's what I can tell you about the budget. And time-wise, it's quite substantial because it's important to maintain the community. I mean, you can't just go through the season and then stop at the end of September when the champion is crowned. Then there's no football – what do we do then?

Mario Kuhnt 6:16

Mhm.

E2 6:36

Then it's about continuing to stay in touch with our fans and community through social media or newsletters, constantly supplying them with information. Then it starts with things like season ticket sales – we need to contact all of last year's season ticket holders and ask if they're interested in purchasing a season ticket for the new season, so that we're back in touch with them.

Then, my main focus is on contacting all our sponsors, which currently takes up 100% of my time. I talk to them about their experience of the season. Did they enjoy being with us? Would they like to continue next year? If yes, what kind of advertising measures would they like to implement? What would they like to change? So, it's like a small review with all the sponsors. Now, with the Christmas season upon us, it's especially important to foster this sense of community. Starting today, we are launching an advent calendar to give something back to our fans. We have teamed up with our partners and included prizes like tickets for the Lions.

Tickets for FSV, breakfast at HUK, so that we're really giving back to our community, our fans, for all the support and loyalty they've shown us. And of course, we involve our partners so they too are recognized – like, for example, Bakery Hoch is a partner of [company name]. This all goes hand in hand with community building, creating a win-win situation for both the partners and the community.

Mario Kuhnt 8:13

Yes, of course, without interrupting, but now let's just focus on the part about the general relevance. We can delve into the details later. If you had to give an estimate, just a rough percentage of how much time and budget you spend on this, exactly.

E2 8:13

In terms of how much work time goes into it, I would say, off-season, it's about 90% focused on the community. During the season, it's a bit less, maybe around 65%, because by then all the advertising measures are already completed and planned.

Mario Kuhnt 8:34

Mhm alright.

E2 8:55

Planned, as in everything with the sponsors is already settled. And we're constantly interacting with the community on social media, but the journey to get there is very, very labor-intensive.

Mario Kuhnt 9:04

Yes, and as a second part to that question, would you say you're doing a really good job, or do you see areas for improvement?

E2 9:12

I believe if you say you're doing a very good job and you're completely satisfied, then you're probably doing something wrong. We're on a very good path; for instance, we've just hit 30,000 followers on Instagram, which is a milestone for us. But we can't rest on our laurels. If we don't publish anything for the community or continue to engage them with content, then things will decline.

Mario Kuhnt 9:24

Mhm.

E2 9:37

It possibly decline again, so we definitely can't rest on our achievements. We must continuously work hard and not become complacent with the successes we've had.

Mario Kuhnt 9:45

Okay, perfect. And in the area of community building, if you were to start again from zero, like having zero Instagram followers or just beginning to gain momentum, what advice would you give yourself to achieve the same level of success more quickly or to be even more successful?

E2 10:28

Definitely, speaking from this year's experience, I'd say fully leverage the NFL theme. 'Leverage' might sound a bit harsh, but during the two weeks of NFL here, we really pulled together, attending every event possible and making our presence felt everywhere. So, riding the NFL wave is crucial.

Secondly, I would suggest reaching out to schools early on to build the community. Children significantly influence their parents and can introduce them to a new sport that the parents aren't familiar with.

Third, and what I find extremely important, is digital community building, be it through social media or newsletters. It's vital to bring the latest information quickly to the fans to keep them updated and engaged with what's happening.

Mario Kuhnt 11:27

Ja, very cool, thank you for that already.

E2 11:29

And yes, let's be honest, online is naturally the fastest way. You write something quickly, send it off, and then everyone has it on their digital device, whatever it may be, and that's how information is shared.

Mario Kuhnt 11:44

Yes, and now I would like to give you three statements or hypotheses, and your task is to rate each one from 1 to 5, where 1 means you strongly agree and 5 means you strongly disagree. Shall we start with the first hypothesis?

E2 12:00

Yes.

Mario Kuhnt 12:03

Startups in the sports industry that are active in community building can differentiate themselves from their competitors and thereby achieve higher growth rates

E2 12:17

Mhm. I would give it a 2, simply because not everything can be attributed to community building. The background is sporting success, even though from a business case perspective, it's often said not to be included, it's an important factor in building a following. No one wants to support a club or a sports company that only loses. That's crucial at the start, like how we fortunately became champions in our first year and have continued to play successfully in the following years.

Mario Kuhnt 12:30

I see.

E2 12:56

Of course, it's easier to build a community when you're successful rather than when you're consistently losing, like going home with a 0-12 record every year. Then it becomes difficult to form a community, to engage the fans, and to strengthen the theme of loyalty, which is obviously important.

Mario Kuhnt 13:15

Yes, the second hypothesis is that brands actively engaged in community building efforts have a stronger brand loyalty and connection with their customers than brands that don't.

E2 13:27

One hundred percent, I'd definitely give a strong one to that. It ties into what I just mentioned. If you manage to build loyal customers, which naturally takes a couple of years, they will keep coming back, and then you always have a fan who is there.

Mario Kuhnt 13:32

Mhm.

E2 13:46

If you manage to achieve this point of loyalty, then they will keep coming back, regardless of whether we win or lose

Mario Kuhnt 14:02

Yes, and the last statement would be, if you actively involve the community in community building, they feel a stronger sense of being truly a part of [company name], when they are included in these processes and can participate, not just as passive consumers, but actively involved.

E2 14:27

Yes, one hundred percent, I'd like to give a 2, meaning I agree. Sure, you can involve the community to a certain extent, like in designing merchandise or shows. But ultimately, there are decisions that need to be made that might not please the fans, such as ticket price increases or other costs that suddenly arise. In these situations, you can't really involve the fans. You need to keep them informed so they don't feel alienated, but there are decisions where the fans can't have a say because it's about the business case.

Mario Kuhnt 15:12

Yes, I understand. Now we move on to the second part: Methods and Strategies. I have listed a few here, I'm not sure if you can see them yet, perfect. So now, it's about the methods you use at [company name]. Maybe you could also rate them, and perhaps in a second step, rank them, saying which is number 1, 2, 3, etc. But maybe you can tell me first which methods you actually use and maybe even add something if you think something is missing, focusing specifically on community building, not on general marketing.

E2 15:21

Alright, so we have Live Streams, called Deep Purple Lounge, which happens on Twitch every Monday at 8:00 PM. During these streams, players are introduced, and fans can also ask questions about what's happening in the office. Then there's Arash, which is our annual survey to get direct feedback from our fans. And you mentioned 'Generated Content'

Mario Kuhnt 16:28

Exactly, so fans create content, like posts on social media, and we either repost it or engage with it in some way.

E2 16:31

Yes, we do that too. We have fans who create graphics for us, and we simply publish them. We believe it's a way to involve the community.

Mario Kuhnt 16:41

Mhm.

E2 16:45

Influencer marketing, yes, we've tried it, but it hasn't been very successful in building our own community. Sure, you have the influencer community, but when they are spread all over Germany, it doesn't benefit us in Frankfurt as a location. And of course, offline events like closing ceremonies or autograph sessions are essential. We haven't introduced new programs like that yet.

Mario Kuhnt 17:03

Mhm.

E2 17:15

Indeed, we are currently in the process of evaluating a lot of our merchandise sales data. For instance, we offered job opportunities to individuals who generated the most revenue and provided them with a season ticket at a very reasonable price or the option to choose a game jersey from the shop. We're starting to build on that. To rank these methods, I would actually prioritize offline events at 1, live streams at 2, user-generated content at 3, Holz and Question Aris at 4, and influencer marketing at 5.

Mario Kuhnt 18:26

Let me think if there's anything else I might have forgotten or if you think there's something that's super important for you as a community method.

E2 18:31

I see. Newsletters are essential, especially in the digital realm. It's crucial to keep fans engaged with the latest information, and I would rank it as 1 as well. As you mentioned, it helps quickly deliver important updates to fans, whether it's about season ticket promotions, new partners, or player signings.

Mario Kuhnt 19:08

Would you say there's a difference for you between the online community, those who follow you on platforms like Instagram, and the offline community, the ones who actually come to the games? Or is it the same for you, and you treat them equally?

E2 19:26

There is definitely a difference. The offline community, those who attend games and events, are more engaged in terms of physical presence. There's a dedicated core of fans who come to every game and event, which is different from the online community where it's easier for people to simply click the follow button without attending offline events.

Mario Kuhnt 19:55

Would you say, in general, there's a difference when building a community as a brand in a non-sports-related field compared to building a community as a sports brand? What are the differences, if any?

E2 20:19

I think, generally speaking, building a community is similar in both cases because the initial goal is to reach a large number of people who are interested in your product, whether it's clothing or sports, and you want them to either shop with you or attend your games. However, when you get into the details, there may be some differences. In sports, success is a significant factor. A successful franchise is different from an unsuccessful one. In contrast, in the fashion industry, you might need to consider loyalty programs. For example, if a customer spends a certain amount per month, they get a €120 voucher. This helps you continue to build the community and share these benefits through word of mouth, propaganda, or social media. But I believe that initially, the goal is quite similar because you want to capture people who could be interested and then start to engage them.

Mario Kuhnt 21:35

Alright, and now let's move on to the last part of the first section of the question, so to speak, about the intention, why do you do it, or what is your thought behind the whole concept of Community Building? And here I have listed a few again, and maybe you can rank the top 3 that resonate with you the most, can you take a moment to read them?

E2 22:00

Mhm, of course, promoting the product is crucial, absolutely. Our product is sports, specifically football, and we need to market it as effectively as possible with our community to fill the stadium. So, I would directly place that as number 1. Due to the fact that we only have 6 home games, it's a limited timeframe, and we need to go all out.

Mario Kuhnt 22:27

Mhm.

E2 22:27

Then, of course, connecting people with shared interests. It's clear that we don't want our community to be limited to people who only watch bowling, for example, and have no interest in American football. While we do have many football fans, including newcomers, we want individuals who have a general passion for sports and are open to trying something new.

Gathering consumer insights is crucial as well. This is essential for understanding your company's value. When you collect digital data from your customers, you gain insight into your company's worth and where you stand. So, I would place gathering consumer insights at number 2.

Lastly, engaging with the press who share an interest in our field. Having contact with the press who have a genuine interest in what we do is also crucial. Without consumer insights, you wouldn't know anything about your target audience – their age, location, buying behavior, income, etc. All of this information is essential for building and promoting your product. So, you can place insights at number 1, the product at number 2, and engaging with the press at number 3. Without consumer insights, you won't have a chance to effectively promote your product.

Mario Kuhnt 23:36

Yes, I understand that. So, what is the goal, so to speak? What should be the end result? To have a strong community? There are also topics such as sales, overall growth, primarily related to the community. Positive referral rates and customer loyalty, as well as the brand's authenticity and strong customer connections, are probably goals that are important in some way. So, the question now is whether you could rank them in terms of importance, but specifically related to the community. I don't want to focus on the entire brand.

E2 23:54

So reach is very important and brand loyalty as well! I would rank them at 2. Positive Word of Mouth is, of course, important because having good word-of-mouth promotion is crucial. If many people speak negatively about their experience at the stadium, a community won't thrive. Then, of course, there's the community aspect, where we appear authentic and people believe in what we do. As a result, when we appear genuine, loyalty and other factors naturally follow because you're selling things. What do you mean by "Brand attachment"?

Mario Kuhnt 25:13

That is essentially how closely the customer is connected to you, or how intense their feeling of connection to the brand is.

E2 25:25

Mhm, yeah, I would maybe rank it as a 5 and as a 2 as well, with Loyalty as a 2 because a strong connection naturally leads to loyalty. So, if you have a good bond with the customer, they will come back.

Mario Kuhnt 25:37

Yes, very good, and then we can move on to the last question. We've talked about the intention and desired outcomes, but how do you track it, or what do you use to measure community progress?

E2 26:04

Of course, in this regard, there isn't a one-size-fits-all solution that covers everything. We can look at individual areas and how they have developed compared to the previous year. For example, in ticket sales, we examine ticket numbers from the previous year to this year, and then we go into detail to see which customers have purchased, where they come from, whether they are loyal customers or new customers. We need to delve into the details. The same applies to merchandise; we analyze who buys the most, where they come from, and how frequently they make purchases.

Regarding social media, we clearly track how the reach has grown and what the engagement rate is on individual posts or links. I must say our engagement rate is generally quite good, usually above four and a half percent, which is quite acceptable.

Additionally, we assess the reception of our events. For offline events, we often see familiar faces from the fan club, which constitutes the hardcore fan base that stands by us in every situation and provides assistance. There isn't a one-size-fits-all formula from our perspective. Instead, we must examine each individual aspect and conduct an analysis of how it has grown and where the consumer insights come into play. These insights help us shape the marketing strategy for the new season to continue engaging and growing the community.

Mario Kuhnt 27:47

Understood, we can conclude the official part of the transcription here. Thank you very much for participating in this interview.

Mario Kuhnt stopped transcription

### **Appendix 3 : Expert Interview E3**

Mario Kuhnt started transcription

Mario Kuhnt 0:08

Hi, E3. Thank you for participating in my master's thesis interview. First question before we start: Is recording the interview fine for you?

E3 0:18

Sure, go ahead.

Mario Kuhnt 0:20

I'm conducting research in the field of 'Community-Centric Brand Building.' Specifically, I'm exploring the strategies that startups can employ to leverage their community as a tool for brand development, with a focus on the sports industry.

My research involves two primary perspectives. Firstly, I want to highlight the practices of branding experts like yourself. I'm interested in learning what these experts do to develop their brand's community and how vital the community is to their brand. Secondly, I'm seeking insights from customers to understand whether they value brands that offer a strong community. Additionally, I'm curious to know if these customers are willing to pay a premium for brands that provide a robust community experience.

To start, could you please introduce yourself, tell us about your role in your company, and provide some information about the company you're associated with?

E3 1:23

Thank you for the introduction. I'm E3, and I've been with [company name] for the past two years. My role at the company is as the Head of E-commerce, where I oversee all aspects of global online sales. This includes responsibilities related to online marketing, customer success, and managing specific IT resources. That pretty much sums it up.

Mario Kuhnt 1:52

To begin, we've structured this interview into three main parts. Firstly, we'll discuss the significance of brand community building. Next, I'll ask you some questions regarding the methods and strategies employed. Finally, we'll delve into the intentions and outcomes of [company name]'s community-building efforts.

So, let's start with the relevance aspect. On a scale of one to ten, with one signifying that community building is the most critical brand development tool, and ten indicating that it holds minimal importance for [company name], how would you rate the relevance of community building for the [company name] brand?

E3 2:36

Defining 'community' can be somewhat ambiguous. If we consider a community of elite athletes who share specific learnings and experiences, I would rate its importance as a '1' on the scale. Brands like [company name] have achieved significant recognition and success through their association with renowned athletes such as Eliud Kipchoge, Joshua Cheptegei, Mo Farah, Christian Coleman, and Molly Seidel, all of whom are Olympic medalists or record-breaking athletes. However, it's worth noting that these athletes may not actively engage in community discussions.

When we discuss a more general athlete community, it's important to recognize that awareness can also be fostered. For instance, when Eliud Kipchoge attempted to run a marathon in under 2 hours, it created a unique type of community. In my experience, community building needs segmentation. We focus on elite athletes, sub-elite athletes, and regular athletes who participate in various races. For the non-elite athletes, I would rate the importance of community at around '3.'

However, it's essential to understand that the impact of communities varies based on various factors, including community marketing and management. When evaluating a brand's importance within an established environment, especially in sports, communities play a significant role. They provide a platform for education, particularly for products with technical aspects. In this context, I would rate the importance of communities at '3.' Nonetheless, it's important to recognize that effective community-building involves a multifaceted approach, and factors like community marketing and management also come into play. Short time frames, such as those associated with online ads, can present challenges due to limited attention spans.

Mario Kuhnt 5:30

Sorry to crash you before we go into more detail because those questions will come a little bit later on.

E3 5:35

OK, alright. Yeah.

Mario Kuhnt 5:37

Let's start with the importance, keeping it quite broad for now. Then, the second question will be about the time and budget allocated to our community building efforts.

E3 5:40

Yeah.

Mario Kuhnt 5:47

I understand that it might be challenging to provide precise figures, but could you offer a rough estimate in terms of both time and budget allocation for our community building efforts, including events or other initiatives? Perhaps in terms of a percentage?

E3 6:03

Certainly, I'm still trying to grasp the exact definition of 'community.' For instance, if we consider events and our involvement in activities like sponsorships and shakeup runs as part of this community, I would estimate that it constitutes roughly 10% of our efforts.

Mario Kuhnt 6:28

In a broader sense, based on my understanding from the literature, community building encompasses the relationship between the brand and the customer. It involves various forms of interaction, creating a connection between the brand and the customer, which goes beyond one-sided advertising but includes diverse ways of engaging with them.

E3 6:58

Understood. 10% may seem a bit high, so let's revise it to 8%. We'd like to do more, but it's constrained by resource availability. You need individuals such as community managers, and these roles typically become feasible when the company reaches a certain size and has more headcount for these functions. So, 8% in terms of time allocation seems appropriate.

In terms of budget, it's also linked to headcount within the organization rather than the entire company's budget. I'd say it's a percentage, but it's more related to the allocation based on headcount within the organization.

Mario Kuhnt 7:59

That makes sense. Now, for the next question: What recommendations would you give, particularly if you were starting from scratch with the [company name] brand today? Are there any key strategies or best practices you'd advise replicating, given your experience? Additionally, are there any aspects that you believe [company name] might have missed in recent years, but should definitely consider if they were to begin anew in the community-building process?

E3 8:30

What we've executed quite effectively is engaging with elite athletes and emphasizing the importance of nutrition and training, particularly in relation to gut health. I would certainly repeat this strategy if we were starting new.

However, a significant challenge lies in bridging the gap between elite athletes and amateur athletes, as both groups require similar attention but demand substantial time and budget investments. To address this, we've implemented an ambassador program that supports both sports teams and individual athletes. Our aim is to leverage them to educate their followers, family, friends, and wider communities. We plan to professionalize this approach further to streamline processes and analysis, especially as we grow rapidly.

This professionalization involves enhancing our ambassador marketing efforts by building a tracking system to assess the impact of ambassadors. This will help us identify areas where we can improve, acquire new ambassadors, and make informed decisions about retaining or replacing those who may not be delivering the desired impact.

Mario Kuhnt 10:36

Alright, thank you. Now, for the next question, I'd like to get your opinion on my thesis hypotheses. Please provide your thoughts on the following statements using a scale of one to five, where one represents 'strongly agree,' and five represents 'strongly disagree.'

Hypothesis 1: 'Startups in the sports industry that prioritize community building can differentiate themselves from competitors and achieve higher growth rates.'

E3 11:16

Straight 1.

Mario Kuhnt 11:16

So secondly, brands that actively engage in community-building efforts experience strong loyalty and attachment among their customer base.

E3 11:27

1.

Mario Kuhnt 11:29

And the last one involving the community in rambling efforts, plays a significant role in fostering a sense of ownership among community members.

E3 11:43

3.

Mario Kuhnt 11:45

Hm, is there are reasons why you picked the three, just to understand it?

E3 11:57

I believe it depends on the product to a certain extent. For instance, we develop products that enhance athletic performance, and the greatest credibility for these products comes from endorsements by elite athletes. However, elite athletes often seek monetary compensation for their endorsements, and their motivation isn't solely intrinsic.

Mario Kuhnt 12:42

Alright.

E3 12:47

It depends to some extent on the product itself. For instance, our products are designed to enhance athletic performance, and their credibility is often reinforced through endorsements by elite athletes. However, elite athletes typically seek financial compensation for these endorsements, and their motivation may not purely be driven by intrinsic factors.

In practice, some athletes may choose to sign with other brands due to financial incentives, even if they continue to use our products. This adds complexity to the question. Nevertheless, I'll stick with my previous rating of '3' because I strongly believe that a high-quality product with a clear purpose and proven performance is essential for building credibility. When you have such a product, elite athletes are naturally drawn to it, potentially reducing the need for extensive community-building efforts.

However, it's important to acknowledge that it's not solely about the product. Success often involves a combination of factors. While a great product is fundamental, collaborating with specific brands or communities can significantly contribute to growth, especially in certain cultural spaces. So, both product quality and community engagement play pivotal roles in brand development.

Mario Kuhnt 14:58

All right.

E3 15:05

To build a brand, I would argue that the product itself holds greater significance than the community. A strong product is the foundation upon which a brand is built, and a well-developed product with clear benefits and performance will naturally attract and engage a community of users. In essence, when the product is exceptional, the community tends to follow.

Mario Kuhnt 15:19

Thank you for the response. Now, let's move on to the second part, which is about the methods and strategies [company name] utilizes. I see the list here, and I'd like you to select the ones that you currently employ. If there's anything missing that you use to build your community, please feel free to add it. You've already mentioned the ambassador program.

E3 15:45

Yes, we employ several strategies in our community-building efforts:

We have a network of brand ambassadors and sponsor events like the Berlin Marathon, Boston Marathon, and Iron Man. While we currently lack loyalty programs, it's a significant project on our agenda for next year. We occasionally utilize questionnaires, often presented during the checkout process. User-generated content naturally occurs through our ambassadors' channels, although we don't actively curate or promote it. We prefer to let our athletes authentically share their experiences with our product. Notably, we don't actively showcase ourselves on a metaphorical stage to praise our product; we let our athletes do the talking. We're proud to have won the Global Trials Award this year. Co-creation has not been a focus for us currently.

Mario Kuhnt 17:04

In your case, the ambassadors, especially when they are elite athletes, can also be viewed as influencers because of their prominence in their respective fields?

E3 17:12

Exactly, user-generated and co-created content is something we engage in, mainly as a result of our ambassador program. However, we don't actively promote or share this content externally. It's a part of their contractual agreement to generate and share content.

Mario Kuhnt 17:40

And is there something missing in your opinion?

E3 17:44

Umm, just thinking about a couple of things.

No, think that's it.

Mario Kuhnt 18:07

All right, Perfect. And could you rank them?

And regarding their importance only for building a strong community, not like for overall the brand just for the aspect of Community building.

E3 18:19

When it comes to brand advocacy, particularly when involving elite athletes, our primary and most significant factors for brand building are as follows: We consider our sponsorships of elite athletes like Elliott Kipchoge, Christian, and Sam Lelow to be the foremost and most crucial element for brand building. These sponsorships are our top priority. Offline events also hold substantial importance in our community-building efforts. Brand advocacy naturally follows from our sponsorship efforts, reinforcing our brand image. The co-creation of content plays a role in content generation and community engagement. Loyalty programs contribute to our community but come after the aforementioned factors in terms of importance.

Questionnaires and polls, while valuable, are the least impactful for our community-building efforts.

Mario Kuhnt 19:13

Do you perceive a distinction between the online and offline communities at [company name], or do you believe that they are interconnected and perhaps comprise the same individuals? In other words, do the people you meet at offline events also form part of the online community on social media platforms? What's your perspective on this?

E3 19:39

Certainly, there are overlaps between the online and offline communities, but the distinction also varies depending on the marketplace. For instance, when we talk about our website, the audience may differ from those who purchase our products from online retailers like Wiggle in the UK, a significant nutrition retailer. The US also has its own unique audience dynamics. People who come directly to [company name]'s platform typically have a prior awareness of our brand and often possess intrinsic motivation. They've been acquired through specific channels and tend to be more engaged. On the other hand, when you venture into online marketplaces like Amazon, behavior can be quite different. We're all familiar with the distinct behavior associated with platforms like Amazon, where customers often engage differently.

Mario Kuhnt 20:41

Makes total sense.

E3 20:45

The nature of customer interactions and their paths to our brand can vary significantly. When customers come to [company name]'s website, they often fall into the category of the 'cool kids,' so to speak. These are individuals who have already sought out our brand, perhaps due to prior awareness or intrinsic motivation. Conversely, new customers may find themselves on other retailer websites, where they take the opportunity to educate themselves within the nutrition category. In certain cases, offline events and physical stores, especially in the US, play a pivotal role. Many customers in the US visit retail stores to seek advice and guidance on nutrition, making it easier to educate them in a face-to-face, brick-and-mortar setting. The time spent on educating customers online is typically shorter, whereas in a retail store, customers are already in a mindset conducive to education and purchase. There's undoubtedly a distinct journey and approach for each scenario.

Mario Kuhnt 22:05

Do you believe there's a distinction between building a community for a brand in a general context and building a community within the sports industry specifically? In other words, is there a unique approach or difference in building a sports community compared to building a community for a brand in another industry?

E3 22:24

Yes, but let me think, I mean, it depends.

It always depends on the product.

Mario Kuhnt 22:44

This question pertains to a general context and isn't specific to [company name]. It's about whether you believe that creating a sports community differs from building a brand community for, let's say, a fashion retailer.

E3 22:44

I believe there is a difference, yes. The level of engagement tends to be higher within a sports community. When individuals are passionate about their sport, they not only invest more financially in it but also dedicate more time to it and are more inclined to discuss it. For example, during a casual gathering, it's far more common for people to engage in conversations about their recent training sessions compared to discussing their latest fashion purchases. Sports often serve as a more profound and engaging hobby compared to fashion, in my opinion.

Mario Kuhnt 23:39

Yes.

E3 23:48

Exactly, the level of engagement and motivation to educate oneself and share passions with others is significantly higher in the realm of sports, without a doubt.

Mario Kuhnt 23:49

Alright, let's discuss the intentions behind [company name]'s brand community building efforts. I'll provide you with a quick overview of some intentions commonly found in the literature, and I'd appreciate it if you could tell me which ones apply the most (up to three) from [company name]'s perspective. Additionally, if there's an intention not listed here, please feel free to mention it, as intentions represent what you aim to achieve through these efforts.

E3 24:43

Hmm, I think it's a couple things.

Mario Kuhnt 24:57

What will be your top three?

E3 24:58

Our primary intention is to begin by inspiring and motivating our community by showcasing the success of our elite athletes. This demonstrates that [company name], as a brand, plays a significant role in their achievements. Following that, our second focus is on education, ensuring that our community members are well-informed. Lastly, we aim to promote our products. Education takes precedence, as it forms the foundation. We place inspiration and motivation at the second spot since both can be achieved concurrently, but education remains essential even in their absence. We would then allocate the fourth spot to enhancing our brand image. These intentions complement each other as we build our community.

Mario Kuhnt 26:06

Yeah, they're all somehow connected.

It's something that's difficult to differentiate.

E3 26:12

Yes, indeed, they are all interconnected. I must admit that assigning specific rankings can be somewhat challenging, but let's proceed with the rankings.

Mario Kuhnt 26:26

Certainly, let's discuss the outcomes of community building for [company name] as a brand. I'd like to rank them in order of their relevance, with one being the most important and six being the least important, specifically in the context of community building.

E3 26:47

You might find this amusing, but education remains the top priority for us. In the grand scheme of things, this is crucial because it directly ties into our products. Looking back, not only at [company name] but also at the endurance sports industry as a whole, it's fascinating to see that just five or six years ago, hardly anyone understood the importance of carbohydrates. People were using electrolyte drinks and trying various weight loss strategies, which were essentially nonsense. However, the quality of research improved, leading to the consensus that carbs are indeed crucial. Consequently, we've been actively involved in driving education efforts. Education serves as both our input and output because when individuals know that training with [company name] allows them to tolerate more carbs per hour, resulting in enhanced performance, it naturally leads to increased sales. With this level of understanding, the product becomes a necessity.

Mario Kuhnt 28:08

Yeah, I got it.

E3 28:12

As I mentioned earlier, we never prioritize pushing sales. Instead, our focus remains on education. We believe that if individuals genuinely grasp the equation and understand the value, they will inherently be motivated to choose [company name] as a byproduct of their knowledge and conviction.

Mario Kuhnt 28:13

And if you would have to rank the other ones; so education is #1?

E3 28:49

Yeah. Growth is part of sales, right?

Mario Kuhnt 28:56

Yes, sales are about how many gels, for example, you actually sell, while growth focuses on how many people you can reach. With a large community, more people are exposed to your products, even if they don't make an immediate purchase, enhancing your visibility.

E3 29:11

Alright, perhaps we need to adjust the structure. Ultimately, the equation is this: if I reach 100 people, educate 80 of them, and 60 of them end up buying the product, then the most critical aspect is the initial reach. Following that, education comes as the second part, and then we have the impact, which includes word-of-mouth marketing, brand loyalty, brand recognition, and brand attachment. You can determine the order of these elements, as I don't see a strict hierarchy among them.

Mario Kuhnt 29:47

Alright, for the final question, how do you assess the performance and progress of community building, especially when education takes precedence? Is there a specific method or approach you use to measure the impact of education within the community?

E3 30:08

Yes, as I mentioned earlier, professionalizing our approach to Ambassador marketing is crucial. There are tools available to measure reach and evaluate the impact of these activations within our communities. Reach is indeed an important key performance indicator (KPI). However, it's important to acknowledge that some aspects of marketing are challenging to measure. There's always a bit of a blind spot. In such cases, you have to rely on your experience and understanding of communities, which is a critical part of the process.

Mario Kuhnt 31:15

Mhm got it.

E3 31:17

Major brands like Nike have dedicated community managers in each market for a reason. Ultimately, you do measure the success of community building through sales. However, when you aim to expand into specific markets and tap into cultural spaces, investing in communities becomes necessary. There are various activations and strategies to gauge success, but it's challenging to provide a concrete answer because it varies. For instance, we sponsor a race in a certain community, and if we observe a significant increase in sales at the Expo before the race, it's an indicator that our community-building efforts were effective. In the online space, there are tools to measure reach, click-through rates, and brand engagement. UTM tracking links can be used for ambassadors to share with their audience, allowing us to attribute sales to specific users who clicked on those links.

Mario Kuhnt 32:57

So that's kind of an affiliate program with the ambassadors that they have a link or code, right?

E3 33:06

I'm just telling you how I would do it, I'm not saying that we do it. (twinkle in the eye)

Mario Kuhnt 33:11

OK haha.

E3 33:12

I've been pushing my team quite a bit on these aspects. Although it's not directly under my team's responsibilities but falls within the marketing team, I believe in professionalizing our approach to community building. This involves setting up processes and utilizing tools to gain a better understanding of the impact.

Mario Kuhnt 33:38

Great. Alright then, the interview already comes to an end, it was a pleasure talking with you. Thank you very much for your participation and I'll just end the recording here.

E3 33:45

Sure. It was fun.

Mario Kuhnt stopped transcription

## **Appendix 4: Expert Interview E4**

Mario Kuhnt started transcription

Mario Kuhnt 0:08

Thank you for participating in my master's thesis interview. My research focuses on community-centric brand building, particularly in the sports industry. I aim to uncover strategies that startups can employ to leverage their communities as a tool for brand development. This research comprises two key perspectives. Firstly, I'm interested in hearing from experts like yourself within the sports industry about their insights into community building and its relevance. Secondly, I want to explore the customer perspective, understanding whether a brand's community matters to them and if they are willing to pay a premium for a brand that offers a strong community.

Now, let's get to know you better. Could you please introduce yourself, share your role, and tell me about the company you work for?

E4 1:14

Hello, I'm E4, and I run my own business. I work primarily as an online coach, specializing in working with runners and focusing on strength training.

Mario Kuhnt 1:31

Do you have other employees or do you work on your own?

E4 1:34

Now, just me, a solo entrepreneur.

Mario Kuhnt 1:39

We will structure this interview into three main sections. Firstly, we'll delve into the importance of brand community building. Next, we'll explore various methods and strategies. Finally, we'll discuss the intentions and outcomes of your brand's community building efforts.

Let's begin with the relevance of community building. On a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 signifying that it's the most crucial brand development tool, and 10 indicating that it holds no significance for your company, how would you rate the importance of community building for your brand?

E4 2:18

I'll probably go with a one or two.

Mario Kuhnt 2:22

Now, let's discuss the allocation of time and budget to your community building efforts. Could you provide an estimate, in terms of both time and budget, and express it as a percentage?

E4 2:34

Time is probably 20 to 30% of my weekly schedule and then budget - it is significant to manage, it is probably more like 30 to 40%.

Mario Kuhnt 2:52

And do you think you're already doing a great job here, or do you think you could put more effort into community building at the moment?

E4 3:00

I believe there's always room for increased investment in community building. As a small business owner, I currently allocate a reasonable amount of time and budget to this aspect. Community is paramount, especially in my line of work, which involves working directly with individual clients, albeit remotely. While it's not face-to-face, establishing a strong sense of belonging within the community is of utmost importance.

Mario Kuhnt 3:28

Perfect. Then the next question is what is something you would recommend to yourself in terms of community building? If you would have to start the brand right now from zero again, but just maybe some quick tips - if you have something here.

E4 3:45

Just emphasizing the community and team aspect of training sooner. It's something I didn't do initially, and it's something I'm doing a lot more of now. Building within my training programs, a community aspect, whether that's a community forum where they can chat, ask questions, and become aware of each other. Also, incorporating community competitions to get people more involved and feel a higher level of motivation and drive to do their training. They can compare themselves to others within the community and have benchmarks to aim for. I would like to become top of the leaderboard, and that would motivate them to do more training, be more consistent, and generally work harder. So, it's something I'm doing now, but if I were starting from scratch, it's actually one of the first things I'd do.

Mario Kuhnt 4:41

Great response. Next, I'll present you with some statements. Please rate them on a scale of 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree).

E4 4:59

OK.

Mario Kuhnt 5:00

And just rate those statements.

So the first would be: Startups in the sport industry, the prioritize community building can differentiate themselves from competitors and achieve higher growth rates.

Should I repeat it?

Are you still here?

E4 7:52

..

Mario Kuhnt 7:55

Are you here again?

E4 7:57

I'm here, yes.

Mario Kuhnt 7:58

Uh, perfect. Alright, so let me let me repeat the last question real quick.

Umm, so it's about the statements, and the first one would be: Startups in the sports industry that prioritize community building can differentiate themselves from competitors and achieve higher growth rates.

E4 8:18

Say it on a scale from one to five, wasn't it so?

Mario Kuhnt 8:21

Exactly.

And one would be strongly agree and five would be strongly disagree.

E4 8:25

1.

Mario Kuhnt 8:28

The second: Brands that actively engage in community-building efforts experience strong loyalty and attachment among their customer base.

E4 8:37

1.

Mario Kuhnt 8:40

And the last one: Involving the community in brand-building efforts plays a significant role in fostering a sense of ownership among community members.

E4 8:50

2.

Mario Kuhnt 8:53

Now, moving on to the second part of our discussion, I'd like to explore the methods and strategies you currently employ for brand community building. Please share the methods you are using, and afterward, I'd appreciate it if you could provide your perspective on their relative importance. The methods we'll be discussing include brand advocacy, user-generated content, co-creation of content, offline events, loyalty programs, polls and questionnaires, and live streams. If you believe some additional methods or strategies should be considered, please don't hesitate to mention them.

E4 9:37

Currently, I would also do live streams for Q&A sessions, community forums, and community competitions as methods for brand community building. These strategies are essential for engaging with a community.

Mario Kuhnt 9:57

You mean in addition to the ones that are here? Or which one do you mean?

E4 10:01

Yeah, they're not the ones you've listed there. So I would say community competitions and community forum.

Mario Kuhnt 10:25

You mean something like a poll or a questionnaire, or what do you mean by forum?

E4 10:33

Yeah. And I suppose newsletter as well. So kind of free content.

Mario Kuhnt 10:47

And what would you rank the most important?

So maybe you can give numbers from one to four as you mentioned those four.

E4 10:56

Newsletter 1, community competitions 2, forms 3, Live stream 4.

Mario Kuhnt 11:00

Perfect. And do you think there is a difference between an online and an offline community for you or do you think it's kind of the same and just different channels where you talk to them?

E4 11:22

Well, I'm entirely online so I have no physical presence offline, so it's only online.

Mario Kuhnt 11:29

Do you perceive a distinction between general community building and constructing a sports community? Given that my master's thesis focuses on the sports industry, do you believe there are unique aspects to consider, or do you view the principles as being similar and not particularly significant?

E4 11:56

The underlying principles remain consistent, but there are more apparent methods available when building a sports community. These principles involve establishing a shared space, shared interests, common ideals, and maintaining a coherent messaging strategy, which are standard practices in brand community building. In the sports community, you can also incorporate elements such as competition, which is inherent to sports, to foster a sense of community. This allows for the inclusion of various sports-specific elements. While these additions don't fundamentally alter the community-building approach, they offer valuable insights into the specific expectations within the sports community.

Mario Kuhnt 12:46

Now, let's move to the final part, focusing on the intentions and outcomes of brand community building. I'm interested in understanding why you're investing in community building, as you mentioned dedicating roughly 30% of your efforts to this area. I've prepared a list of potential reasons. Please choose up to three that resonate most with you and rank them in terms of importance. Like in the previous question, feel free to add anything that you think I might have missed. Remember, we're focusing solely on the intentions here, not the outcomes.

E4 13:22

Ok, when you say the intention, what do you exactly mean there?

Mario Kuhnt 13:37

I'd like to delve into the 'why' and 'how' of your community building efforts. Are you doing it to gain more customer insights, to tell your brand's story, or to create a sense of belonging among community members? What exactly drives your intention in this area?

E4 13:59

So it's the desired outcome? I do it because I want to achieve this.

Mario Kuhnt 14:02

Not directly, the desired outcome is more focused on the end goal, the intention on the purpose behind it.

E4 14:05

Ok, yeah, I understand. So I'm going to say that spreading a brand message is the most important.

Mario Kuhnt 14:30

Is that number one or just something you would like to mention?

E4 14:30

Actually, I'll take 'promote product' number 1.

Spread a brand message number 2, inspire and motivate #3.

Mario Kuhnt 14:42

All right. So do you think nothing is missing in this list at first glance?

E4 14:52

No kind of everything I'd look for in it is there.

Mario Kuhnt 14:55

Now, let's discuss the desired outcomes. Here, feel free to mention all the outcomes that are important for your brand, as they probably all contribute to measuring brand success. Could you rank them in order of importance, from one being the most important to six being the least important? Additio, if you feel something is missing from this list, please don't hesitate to add it.

E4 15:24

Okay, let's proceed. The order you've provided mostly aligns with my thoughts. Just switch 'authenticity' with 'attachment'. So, to confirm: 1 is sales growth, 2 is positive word-of-mouth, 3 is brand loyalty, and 4 is... But before we continue, could you explain your perspective on the difference between 'brand loyalty' and 'brand attachment'?

Mario Kuhnt 15:46

Brand attachment and brand loyalty are quite similar, but with a key distinction. Brand attachment is when a customer forms an emotional connection with your brand. This doesn't necessarily involve a purchase; it's more about the emotional resonance. On the other hand, brand loyalty is about a customer who already engages with your brand, stays with it longer, and makes repeat purchases. It's about extending the customer lifecycle, often leading to multiple purchases. So, while brand attachment focuses on emotional bonds, brand loyalty is more about consistent customer behavior and repeated engagement.

E4 16:12

OK. Well, I'll go brand attachment 5, and brand authenticity 6.

Mario Kuhnt 16:17

Alright. To wrap up, how do you measure the performance and progress of your community building efforts? This is often highlighted as a challenging aspect in literature. While outcomes like brand loyalty can be indicators, I'm curious if you have developed your own methods. Do you rely on direct interactions with people, or are there other metrics or approaches you use? Any insights on how you track and assess this would be valuable.

E4 16:47

Okay, great. For me, the approach is straightforward. On a smaller scale, community building success is primarily measured through word-of-mouth referrals. If my clients refer others, it shows they appreciate my service, trust me, and are willing to integrate their acquaintances into our community. This is a direct indicator of effectiveness, as increased referrals typically mean more clients and higher earnings. On a broader scale, for potential clients or leads, I use different metrics. I track the subscription rate for email campaigns and engagement with my social media content. Using analytics, I monitor how many people view and interact with my content, and how many move from initial engagement to potentially making a purchase on my website. This helps me gauge the effectiveness of my reach and its impact on my target community.

Mario Kuhnt 18:12

Alright, thank you so much for participating in this interview. Your insights have been incredibly valuable for my research. It's fascinating to see the varied perspectives from others in the sports industry. I'm eager to share the final results with you. Also, I should have mentioned earlier that your name will be anonymized in the study. I hope that's acceptable, and thank you for being comfortable with the recording of this interview.

E4 18:30

Sure, was a pleasure.

Mario Kuhnt 18:40

And I forgot to ask you, if its fine to record this video, so sorry. I hope that's also fine for you?

E4 18:43

Yeah, it's all good.

Don't worry, no problem.

Mario Kuhnt 18:48

Perfect.

Then let me end the recording here.

Mario Kuhnt stopped transcription

## **Appendix 5: Expert Interview E5**

INTERVIEW MASTER'S THESIS – E5

(there was an issue with the recording software, so it can't be used – therefore, the notes from the interview can be found in the following, which summarize the opinion of E5)

Intro about my research

"Community-Centric Brand Building: Strategies for startups in leveraging their community as a brand development tool within the sports industry."

What is your role and what does the company you work for do?

Founder of a Sports Brand and Social Media Community. Multiple entrepreneur and business owner, involving gyms, a nutrition company and sports apparel.

Relevance of brand community-building

Assess the relevance of community-building for your brand on a scale 1-10 (where 1 means most important brand development tool and 10 means not important at all)

1

How much time/budget do you currently spend on community-building efforts (percentage)? Do you think you should put more effort into it or already doing a great job here?

100% of my own time and budget – it's the core of the business; always more possible

What is something you would recommend to yourself in terms of community-building if you would have to start the brand from zero again?

Direct collaboration with existing community; do everything with passion/personal values

What do you think about the following statements? (where 1 = strongly agree, 2 = agree, 3 = neither/neutral, 4 = disagree and 5 = strongly disagree)

- Startups in the sports industry that prioritize community-building can differentiate themselves from competitors and achieve higher growth rates.

1

- Brands that actively engage in community-building efforts experience strong loyalty and attachment among their customer base.

1

- Involving the community in brand-building efforts plays a significant role in fostering a sense of ownership among community members.

1

Methods and strategies of brand community-building

What are methods you use to interact with your community? Rank the ones you use regarding their importance

- Brand Advocacy (ambassadors)
- User-generated content
- Co-creation of content (Influencer marketing)
- Offline events x 1
- Loyalty Programs x 2
- Polls/Questionnaires
- Live-Streams (Q&A)
- Ads x 3

Is there a difference between the online vs. offline community for you?

Mixed, online more scalable than offline community – both highly relevant and interconnected

Do you think there is a difference between community-building in general and building a sports community as a brand?

Very similar, shared interest unites and sport is a great passion for lots of people. So maybe easier to develop a sports brand community than in other industries.

Intentions and outcome of brand community-building

What is the intention behind community building for you?

Select the ones that apply the most in your opinion (max. 3) and rank them accordingly

- Gaining consumer insights
- Spread a brand message (storytelling) 3
- Create a sense of belonging
- Promote products
- Connect people with same interests 2
- Give the brand a face
- Inspire and motivate 1

What is the desired outcome of community building that you're aiming for?

Rank the different items according (1= most important and 6 = least important)

- Sales 4
- Growth (reach) 5
- Positive word of mouth 6
- Brand loyalty 2
- Brand authenticity 1
- Brand attachment 3

How do you measure the performance and progress of community-building?

Sales, number of people at the offline events, direct feedback of consumers

## **Appendix 6: Interview Structure**

## INTERVIEW MASTER'S THESIS – MARIO KUHNT

Intro about my research

"Community-Centric Brand Building: Strategies for startups in leveraging their community as a brand development tool within the sports industry."

What is your role and what does the company you work for do?

Relevance of brand community-building

Assess the relevance of community-building for your brand on a scale 1-10 (where 1 means most important brand development tool and 10 means not important at all)

How much time/budget do you currently spend on community-building efforts (percentage)? Do you think you should put more effort into it or already doing a great job here?

What is something you would recommend to yourself in terms of community-building if you would have to start the brand from zero again?

What do you think about the following statements? (where 1 = strongly agree, 2 = agree, 3 = neither/neutral, 4 = disagree and 5 = strongly disagree)

- Startups in the sports industry that prioritize community-building can differentiate themselves from competitors and achieve higher growth rates.
  
- Brands that actively engage in community-building efforts experience strong loyalty and attachment among their customer base.
  
- Involving the community in brand-building efforts plays a significant role in fostering a sense of ownership among consumers.

## Methods and strategies of brand community-building

What are methods you use to interact with your community? Rank the ones you use regarding their importance

- Brand Advocacy (ambassadors)
- User-generated content
- Co-creation of content (Influencer marketing)
- Offline events
- Loyalty Programs
- Polls/Questionnaires
- Live-Streams (Q&A)
- ...

Is there a difference between the online vs. offline community for you?

Do you think there is a difference between community-building in general and building a sports community as a brand?

## Intentions and outcome of brand community-building

What is the intention behind community building for you?

Select the ones that apply the most in your opinion (max. 3) and rank them accordingly

- Gaining consumer insights
- Spread a brand message (storytelling)
- Create a sense of belonging
- Promote products
- Connect people with same interests
- Give the brand a face
- Inspire and motivate

- ...

What is the desired outcome of community building that you're aiming for?

Rank the different items according (1= most important and 6 = least important)

- Sales
- Growth (reach)
- Positive word of mouth
- Brand loyalty
- Brand authenticity
- Brand attachment
- ...

How do you measure the performance and progress of community-building?

## **Appendix 7: Survey Structure**

# Community-centric brand building

## **Welcome to this Survey.**

Thank you very much for your participation. It will only take around 5 minutes of your time and will be highly valuable for my research.

**Purpose:** This survey is conducted within the context of the research for my master's thesis at Nova School of Business and Economics. Your responses will contribute to a broader understanding of consumer-behaviour regarding sports brand communities.

**Confidentiality:** Your participation is voluntary and the responses are completely anonymous. Your data will be securely stored and used only for an academic purpose.

## **Let's get started.**

In case you have any doubts or questions, or are interested in getting a copy of my work once it's concluded, you are more than welcome to send me an e-mail to 55651@novasbe.pt

1. Question : Which generation do you belong to?

- Boomer (1946-1964)
- Generation X (1965-1980)
- Generation Y/Millennial (1981-1996)
- Generation Z (1997-2012)

2. Question: How often do you practice sports per week?

- not at all
- 1-2 times
- 3-4 times
- 5-7 times

3. Question: Imagine you're planning to purchase a sports-related product. What factors are important to you when choosing a specific brand?

Please rank each item individually from 1-5

- Quality
- Community

- Sustainability
- Price
- Values
- Branding

4. Question: Do you believe that a sports brand community serves as a distinguishing factor from its competitors? (rate from 1-5)

5. Question: Do you think that participating in a sports brand community makes you more loyal towards that company regarding future purchase decisions? (rate from 1-5)

6. Question: Do you believe that participating in a sports brand community contributes to fostering a sense of ownership and a feeling of being a part of the brand? (rate from 1-5)

7. Question: What is important to you when joining a sports brand community?

Select the items (max. 3) that seem the most relevant to you.

- Shared values with the brand
- Inspirational/motivational aspect
- Meeting new people
- Interact with characters behind the brand
- Education about the services/products of the brand
- Sense of belonging

8. Question: Which community-building efforts by a sports brand do you find relevant in shaping your preference for a specific brand?

- Brand Advocacy (ambassadors)
- User-generated content
- Co-creation of content (influencer marketing)
- Offline events
- Loyalty Programs
- Polls/Questionnaires

- Live-Streams (Q&A)

- Storytelling

9. Question: How much of a price premium would you be willing to pay for a sports brand that provides a strong community?

- no price premium

- <5%

- 5-10%

- 10-20%

- 20-30%

- 30-40%

- 40-50%

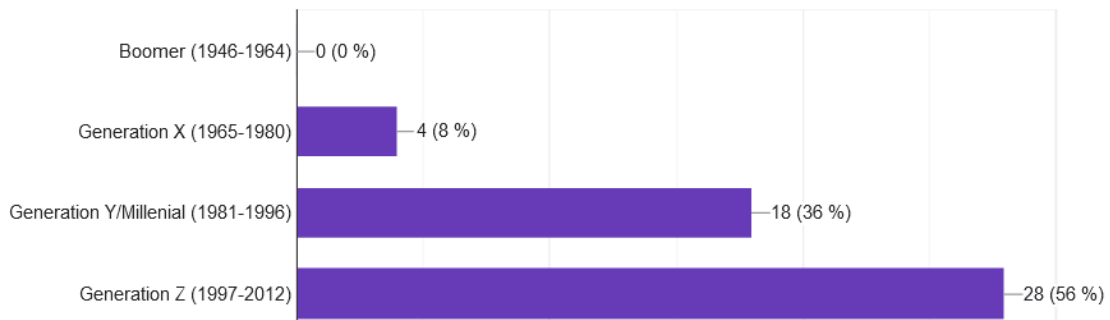
- >50%

## Appendix 8: Survey Results

Which generation do you belong to?

 Kopieren

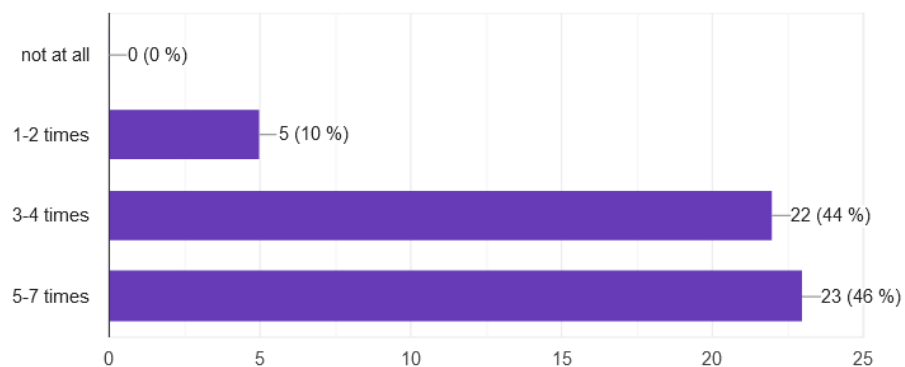
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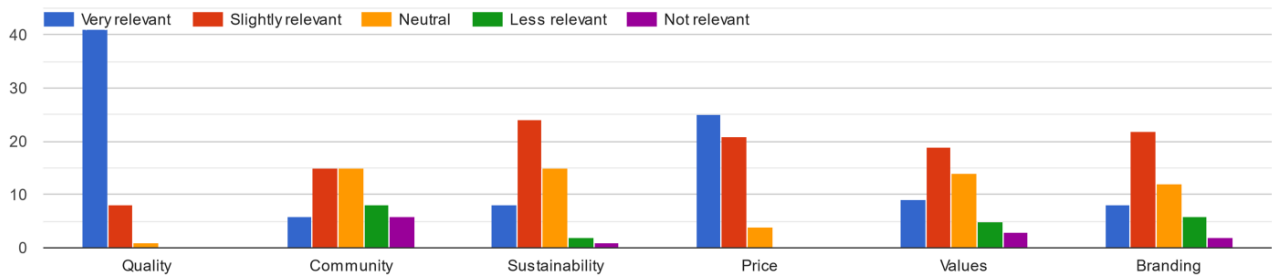
How often do you practice sports per week?

 Kopieren

50 Antworten



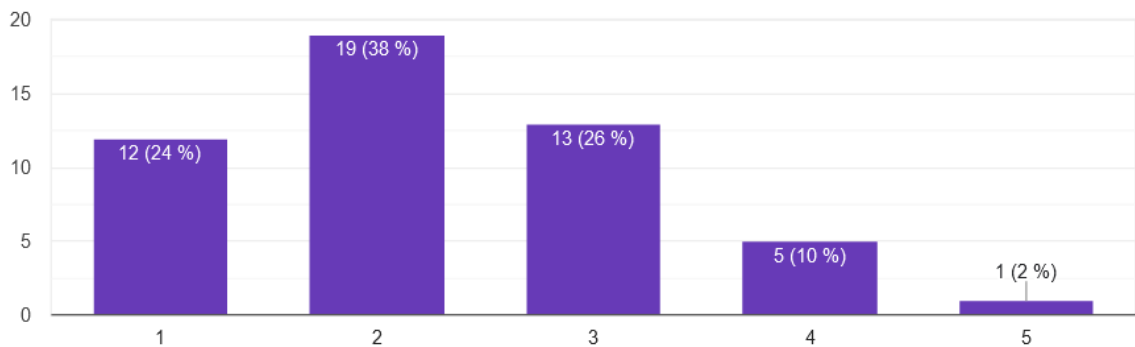
Imagine you're planning to purchase a sports-related product. What factors are important to you when choosing a specific brand?



Do you believe that a sports brand community serves as a distinguishing factor from its competitors?



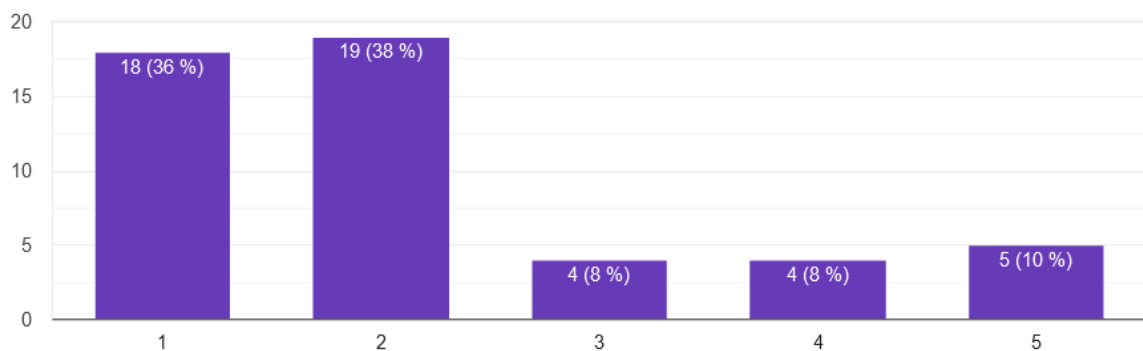
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Do you believe that participating in a sports brand community contributes to fostering a sense of ownership and a feeling of being a part of the brand?



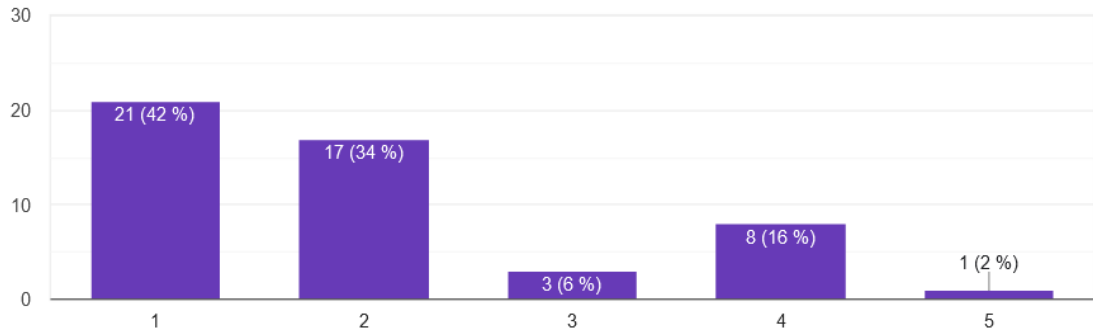
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Do you think that participating in a sports brand community makes you more loyal towards that company regarding future purchase decisions?

 Kopieren

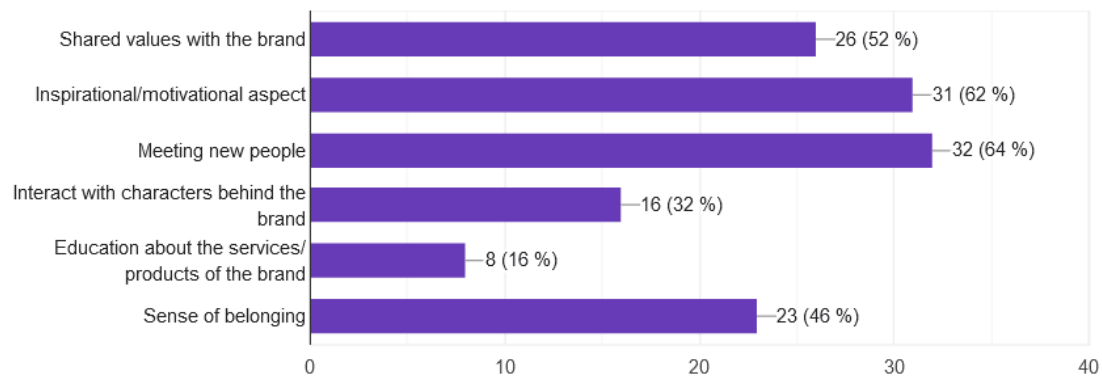
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What is important to you when joining a sports brand community?

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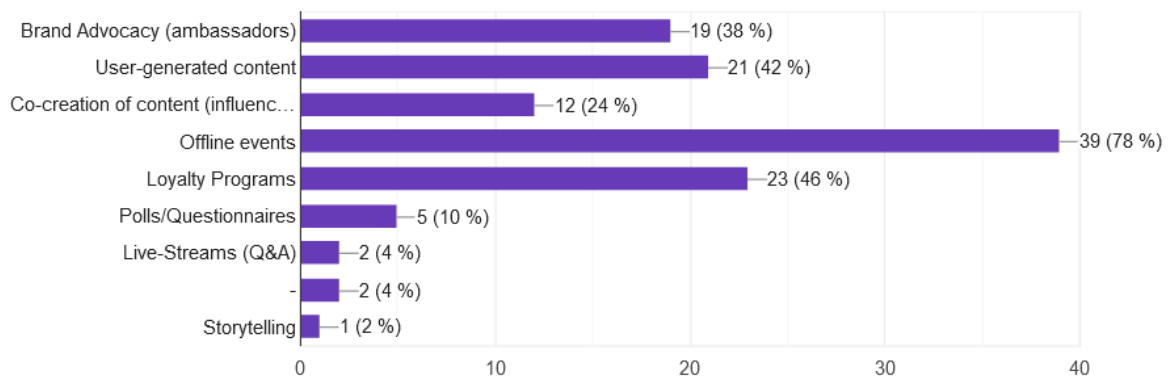
50 Antworten



Which community-building efforts by a sports brand do you find relevant in shaping your preference for a specific brand?

 Kopieren

50 Antworten



How much of a price premium would you be willing to pay for a sports brand that provides a strong community?

 Kopieren

50 Antworten

