

**SPORTS FAN CULTURE & BRAND COMMUNITY:
AN ETHNOGRAPHIC CASE STUDY OF THE VANCOUVER CANUCKS
BOOSTER CLUB**

by

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B.H.K., University of British Columbia, 2000

THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF ARTS

in

The Faculty of Graduate Studies

(Human Kinetics)

UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

February 2006

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to contribute to research and theory in the area of sport fan communities. Existing analyses of sport fans have used a variety of constructs and theoretical approaches to assess fan experience, including social identity theory (Underwood et al., 2001), emotionality (Trujillo and Krizek, 1994), escapism (Segrave, 2000), and body culture and hypercommodification (Giulianotti, 2002). However, even though some of this literature has mentioned the importance of “group experience” and “community” in fans’ lives, there is a lack of research on communal aspects of fan interactions, particularly outside of the “spectator experience”. The theoretical perspective for the thesis was developed from recent research on group consumption (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995; Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001; McAlexander et al., 2002) and from work on subcultures and social groups (Hebdige, 1979; Brake 1980; Willis, 1990; Maffesoli, 1996). An ethnographic study was designed that used participant observation, one-to-one interviews and focus groups to record and analyze the “lived experiences” (Prus et al., 1994) of members of the Vancouver Canucks Booster Club during the 2003-2004 NHL season.

The findings from the study confirm the value of using group consumption theories, especially the brand community framework, to better understand the relationships that exist within sport fan groups. The sport fan group in this study displayed the three core commonalities of a brand community that were identified in prior research on high involvement consumer brands by Muniz and O’Guinn (2001): consciousness of kind, rituals and tradition, and moral responsibility. In addition, it was found that the root factors which enable the development of these commonalities (e.g., existence of opposition, sharing of brand stories, protection of and assistance to others in the community) were also apparent in the Booster Club. Consistent with the observations of McAlexander et al. (2002), this study also found that the customer-centric model of relationships that exist within brand communities extended beyond the “customer – customer – brand” triad of relationships (described by Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001) and included the “customer – sports franchise employee” relationship and the “customer – product” relationship. The study also identified a “customer – media” relationship that had not yet been described in other brand community work. The thesis introduces a fan-centric model that illustrates the relationship fans have with the elements of a brand community including the brand, product, marketers, media and other fans.

The findings demonstrate the potential for using conceptual frameworks from social group theories, especially “common culture”, subcultures and neo-tribalism, in combination with the brand community framework. While some researchers have distinguished brand communities from other social group constructs such as subcultures and neo-tribes (Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001), other researchers have been more inclusive (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995; McAlexander et al., 2002). The findings from this study suggest that fans within a Booster Club not only tend to demonstrate the shared cultural perspectives of the fan-based community, but may also have neo-tribal and subcultural relationships within the community. An analysis that overlooks these elements will miss some of the internal dynamics of subgroups that operate within the broader communal framework. By incorporating these social group theories in a more Socially Inclusive Brand Community (SIBC) model, a more complete and in-depth

understanding of the sport fan community becomes possible. The thesis concludes with a brief discussion of the marketing implications of the findings and of the ethical issues that surround this type of research.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, I would like to express a great deal of thanks to the members of the Vancouver Canucks Booster Club for their willingness to participate in this study. I would also like to thank Dr. Robert Sparks, Dr. Brian Wilson, and Dr. Charles Weinberg for their guidance and wisdom throughout this study, as well as Dr. Lucie Thibault for her encouragement in the early stages of my graduate work.

On a personal note, I would like acknowledge my parents for always being behind me in everything that I do, with such unwavering support. I would also like to thank my cousin Grace Hawley for having the incredible patience to hear all of my wild ideas over the years, and always listening and caring. This journey would not have been possible or complete without the tremendous love and support of my wife Lia. Thank you for so lovingly sharing in this challenge with me.

Finally, I would like to thank my high school English teacher Emilio Regina. Though it was many years ago, this thesis truly began when he put the pencil back in my hand and inspired me to write.

1. INTRODUCTION & OVERVIEW

Anthropologists have always had a hard time with football. The trouble is, you can only see what's on the outside. But there is an inside, believe it or not. We all have our reasons for loving things the way we do. (Character Paul Ashworth, *Fever Pitch* by Hornby, 1997, p. 40)

The ongoing quest to witness the “inside world” of sports fans and better understand why people appreciate sports teams the way they do is nothing less than a daunting challenge. Sports fans are a fascinating population whose appearances and behaviours can range from the wild and outrageous, to the tame and innocuous. Their loyalty may run to the very core of their identity, or on the other hand, their loyalty may only be a temporary and superficial phenomenon. Yet, despite these differences in identities, identification and loyalty, these individuals in other respects have a great deal in common, including their shared passions and experiences, and in this sense they constitute a social group or, in more formal terms, a sport fan community.

The purpose of this research was to develop a better understanding of the social phenomenon of a sports fan community. To do so, this research explored and described the “lived experiences” (Prus et al., 1994) of a specific group of hockey fans known as the Vancouver Canucks boosters. Both participant observation and focus group methodologies were used as a means for data collection. Vital to this study's approach was the interpretive perspective referred to as symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969; Prus, 1996). Using this perspective, this study focused on the processes through which Vancouver Canucks boosters act in meaningful ways towards objects (social, physical or abstract) in their environment, as well as their social interactions and interpretations that help to create, maintain and alter these meanings (see the three premises by Blumer, 1969, p. 2).

Existing analyses of sport fans have used various lenses to assess these areas of experience including: social identity theory (Underwood et al., 2001), emotionality (Trujillo and Krizek, 1994), escapism (Segrave, 2000), body culture and hypercommodification (Giulianotti, 2002). However, even though some of this literature has made mention of the importance of “group experience” and the sense of “community” in fans’ lives, there remained a need to study sports fans more straight forwardly from a group/community perspective and one that was not bound by the “spectator experience” alone. The study presented in this thesis drew from extant theories of group consumption (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995; Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001; McAlexander et al., 2002) and from social group theories (Hebdige, 1979; Brake 1980; Willis, 1990; Maffesoli, 1996) to analyze the experiences of the Canucks Booster Club.

Recently the term “brand community” (Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001) has been used to describe “a specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relationships among admirers of a brand” (p. 412). This is potentially a very useful concept for studying sports fans, however, not unlike other frameworks relating to group consumption, the brand community concept has been largely concerned with mainstream consumer products such as cars and computers, and not brands relating to sports entertainment. One goal of this research was to extend the brand community concept to sports fans, which may also contribute to our understanding of consumer groups and brand communities overall.

This study also reviewed social group theories and concepts such as subcultures (Hebdige, 1979, Brake, 1980), neo-tribalism (Maffesoli, 1996) and common culture (Willis, 1990) in order to gain a better perspective on group and community interactions

among sport fans. Prior research on consumer groups has used social group frameworks such as subcultures (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995) and neo-tribalism (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001), and sport fans have been used as examples in research on common culture (Willis, 1990, p. 112-133) and neo-tribalism (c.f. Maffesoli, 1996 - see the forward written by Shields). Nevertheless, I am not aware of a study that has conducted an in-depth and concurrent exploration of theories about subcultures, neo-tribalism and common culture within the context of sport fan culture. Again, such an exploration may assist in furthering our understanding of sport fan identities, identification and loyalty from a group and community perspective, as well as also provide a new context in which these theories can be understood.

Drawing on this literature, this study looked specifically at the meanings, significance and stability of the communicated messages between Booster Club members and the "objects" (Blumer, 1969) that exist within their environment. The four general objects evaluated in this study were identified by McAlexander et al. (2002) as the primary bases of the relationships involved within a Brand Community. They are: the brand, the product, marketer(s) and other consumers. My research focused on the symbolic interactions that take place between a Canucks booster and the 1) Canucks brand (eg. logo, organization), 2) Canucks product (eg. team, spectacle, entertainment), 3) Canucks marketer(s) (eg. management, players, mascot) and 4) other Canucks fans. The specific research questions for this study include: In what ways do Canucks boosters interact with these objects? What meanings can be interpreted from these interactions? How do Canucks boosters communicate these meanings? How personally significant and stable are these meanings within the identities of Canucks boosters?

Aside from the theoretical contributions of this study, exploring how the brand community concept relates to the context of sports entertainment may also have practical implications for sports managers. It has been conjectured that brand community awareness may positively influence the ways in which marketers manage their relationships with their consumers, (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001, p. 427) and that brand communities may yield "competitive advantages" (McAlexander et al., 2002, p. 51) in the form of increased brand loyalty and increased brand equity (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001) for marketers who are able to capitalize on them.

The observation and interview procedures for this study were approved by the Behavioural Research Ethics Board of the University of British Columbia. The procedures were designed in manner that obtains consent and protects the privacy of participants, and ensures that participants and the researcher are not placed in a situation of risk such as inadvertently revealing personal information in a group context. In anticipation of potential criticism related to the marketing implications of this research, this study took the standpoint of Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) whereby the brand community notion is not accepted as socially destructive but rather as "neither any more nor less real than many other forms of community, and is simply an essential form humans invariably employ in their social existence" (p. 426). Furthermore, drawing from work by Willis (1990), the position taken in this study is that the relationships between commerce, consumption and culture are real and unavoidable aspects of being a Canucks booster and deserved scholarly attention.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Sport Fan Identities, Identification & Loyalty

Sport fan identities, identification and loyalty have been researched from various perspectives. In a recent sport spectator taxonomy, Giulianotti (2002) suggests the existence of four types of spectators: Supporters, Followers, Fans and Flâneurs. Using literature on the hypercommodification of football and body culture, Giulianotti (2002) categorizes spectators using “two basic binary oppositions: hot-cool and traditional-consumer” (p. 30). The “hot-cool” continuum aims to establish the extent to which an individual’s identity is determined and influenced by their attraction towards a team. In other words, “hot” spectators are those whose “forms of loyalty emphasize intense kinds of identification and solidarity”, while “cool” spectators are those who “denote[s] the reverse” (p. 31). The “traditional-consumer” continuum aims to determine the level to which an individual’s identity is culturally driven as opposed to driven by market forces. Giulianotti (2002) considers “traditional” spectators to “have a longer, more local and popular culture identification” when compared to “consumer” spectators who “have a more market-centered relationship to the club as reflected in the centrality of consuming club products” (p. 31).

The *Supporter* is characterized as the “traditional/hot” spectator who has a deep and personal appreciation for their team as well as strong feelings of solidarity (Giulianotti, 2002). This spectator has a “relationship with the club that resembles those with close family and friends” (p. 33) and their support “...is a lived experience, rooted in a grounded identity that is reflected in an affectionate relationship to the ground that is regularly

revisited” (p. 33). In this regard, their identities are very much associated with who they are as spectators (“hot”) and resemble that of a subculture (p. 34).

Similarly, the *Follower* spectator is also described to be a traditionalist who identifies with a team and the game in a very personal and symbolic manner (Giulianotti, 2002). Followers are described to be knowledgeable spectators, whose interest in the game is unquestionable but not restricted to one specific team (Giulianotti, 2002). Therefore, unlike the Supporter, their solidarity may range from “thin” to “thick” depending on the given situation (Giulianotti, 2002). Furthermore, because Followers’ personal interest is distributed amongst more than one team, their affiliation has only a marginal influence on their overall identity (“cool”) (Giulianotti, 2002).

For the “hot/consumer” spectator, Giulianotti (2002) uses the term *Fan*. A Fan is one whose identity is very much associated with a specific team (“hot”), however a traditionalist they are not.

The individual fan experiences the club, its traditions, its star players, and fellow supporters through a market-centered set of relationships. The fan’s strength of identification with the club and its players is thus authenticated most readily through the consumption of related products (p. 36).

Fans may have either “thin” or “thick” solidarity, however in contrast to Supporters and Followers, Fans should be viewed as consumers whose support can be attributed to market conditions (i.e. to success of the brand/team).

If the club fails to deliver on its market promises (such as ‘brand improvement’ of the team), then the fans may drift into other markets (other leisure activities, other football leagues, though probably not supporting rival teams) in the deculturalized pursuit of ‘value for money’ (p. 37).

Giulianotti (2002) labels the “cool/consumer” spectator a *Flâneur*. The Flâneur is driven by the consumption practice, but does not share the same “hot” level of personal

identification. Flâneurs are described as being “thin” in terms of solidarity and as experience seekers who maintain a very distant affiliation with the team (Giulianotti, 2002). These individuals are likely to be more responsive to the way a team logo looks (the “signifier”) as opposed to the deeper meanings associated with that logo (the “signified”)(p. 39). “The flâneur thereby avoids any personal consumption by the appended signs but instead consumes these signifiers in a disposable and cliché-like fashion, as if adopting a temporary tattoo” (p. 39). Moreover, despite these distant and “virtual” (p. 39) characteristics, the Flâneur will from time to time act in a manner that resembles spectators who are “true supporters” (p. 40). However, Giulianotti (2002) emphasizes that “the real identity of the flâneur is rooted in persistent motion, classically in material terms but increasingly in virtual terms, through switching affiliations like television channels” (p. 40).

Underwood et al. (2001) have also explored spectator identities, however they did so using a marketing perspective and focused more specifically on the identification that takes place during consumption. Their conceptual analysis demonstrated that social identity theory can be viewed as a “mechanism for tapping the emotional connection between the consumer and service brand” (p. 2) and that “...within the context of sports, fan identification is a manifestation of social identity theory” (p. 3). From this standpoint, fan identification is cultivated when one’s concept of self is drawn from particular characteristics - group experience, history/tradition, physical facility and rituals - of the highly social sports marketplace (Underwood et al., 2001).

Underwood et al. (2001) encourage marketing approaches that utilize these characteristics and implement “strategies to foster a deeper sense of affiliation with the

team and between fans” (p. 2). To this end, Underwood et al. (2002) suggest that a marketer can increase consumer identification and loyalty, and thus further enhance brand knowledge, awareness and image. Such strategies would appear to speak to the ways in which marketers could create or develop more of a *Supporter* type (Giulianotti, 2002) of spectator, or in other words, how sports marketers might utilize the characteristics of their marketplace (Underwood et al., 2001) to develop “hot” and “traditional” spectators (Giulianotti, 2002).

From an ontological perspective, the unique characteristics of the sports marketplace can also provide a person with an avenue to escape from the solitary aspects of their everyday lives in search of “warmth”, “security of human bonding”, and “the sense of belonging and moral identification” (Segrave, 2000, p. 68). Ethnographic studies by authors such as Trujillo and Krizek (1994) explored and identified some of the unique fan identities that exist within ballpark culture. They found that, regardless of the venue, spectators “expressed similar feelings and emotions about the importance of baseball in their lives and of the places where it is played” (p. 303). This emotional and symbolic identification demonstrates that the sport club is not “just another bank, department store, or amusement park” (Trujillo and Krizek, 1994, p. 306), rather it falls on what Underwood et al. (2001) might refer to as the higher end of the services identification continuum. It is a place where the baseball club “...is experienced as a public trust that engenders a powerful sense of identification and identity for fans and franchise employees alike” (Trujillo and Krizek, 1994, p. 306).

A common trend in the above literature is the recognition of the “collective consciousness” (Giulianotti, 2002, p. 37) or community-like characteristics of sports

entertainment (Underwood et al., 2001; Segrave, 2000; Trujillo and Krizek, 1994). In fact, some of this literature has drawn parallels with Victor Turner's (1974) notion of "communitas" (c.f. Segrave, 2000, 68; c.f. Trujillo and Krizek, 1994, p. 308).

In other words, being apart of an audience allows us to feel and see 'through and behind' the political, racial, ethnic, religious, and linguistic boundaries that separate us, not eliminating them from consciousness but by invoking a deeper sense of commonality, one that transcends the normative order (Segrave, 2000, p. 68).

This resembles the description by Underwood et al., (2001) that:

Spectator sports are a unique group experience characterized by a sense of belonging that spectators feel and an inherent bias against out-group members.... For these individuals, sports are not merely a form of entertainment and recreation, but provide a sense of community and family. (p. 5)

Similarly, Trujillo and Krizek (1994) found the ballpark to be meaningful to these people in symbolic and emotional ways that reflect how they have "invested much of their identities in baseball and in their favorite teams and ballparks" (p. 306), and "through social interaction at the ballpark, fans and workers develop important, and often lasting, relationships" (p. 307).

Although these studies have acknowledged the significance of the group/community involved in spectatorship, the above literature has predominantly approached sport fan identities, identification and loyalty from an *individual spectator standpoint*. This work has unquestionably made important contributions to our understanding of the spectator experience, yet there remains a need to assess *group/community* aspects of sport fan culture in order to come to terms with the group and communal dimensions of sports consumption. To help gain this perspective, literature on group consumption, brand communities (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995; Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001; McAlexander et al., 2002) and social group formations are reviewed next.

2.2 Brand Community & Group Consumption

Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) have defined a brand community as a "specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relationships among admirers of a brand" (p. 412). Their approach is significant in that it suggests that the practice of brand consumption by individuals can build community that is not "any more nor less real than other forms of community" (p. 426). This is a rare perspective considering "consumer culture has long been accused of destroying real community" (p. 426). Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) also contend that "these communities may form around any brand, but are probably most likely to form around brands with a strong image, a rich and lengthy history, and threatening competition" (p. 415). Brand communities revolve around three core community commonalities: 1) consciousness of kind, 2) rituals and traditions and 3) a sense of moral responsibility (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001).

'Consciousness of Kind' is the most critical factor of community according to the findings of Muniz and O'Guinn (p. 418) and relates to "the intrinsic connection that members feel toward one another, and the collective sense of difference from others not in the community" (p. 413). Directly affecting the shared consciousness element in a brand community are two social processes: 1) Legitimacy and 2) Oppositional Brand Loyalty (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001). Legitimacy ensures that individual community members are "sincere" and belong for the "right reasons" (p. 419). While legitimacy may not be relevant to all communities, it was found that "differentiating between those who are true believers in the brand, and those who are merely opportunistic is a common concern voiced by brand community members" (p. 419). The second social process identified by Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) is oppositional brand loyalty (p. 420). Oppositional brand loyalty

“serves to delineate what the brand is not, and who the brand community members are not” (p. 420). For example, Muniz and O’Guinn (2001) found that the oppositional brand of Microsoft along with their loyal users resulted in a “source of unity amongst Macintosh brand community members” (p. 420). Furthermore, it is conceivable that “a community may form simply to oppose another strong community, regardless of any real threat it may or may not pose” (p. 421)

‘Rituals and traditions’ were identified as being “vital social processes by which the meaning of the community is reproduced and transmitted within and beyond the community” (p. 421). According to Muniz and O’Guinn (2001), “these rituals and traditions typically center on shared consumption experiences with the brand” and “...function to maintain the culture of the community” (p. 421). Muniz and O’Guinn (2001) discuss two elements involved in this social process that ultimately work to “perpetuate consciousness of kind” (p. 422). These elements include 1) celebrating the history of the brand (p. 423) and 2) sharing brand stories (p. 424). The celebration of a brand’s history is significant because it can be seen as a way of distinguishing legitimacy and separating those who are the “true believers from [those who are] the more opportunistic” (p. 423).

‘Moral responsibility’ is described by Muniz and O’Guinn (2001) as “a sense of duty to the community as a whole, and to individual members of the community” (p. 424). This core commonality associates the element of “social commitment” to community members, and “is what produces collective action and contributes to group cohesion” (p. 424). Muniz and O’Guinn (2001) identify two “missions” that are present in moral responsibility of the brand: 1) “integrating and retaining members and 2) “assisting brand

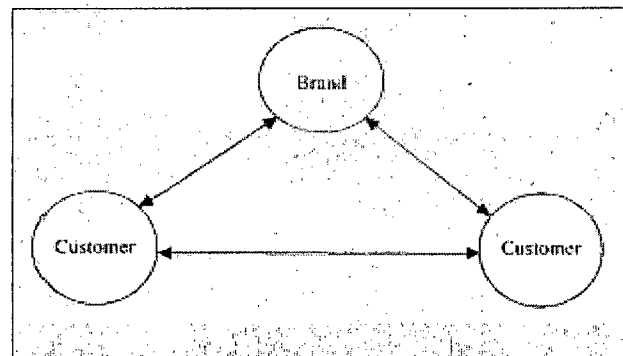
community members in the proper use of the brand” (p. 424). The first mission is concerned with “communal survival” or in other words the assurance that there will always be others with them (p. 424), while the second mission attempts to explain the kindness and consideration community members provide for each other with respect to product/brand usage (p. 425).

Muniz and O’Guinn (2001) contrast the theory of brand community with neo-tribal theory (Maffesoli, 1996) and consumer subcultures (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995). In contrast to Maffesoli’s neo-tribal theory, Muniz and O’Guinn (2001) suggest that a brand community involves more “stable groupings” and “non-trivial commitment”, while neo-tribalism theory resembles more “naïve consumption” with less “self awareness” and “commitment” (p. 415). In contrast with Schouten and McAlexander’s (1995) study of the Harley Davidson Subculture (HDSC), Muniz and O’Guinn (2001) noted that even though the HDSC demonstrate a shared connection around a brand that is similar to a brand community, the HDSC individuals were different because they often went through a “transformation of self” when becoming a Harley biker. Muniz and O’Guinn (2001) also felt the HDSC demonstrates an adoration towards the brand that becomes “an actual way of life”, while brand community members are more “social constructionist” (p. 414). In other words, within a brand community the “brand meaning is socially negotiated, rather than delivered unaltered and in toto from context to context, consumer to consumer” (p. 414).

McAlexander et al. (2002) expanded upon Muniz and O’Guinn’s (2001) work to suggest a “broader view” of a brand community. From their perspective, the brand community model by Muniz and O’Guinn (2001) is limited to the triad of relationships that

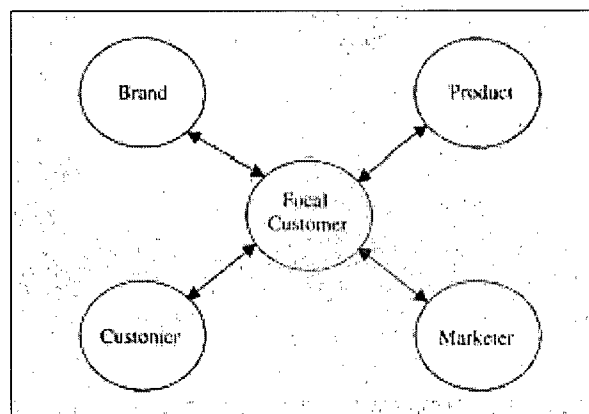
exists between customer and customer, and between these customers and the brand (see Figure 2.1).

Figure 2.1 Brand Community Triad (Muniz and O’Guinn, 2000) (c.f. McAlexander et al., 2002, p. 39)



Using a more customer centric approach, McAlexander et al. (2002) view a brand community as including a focal customer who has relationships with the brand, the product, the marketer(s) and other customers (see Figure 2).

Figure 2.2 Customer-Centric Brand Community (McAlexander et al., 2002, p. 39)



From this perspective, "...the existence and meaningfulness of the community inhere in customer experience rather than in the brand around which that experience revolves" (p. 39).

To date, brand community research has largely focused on products such as motorcycles, cars, trucks, vehicle parts and computers. There is a need to explore the existence of brand communities in other product categories including sports entertainment. Such an endeavor would not only provide the *group/community* perspective needed to better understand sport fan identities, identification and loyalty, but also contribute theoretically to our understanding of consumer groups and brand communities in a broader context.

2.3 Subcultures, Neo-Tribes & Common Culture

Despite being criticized as a “catch all” concept (Bennett, 1999, p. 599) with a consistently challenged definition (Hebdige, 1979, p. 3), the term ‘subculture’ continues to be widely used, especially in the analysis of youth and popular culture. Over time the notion of subculture has been used to characterize a wide variety of groups, including Hipsters, Beats, Teddy Boys, Mods, Rastafarians, Freeks, Rockers, Skinheads and Punks (Hebdige, 1979; Brake, 1980). In order to develop a more informed understanding of subculture, this thesis draws on the work of Hebdige (1979), who emphasizes the importance of ‘style’, more specifically the ‘meaning of style’ in subcultures. Hebdige (1979) characterizes subcultural “style” as a means of producing meanings of “refusal”, “revolt”, “exile” (p. 2), “forbidden identity”, “defiance” (p. 3) and “declaration(s) of alien intent” (p. 42). Hebdige (1979) emphasizes that those who have an interest in subcultures, ultimately have an interest in people “...who [are] alternately dismissed, denounced and canonized; treated at different times as threats to public order and as harmless buffoons” (Hebdige, 1979, p. 2). Brake (1980) similarly states that style demonstrates a level of dedication and ultimately “membership” in a specific subculture (p. 12). Brake (1980)

contends that style is essentially composed of "Image", "Demeanor" and "Argot" (p. 12). In other words, style is made up of the unique ways in which people portray meaning through their appearance, behaviour and speech (p. 12). From this standpoint, subculture as an analytic tool enables a functional understanding of specific groups of people (Brake, 1980).

One can draw comparisons between these conceptions of subcultures and the ethnographic work by Shouten and McAlexander (1995) on the subcultural consumption of Harley Davidson bikes. Harley Davidson subcultures are characterized as belonging to a "marginal group" (p. 58) and deemed "hard core members" (p. 59) with "outlaw mystique" (p. 57). Such passionate subcultures, according to Schouten and McAlexander (1995), may embrace and raise brands to the "status of icons" with "religious intensity", "enhanced by missionary-like behaviours" (p. 55).

Shouten and McAlexander (1995) also note in their findings a phenomenon they call "transformation of self" (p. 55). 'Transformation of self' begins with an aspiration to come in contact with the subculture possibly caused by pressure to cohere or simply a fascination with the group's style (p. 55). Once the 'aspirant' decides to join this subculture, they take the appropriate steps (i.e., purchase a Harley) to initiate themselves (p. 55). However, Shouten and McAlexander (1995) caution that members of subcultures, like those who ride Harley Davidson bikes, are quick to clarify that owning the right products does not qualify a person to be a member of the subculture. "The mere acquisition of a Harley-Davidson doth not a biker make" (p. 55). Shouten and McAlexander (1995) note that such transformations are "gradual...an evolution of motives

and a deepening of commitment as (members) become more involved in the subculture” (p. 55).

This ‘self-transformation’ would seem to correspond with what Lury (1996) has called “internal coherence” and “creativity” (p. 196). Lury (1996) argued that central to the “analysis of style as a process of transformation” is the acceptance that “creativity is an integral aspect of everyday life” (p. 196). She (1996) asserts that what has differentiated subculture, specifically the behaviors of youth subcultures, has been the “...internal coherence of style to which their creativity gave rise, the active articulation of objects with activities, expressions of belief and ways of life in a distinct ensemble” (p. 196). This ‘distinct ensemble’ of style is formulated through elements of “dress, appearance, language, rituals, modes of interaction, genres of music” and settles into a “structural symbolic fit” or “state of homology” (p. 196).

In contrast to subcultural theory, neo-tribal theory exemplifies more transient behaviour with a particular emphasis on what Maffesoli (1996) refers to as the “collective present” (p. 75). The “collective present” is meant to imply not only the central desire to become one of a group, but also reflects a lack of stability or “finality” with that desire (p. 75). In this sense, neo-tribes reflect a unified, but temporary, group of identities (p. 75). This unification is achieved by individuals metaphorically wearing “masks” in order to act out a particular persona which in turn allows them to connect with others (p. 90-91).

Maffesoli (1996, p. 76) suggests that there is a special “aesthetic ambience” to which “we can occasionally see ‘instantaneous condensations’ ...which are fragile but for that very instant the object of significant emotional investment”. For example, in an application of neo-tribalism to youth culture and musical style, Bennett (1999) found that:

From this [neo-tribal] point of view the group is no longer a central focus for the individual but rather one of a series of foci or 'sites' within which the individual can live out a selected, temporal role or identity before relocating to an alternative site and assuming a different identity (p. 605).

While Bennett (1999) refers to them as 'foci' or 'sites', it would seem probable that they could also be considered what Brand Community theorists Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) would refer to as 'focal sites' or 'gathering sites'. However, in contrast to the long-term relationships of brand community members within 'gathering sites', neo-tribes seem to be continuously searching for other exciting 'sites' to experience.

In his work on 'Clubbing' (going out to night clubs), Malbon (1998) uses the term 'experiential consumption' (p. 266). He acknowledges the importance of tribal theory as a "useful guide" (p. 266) and highlights the phenomenon in which people lose themselves and temporarily stray away from the awareness of their true individual identity and attach greater importance towards their present social environment (p. 274-275). Malbon (1998) also notes a tendency for:

clubbers (to) act out certain roles in order to gain entry to the club – they behave as they believe they are expected to behave.... Acting out certain roles, dressing in a similar manner, dancing in a certain way, even drinking similar beers are all ways in which the affinity of the group can be reinforced, the territory of the club experience claimed (p. 276).

In contrast to subcultural and neo-tribal theory, Willis (1990) coined the term "common culture" in his recognition of the 'symbolic creativity' that is instrumental to one's daily life (p. 1). Willis (1990) intention in emphasizing the commonness of culture and creativity is to "not invent [symbolic creativity in everyday life] or propose it", but to "recognize it – literally re-cognize it" (p. 1). Common culture is the "extraordinary in the ordinary" (p. 2), the 'ordinary' being what is common to everyone's "immediate life spaces and social practices", while the 'extraordinary' is the various ways in which individuals

interact with the 'ordinary' both 'creatively' and 'symbolically' (p. 2). The symbolic source of such interactions stems from what Willis (1990) refers to as "grounded aesthetics". According to Willis (1990):

This is the creative element in a process whereby meanings are attributed to symbols and practices and where symbols and practices are selected, reselected, highlighted and recomposed to resonate further appropriate and particularized meaning (p. 21).

Willis (1990) considers grounded aesthetics to be the "yeast of common culture" (p. 21)

Imperative to symbolic creativity is the notion of 'message made' communication (Willis, 1990). More "democratic" in nature, 'message made' communication challenges message 'received' theories of communication to suggest that symbolic meanings are actively constructed by individuals instead of simply accepted unaltered (p. 136). It is this "made messages" communication along with "grounded aesthetics" which creates a social climate for the emergence of communication communities (Willis, 1990, p. 141). Willis (1990) also refers to these communication communities as "proto-communities and contends that while they are somewhat "unrecognized", "misrecognized", or "partially recognized", they can arise from "contingency, from fun, from shared desires" and around a similar "consuming interest" (p. 141).

Having reviewed some of the prominent research on brand communities and group consumption and on subcultures, neo-tribes and cultural creativity, I would like to now turn to the design of the research component of the thesis project. Hopefully it is clear from the literature review that these frameworks I have discussed have good potential for helping to explore sport fan culture and sport fan identities and the processes of identification and loyalty.

3. METHODOLOGY

This chapter has several sections. First I describe the broader methodological approach for the thesis research. Then, I discuss the specific methods of data collection, organization and analysis.

3.1 Methodological Approach

This research followed an ethnographic approach for several reasons. First, ethnographic approaches have been used very successfully in prior studies of fan culture (Trujillo and Krizek, 1994) and consumer groups (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995; Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001; McAlexander et al., 2002), both of which have a high relevance to this research. Second, in order to gain a better understanding of the lived experiences (Prus, 1996) of Canucks boosters, ethnographic methods such as participant observation are the logical method of choice. Lastly, the research is also exploratory and warrants a more open-ended and exploratory methodology than does research on more known phenomenon where other methods might be more appropriate.

I have also chosen to use an interpretive approach known as symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969; Prus, 1996). This approach seeks to study "the ways in which people make sense of their life-situations and the ways in which they go about their activities, in conjunction with others, on a day-to-day basis" (Prus, 1996, p. 10). As outlined earlier in the thesis, this study was most concerned with understanding the Canucks boosters from a group/community perspective. Taking a symbolic interactionist approach seemed appropriate because of its commitment to the study of human group life. In the words of Prus (1996):

Central to the interactionist approach is the notion that human life is community life; that human life is thoroughly intersubjective in its essence. At base is the recognition that humans (and human behavior) cannot be understood apart from the community context in which people live. Humans derive their (social) essences from the communities in which they are located, and human communities are contingent on the development of shared (or intersubjectively acknowledged) symbols or languages (p. 10).

This approach is also appropriate because the study of symbolic interaction is “down to earth” and focused on the interactions that occur within everyday human group life (p. 10). Such a methodological perspective enables this study to be “rigorously grounded” (p. 10) when exploring the meaningful interactions, practices and experiences of Canucks boosters. Rather than collecting data based on what is known from the literature (i.e., a deductive approach), this study preferred to be more open and methodologically ‘grounded’ in symbolic interactions, in order to collect a breadth of data relating to the lived experiences of Canucks boosters (i.e., an inductive approach).

According to Blumer (1969) there are three premises involved in symbolic interaction: 1) people act in meaningful ways towards objects (social, physical or abstract), 2) people generate these meanings through interactions with others, and 3) people create, maintain and change these meanings based on their own interpretations. Following these premises this ethnographic study observed and recorded the meaningful interactions that took place between Canucks Booster Club members – with each other and with objects in their environment - as well as the ways these meanings were generated, communicated, and interpreted by the members. A predetermined (yet flexible) list of general objects (derived from the relationships of a brand community by McAlexander et al., 2002) assisted in categorizing the environment. This list includes: the brand, the product, the marketer(s) and other Canucks fans. The rationale behind selecting the more general “other Canucks fans” instead of focusing strictly on other Booster Club members is because Booster Club

members are often amongst all Canucks fans during their experiences and therefore all Canucks fans are social objects in their environment.

3.2 Data Collection

This study used two different means of data collection. Participant observations were conducted at various Canucks Booster Club events during the season. In addition, two focus group sessions were conducted with a recruited sample of members. In the following section I discuss the reasons for choosing these particular methods and describe in detail how each method was operationalized.

3.2.1 Method #1 - Participant Observations

Participant observation has been a method of choice for a number of studies that have explored group consumption/brand communities (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995; Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001; McAlexander et al., 2002), ballpark culture (Trujillo and Krizek, 1994) and hooliganism (Giulianotti, 1995). This is because participant observation lends itself to gaining insights into how groups of people function together and relate to each other in everyday life. Given the frequency of use in these similar studies and the apparent effectiveness of this method, I was confident that participant observations would be an equally effective choice of method for this study. As suggested by Hammersley and Atkinson (1994), unsolicited data that is gained by participant observations can often be "a useful source of direct information about the setting and of evidence about the perspectives, concerns, and discursive practices of the people who produce them" (p. 127)

In conjunction with this study I joined the Canucks Booster Club and participated in and observed a series of Canucks Booster Club events that occurred during the 2003-04

hockey season.

Table 3.1 Booster Club Events during the 2003-2004 Season

- Approximately 30 Game Nights @ General Motors Place
(Promoting the club, handing out Newsletters, watching some of the game)
- A Christmas Dinner
(Members get together for a Christmas Dinner and watch an away game on TV)
- A Player Dinner
(A dinner social where a few players from the Canucks team are in attendance)
- An Annual General Meeting
(Includes a celebration, trivia night, pizza and club elections)
- One Road Trip
(Interested members take a group trip to another NHL city to attend a game)
- Charity Work
(The Club chooses a charity every year and hold events to support this charity)
- Other Events
(Often where they assist the Canucks Hockey franchise with operation of events)

My participation included 10 game nights, the Christmas and Player Dinners, a road trip to Edmonton, as well as the Annual General Meeting. While consumer group ethnographies can be conducted over a period of several years (see McAlexander et al., 2002), I attended events over a 12 month period. My rule for deciding when I had attended enough Booster Club events was when common themes emerged and began to become predictable.

The above events were considered important because of the interactions at these events between the brand (all events), product (game nights), marketers (player dinner, special events) and other Canucks fans (all events). These events were also useful because they clustered the sample needed for this study, allowing the researcher to focus

specifically on Canucks boosters and avoid having to determine who was and who was not a participant in the study (i.e., confusing Canucks fans with fans of other teams). Also important is the fact that while some of these events took place at General Motors Place, others also took place outside of the spectator environment. Moreover, the number of events, variety of venues attended, and different time periods during the hockey season provided significantly “different phases of the field work”, and thus allowed this study to compare data and to triangulate the findings (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995, p. 230).

Prior to starting the research, my request to take part in these events was approved by the Booster Club’s president and board members. At the end of this study consent was also given to allow me to use the club’s name in future publications. Consent from individual members was requested before my onsite visits began. A letter of consent was sent out to all Booster Club members explaining the purpose of the proposed research. Members who were under the age of 18 were asked to show the letter to their parent or guardian. Those members who wished not to participate, or who had further questions regarding the research were encouraged to respond to the letter. Individuals who declined participation were excluded from my observations and one-to-one conversations. It was hoped that by requesting consent in this manner, the participant observations and conversations would not be disruptive and would not require administering onsite requests.

While participating in these events, I initiated casual conversations and in some cases conducted informal non-directive interviews with Booster Club members of varying ages, ethnicity and gender. This study did not use a predetermined list of questions during the field work, rather I took a more spontaneous approach and used opened-ended questions as a means to get to know the Booster Club members. By creating dialogue and

building rapport with Booster Club members I attempted to obtain a more authentic account from those studied than would be gained from simply observing (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995). Hammersley and Atkinson (1995) have suggested that using this non-directive approach can often make it easier for participants to speak longer, more openly, and in their own words, compared to a more structured interview style.

However, as with the formal interviews, the non-directive conversations can be subject to the unavoidable possibility of researcher influence (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995). With this in mind, I did not expect the unattainable, but instead continuously sought the “correct manner of interpreting, whatever data [I had]” (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995, p. 131). Data collection followed a conceptual approach (i.e., symbolic interactionist) and included my own impressions as a member. While it was not the intention of this study to be autoethnographical, similar studies (Trujillo and Krizek, 1994; McAlexander et al., 2002) have shown that the researchers’ insight that comes out of their own ‘membership’ in the group can also provide useful data. This study also reflected upon the field work in much the same manner and treated these autoethnographic reflections as data.

The majority of data were typed up in journal form using word processing software within 48 hours of leaving the field. This journal included a detailed and chronological description of what took place, what was observed, as well as my “own personal feelings and involvement” (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995, p. 192). Even though it would be “ideal” to be able to record all the data while in the field,

... [it] is not always possible, and even when it is possible the opportunities may be very limited....In many circumstances, such activity would prove totally disruptive to any ‘natural’ participation (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995, p. 176-177).

The intention of this study was to allow the members of the Booster Club to feel comfortable with me being there, and not feel intimidated or threatened by the presence of a clipboard or tape recorder. Nevertheless, in order to assist with the accuracy of data collection during more formal one-to-one interviews a tape recorder was used. However, as a member of the club myself I wanted to take part in the activities involved in these events and often this involvement made it difficult sometimes to keep a tape recorder in hand.

During the participant observations and conversations my identity within the Canucks Booster Club was that of a University of British Columbia graduate student who was studying Canucks fans and happened to also be a Canucks fan. I did not hide the fact that I was conducting research, although I only took the time to remind people that I was conducting research if I got involved in a causal or informal conversation with them. The rationale for this was that it would be relatively easy to remind members in conversation who I was, however, it would be difficult and unnecessary to ensure that everyone at the event knew that I was 'the researcher' who sent out the consent letter.

3.2.2 Method #2: Focus Groups

The reasons for using focus group methodology were two fold. First and foremost, as indicated earlier, this research was concerned with gaining a group/community perspective on Canucks fans. Prior research on group consumption and brand community reviewed earlier (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995; Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001; McAlexander et al., 2002) has shown that group level interviewing is an effective way to gain this perspective. Conducting group interviews specifically allowed me to increase the

number of people studied in one session, as well as create a setting that hopefully made participants more comfortable and more likely to speak up than on a one-to-one basis (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995).

In contrast to the group level interviewing used in other consumption/brand community work, however, it is important to note that while the sessions in this study were fairly directive, they also encouraged more open-ended and more reflexive interaction between participants. In other words, I used a focus group format that encouraged more group interaction rather than simply asking questions and getting their individual answers. Moreover, this study used focus group methodology in much the same manner as audience research that has explored “interpretive communities” (Wilson and Sparks, 1996; Wilson and Sparks, 1999). In their research on youth interpretations of media texts, Wilson and Sparks (1999) suggested that if one is interested in studying “group culture”, it is appropriate to watch participants interact and make interpretations within a “group setting” (p. 603). Therefore, in order to gain a better understanding of the group perspective of sport fan identity, identification and loyalty, it seemed most beneficial to observe sport fans interacting and discussing these topics within a group setting.

The second reason for using focus group methodology was to allow for “technique triangulation” whereby the findings identified during participant observation portions of the study could be compared to the focus group findings (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995, p. 231). It was hoped that by doing so a “more reflexive analysis of the data” could take place and findings would be more “comprehensive” (Mays and Pope, 2000, p. 94). This stemmed from the premise that “what people say in interviews can lead us to see things differently in observation” (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995, p. 132).

Two separate focus group sessions were conducted in the study. Given the amount of time spent in the field doing participant observations, I felt that two focus group sessions were sufficient for achieving the two goals outlined above. The first focus group session (Focus Group #1) took place during the first half of the hockey season (Dec. 2, 2004), the second session (Focus Group #2) took place in second half of the hockey season (March 22, 2004). The focus group sessions involved different members from the Canucks Booster Club. Each focus group session involved 4-6 adult members (19 years and older) who were representative of the different ethnic groups in the club. The first focus group consisted of four (4) women, and the second focus group consisted of three (3) women and three (3) men, making a total of 10 participants.

The recruitment of the sample occurred during the participant observations leading up to the focus group sessions. Participants for Focus Group #1 were recruited during the Booster Club events scheduled between September and November, in particular the Christmas Dinner that took place on November 29th. The participants for Focus Group #2 were recruited during the Booster Club events between January and February, in particular the Players Dinner. The sample consisted of those individuals I had developed a rapport with during the Booster Club events and had demonstrated to me to be talkative, expressive and opinionated members. The sample generally consisted of individuals who all knew each other, had developed a rapport with each other and appeared comfortable interacting with each other.

The study focus groups took place in a conference room at a Community Centre in Burnaby, British Columbia. This location was selected primarily because the club had held functions there in the past, and is a central location to the Greater Vancouver area. This

location provided a casual, comfortable and non-scientific atmosphere. While selecting a location away from Booster Club events would not be considered a natural setting, “artificiality” also constituted a potential benefit (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995, p. 140). As Hammersley and Atkinson (1995) suggest:

... the ‘artificiality’ of the interview when compared with ‘normal’ events in the setting may allow us to understand how participants would behave in other circumstances, for example when they move out of a setting or when the setting changes. (p. 140)

The focus groups took approximately an hour to an hour and a half. This length of time was sufficient to discuss the desired subjects in depth (see Appendix A on p. 89). Participants were asked to sign a consent form and were told that they could refuse any question, refrain from discussion and withdraw from the focus group at any time. Upon gaining consent from all participants, I began with a brief overview of what would take place during the session.

Participants were encouraged to speak up and respond to not only my questions, but to each other’s comments and questions throughout the session. During these sessions I followed a list of focus group questions to guide the discussion. These questions were developed with the goal of addressing the research questions of the study. However, to maintain a grounded theory approach (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) to data collection, I also encouraged a free, open and unstructured dialogue to take place among the members of the group.

The first four questions on the guide were intended to encourage the participants to think about their own individual stories and reasons they were Canucks fans and Booster Club members. It was expected that these questions would be somewhat easy to answer and therefore could be used to ‘break the ice’ and get people talking. The three questions

that followed asked about Canuck fan identities, identification and loyalty through a discussion of Canuck fan legitimacy. The next four questions dealt with their thoughts and feelings about the Canucks' organization, team, marketers and fans. The sessions concluded with perhaps the most personal part of the session, asking the participants to discuss their own identities as Canucks fans and the role that their identities played within their lives as a whole. All questions were delivered in a manner that was intended to avoid leading the discussion.

While all sessions were video recorded, the researcher also actively listened to the dialogue in order to take field notes for purposes of using probing questions. The video recording data were transcribed following the session.

3.3 Data Organization & Analysis

This section of the methodology chapter discusses how the data were organized using coding and categorization techniques and then analyzed in order to shed light on the "meanings" (p. 213) and possible conceptual "indicators" (p. 218) of the categories (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995). The participant observation notes and interview and focus group tapes were transcribed into electronic files and all analysis was done using word processing software. As soon as the first data were collected and entered, the data were read through in a careful manner searching for "patterns", and categories that stood out or that were "surprising or puzzling" (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995, p. 210). Once common themes were identified, the data were coded by using the highlighter function of the word processor. Different highlighter colours were used for different themes. For each of these themes the data was copied from its original location and pasted into separate new

'theme documents' that included only data pertaining to those specific themes. "The ultimate aim, of course, [was] to reach a position where one has a stable set of categories and has carried out a systematic coding of all the data in terms of those categories" (p. 213). On each 'theme document', the categorized data remained separated by its source (i.e., participant observation, focus group notes, focus group transcriptions). Therefore, the data were structured such that the original typed journals and transcripts were identifiable while other newly created categorical documents contained the extracted themes.

The analysis of these themes took place throughout data collection on both comparative and theoretical levels (c.f. Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995, p. 213-214). This is not unlike the brand community ethnography by McAlexander et al. (2002). They suggest that data collection should be done while "...continually reflecting [new data] against previous data and emerging themes" (p. 41).

The first level of analysis used what Glaser and Strauss (1967) refer to as the "constant comparative method" (c.f. Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995, p. 213). Using this method, the researcher examined each categorized theme and explored any possible "new categories or subcategories" that could be identified based on any differences in the data (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995, p. 213). This step was intended to assist in "clarifying meaning and exploring [the data's] relations with other categories" (p. 213).

In addition to this comparative analysis, I also conducted a theoretical analysis (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995) using the literature discussed earlier as well as other material that I reviewed over the course of the study. The purpose of the theoretical analysis was to explore whether or not these characteristics or concepts could help to explain and make sense of the categories and themes identified in the data (Hammersley

and Atkinson, 1995). In fact, Hammersley and Atkinson (1995) suggest that “where the fit is good and the model is well developed, it may even be possible to set about rigorously testing it” (p. 213). By conducting what Denzin (1978) refers to as “theoretical triangulation”, one can utilize theories as a means to analyze and test the identified categories and themes from various theoretical and conceptual standpoints (c.f. Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995, p. 214). For example, this study explored the various perspectives posed by social group theorists (i.e., subculture, neo-tribalism, common culture) as means for analyzing and testing the identified themes.

Along with this theoretical analysis, I revisited the specific research questions of the study. To do so the themes were examined for instances where Canucks boosters appeared to be symbolically interacting with the 1) brand, 2) product, 3) marketer(s) and 4) other Canucks fans. As stated earlier, these four objects were identified by McAlexander et al. (2002) as the relationships involved within a Brand Community. The analysis specifically explored the following questions: What messages can be identified when Canucks boosters interact with these objects? What meanings can be interpreted from these messages? How do Canucks boosters communicate these messages and meanings? How personally significant and stable are these meanings within the identities of the Canucks boosters?

3.4 Potential Barriers & Concerns

The major barriers of the study (such as access) were managed as a result of a strong rapport that was developed with the president of the Canucks Booster Club. While ‘casing the joint’ (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995, p. 38), the president of the club was most helpful, answering all of my questions promptly and was always very supportive of

my research ideas. This support gave me the confidence that whatever barriers arose unexpectedly would be manageable.

I was also aware of the potential concern related to my own personal appreciation of the Vancouver Canucks team. This personal admiration could be seen to bring about concerns relating to 'reflexivity' (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995, p. 16). In other words, there was the possibility that my own relationship with the Canucks could influence what took place in the field, what was recorded and what was found in the study. While these concerns are legitimate, they are in a sense no different from the constraints faced by many other social researchers simply because "social researchers are part of the social world they study" (p. 16). Nevertheless, I was aware that researcher influence and bias was an unavoidable yet potentially limiting aspect of this research. Therefore, throughout the fieldwork I remained cognizant of what I said and did, and attempted to minimize my influence and protect a reasonable level of validity as well as realism.

Another potential concern regarding my personal characteristics was the possibility of 'going native' and developing 'over-rapport' (p. 110). As a Canucks fan, I was aware that I had to be continuously balancing who I was as a researcher and who I was as a fan. I did not want to pretend that I was not a Canucks fan for two reasons. Firstly, having knowledge of the Canucks helped me to converse with Booster Club members and ultimately develop the rapport necessary for insightful interaction. Secondly, as demonstrated by Muniz and O'Guinn (2001), having knowledge or even being a member of the consumer group being studied could "provide an important and unique perspective" (p. 418).

The key to this study was to avoid going fully 'native' and to be more of a 'marginal native' (c.f. Hamersley and Atkinson, 1995, p. 112). To do so, this study used the same "safeguard" that Shouten and McAlexander (1995) used in their study of Harley Davidson Bikers and performed a "critical self-examination" in order to "maintain a balanced, scholarly perspective" (p. 46). I endeavored to maintain this perspective and to ensure that throughout the study I was always a researcher first and foremost, and that my identity as a fan was secondary.

4. FINDINGS

The data analysis revealed a number of distinct themes which together help to identify the core features, cultural formations and social dynamics of the Vancouver Canucks Booster Club (VCBC). It was found that the VCBC not only demonstrated the characteristics of a brand community, but also the characteristics of common culture, neo-tribalism and subculture. These theoretical frameworks are used to help organize the presentation of findings in this chapter. I begin with a discussion of the history and context of the club and then present the findings. In all cases, the names of Booster Club members in the thesis are pseudonyms.

4.1 Booster Club Background Information

The Vancouver Canucks Booster Club (VCBC) history dates back to the 1950's, years before the Vancouver Canucks team was even in the National Hockey League (NHL). Although there are only a handful of current boosters who can recall these 'early years', their history is not hidden from present day booster discussions. Information about most of the clubs' past can be found on their website (www.canuckboosters.org). In the very 'early years', the VCBC supported the Vancouver Canucks when they competed in the Western Hockey League (WHL). In 1970 the Vancouver Canucks became a franchise of the NHL, and the VCBC stayed along with the team. In 1977 the VCBC became the first Canadian Club to appear at the National Hockey League Booster Club (NHLBC) convention held in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Much of what is known about the Vancouver Canucks Boosters Club (VCBC) history can be linked back to the NHLBC conventions and to a person who is not even a fan of the Vancouver Canucks. This individual, who is said

to be a New Jersey Devils fan, but lives in Florida, kept track of yearly membership numbers as well the history of each club associated with the NHLBC. Since 1977, this information has been printed and made available in a NHL Boosters Yearbook at the annual conventions.

After the Canucks boosters made their first appearance at the NHLBC convention, the club had some tough times that eventually resulted in the club coming to an end during the 1986-87 season. It is difficult to determine exactly what took place that caused the death of the VCBC, as there are only a few members who have any knowledge of what may have occurred. In the words of one member who over the years has assumed the role as the club's historian,

My understanding of it is basically there was some in-fighting, the Canucks were caught sort of in the middle of it. One group would go to them [the Canucks] and say, 'they're doing this, they're doing this', and the other group would go and say, 'well they're doing that, they're doing that', and the Canucks just said 'why bother'. 'We don't want to have anything to do with them; it's not our problem, you guys solve it yourselves.' And they couldn't. So the Canucks just said 'you know what, why don't you guys just put it to bed.' But as I said, I don't know the details as to all that went on. When I got involved there were still a few leftovers from the old club, a few people were in the old club. So you kind of got bits and pieces of the story, but you don't know if you got the whole story because it was only certain people that came back. The ones that got really pissed off didn't bother coming back. (Adam, Booster Club member)

Significant to this event is the relationship with the Canucks organization. The club did not officially disband until it was voted on by the members at a VCBC meeting, but perhaps more importantly it would appear that the 'in-fighting' strained the relationship with the Canucks organization to the point that the hockey club no longer cared if the club even existed.

The 'End of the Booster Club' as it has been noted on their website, lasted only a couple of seasons before the 'New Booster Club' was formed, or in some ways re-formed,

depending on how one looks at it. The club historian has dubbed this era as the "reincarnation of the club" because, while it was a new club hoping to move forward without the old problems, it was essentially

One of the factions [of the old club that] got together and said you know we're going to try it again. So the other faction of the old club just disappeared and said we don't want to have anything to do with this. (Adam, Booster Club member)

The VCBC reincarnate came with new rules which the club and its members were expected to abide by. These rules can be found in the VCBC Constitution and By-Laws.

Some notable by-laws include:

A person may apply to the directors for membership in the society and on acceptance by the directors shall be a member. For each application, the directors may vote on whether the application will be accepted or rejected. A majority of the directors must vote to reject an application in order for it to be rejected. In the event of an equality of votes, the membership will be accepted (By-Laws, Part II, Article 4, p. 2)

The president and vice-president of the Vancouver Canucks Booster Club are the only persons that may initiate contact with any person from the Vancouver Canucks Hockey Club on behalf of the Vancouver Canucks Booster Club. Any other member of the Vancouver Canucks Booster Club must receive prior authorization from the club president. (By-Laws, Part II, Article 8, Section 4, p. 3)

The club functions with an elected Board of Directors which consists of a President, Vice-President, Treasurer, Secretary, Editor and Director(s). The Board of Directors are nominated and voted into their roles at the annual general meetings by all members who are in attendance.

As per the VCBC constitution the club is a non-profit society.

The purpose(s) of the society is (are): to promote, to foster, and to develop support for the Vancouver Canucks Hockey Club and to enhance its image and that of hockey in general in the Province of British Columbia, and do everything incidental and necessary to promote and attain the foregoing purposes throughout the Province of British Columbia (Constitution, Article 4, p. 1).

The VCBC is a separate club from the Vancouver Canucks Hockey Club, however, the role the hockey club plays with the Booster Club is considerable. The Booster Club constitution states that the club "can only operate with the expressed permission of the Vancouver Canucks Hockey Club" (Constitution, Article 5.2, p. 1). Furthermore, as demonstrated by the earlier demise of the club in 1987 as well as the constitutional requirement of "expressed permission" (Article 5.2, p. 1), it is clear that the support from the Canucks organization is necessary in order for the VCBC to operate.

While the existence of the 'new' club does not appear to be under any current threats, a more recent look at the history of the VCBC would indicate varying levels of support for their day-day fan activities. This was perhaps no more evident than in 1995-96 when the hockey club moved from the Pacific Coliseum to General Motors Place which eventually led to the unexpected and unappreciated removal of the booster booth. In the Pacific Coliseum the VCBC had established a booth where they could promote the club and sign-up new members. The VCBC struggled in the late 80's to get into the Coliseum, and initially were allowed to set up their booth in a building next to the Coliseum where the hockey club would set up their beer garden. By 1990-91, the VCBC was given space inside the coliseum for a booth. When the hockey club eventually moved to General Motors Place in 1995, it was originally unclear to members whether or not the booth was going to make the trip as well. Once again, eventually the VCBC was provided space in the new building. Their time there, however, was cut short. In the words of the club historian and member who built the booth with his father:

So we had it in GM Place and as the year wore on, you know of course GM Place they wanted things to be much more upscale. Things had to be, you know? And we got our big wooden booth that came over from the coliseum and they were not thrilled to have everything coming over from the Coliseum into GM Place ...one day I came into the

building and the booth was gone. Now I started looking for it and found it in the basement or whatever. (Adam, Booster Club member)

The removal of the booth is an incident that boosters will still occasionally speak of, particularly those who were members pre- 1995. It is a topic that is not relived unless it is to share the story with those who have not yet heard it. Instead of the booth, the club was given a much smaller table (podium style) to use. This was shortly followed by an announcement to the club that there was no longer any more room for them in GM Place. Some members thought this was the case because the boosters were perceived by the Canucks as not being “corporate enough”, particularly in comparison to the newly created C-Force fan club, a fan club operated by the Vancouver Canucks.

The VCBC’s presence in General Motors Place is different from the days of the booth, and is based on their role as volunteers at the Canucks games in which they conduct pre-game, during game and post game hand-outs to fans for the Vancouver Canucks. To facilitate this role, the VCBC is allowed to use a storage room as a meeting point for members when they come to a game and also to store their bags and jackets while they are at the game. It also acts as a storage room for any leftover pre-game, during game and post-game hand-outs. Unlike in the past and due to the recent popularity of the Canucks, the VCBC are rarely provided with any free tickets. Without seats at the game, boosters instead watch the hockey game on the televisions in the food court.

Aside from the chance to volunteer at games, a Booster Club membership also provides members with the opportunity to take part in the Booster Club hockey-pool, join in on interactive web surveys, as well as get invitations to attend different events and socials such as the Christmas Dinner, Players Dinner, Charity Events, Road Trips and the Annual General Meeting. A member also receives the monthly ‘Two Points’ newsletter, a

Booster Club publication that is written, edited and printed by members for members.

Those members who are elected to serve on the Board of Directors oversee these operations and meet once a month as a smaller group. At these meetings the board votes on whether or not to accept individuals who have applied for membership to the club, but membership applications are rarely, if ever, denied.

Although the club membership numbers may vary from year to year, during the 2003-2004 hockey season there were a total of 156 members according to the Booster Club records. This membership consisted of 102 members (65.4%) from the Greater Vancouver area, and 13 members (8.3%) from within British Columbia, but outside of the Greater Vancouver. There were also 17 members (10.9%) from within Canada, but outside of British Columbia, 16 members (10.3%) from the United States of America, and 8 members (5.1%) who live in Europe including England, Germany and Switzerland.

4.2 Canucks Boosters & Core Commonalities

The VCBC demonstrated a number of features that are indicative of a brand community. More specifically, the Booster Club demonstrated the core commonalities of a brand community described by Muniz and O'Guinn (2001), including Consciousness of Kind, Rituals and Traditions and Moral Responsibility.

To the casual viewer, the 'shared consciousness' between Canucks boosters is their shared appreciation for the Vancouver Canucks, however, the actual shared consciousness between boosters goes much deeper and is more complex than this. The observations and interviews in this study found that 'legitimacy' and 'opposition', two key factors identified

by Muniz and O'Guinn (2001), also played a significant role in their shared consciousness of the VCBC.

Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) discuss legitimacy as a factor that is "...not found in all of the brands that support community" (p. 419), or in other words a factor that is important in some brand communities, but not as important in others. This is to suggest that for some brand communities it is expected of all members to be 'sincere', 'non-opportunistic' and belonging for the 'right reasons' (p. 419), while in other brand communities these characteristics are not (or not as) expected. For the VCBC, legitimacy was an important characteristic of being a member and fan, however it was found that members had different perspectives as to what it takes to be a 'real' Canucks fan. To some members legitimacy does not stem from a question of a demonstrated 'appreciation', but rather of demonstrated 'support'. In other words, as long as you are being supportive of the Canucks, you are one of us. While to other boosters, along with this expectation of support, there seemed to be an understanding that knowledge and commitment to the team distinguishes the 'real' Canucks fans.

Picking up any copy of the 'Two Points' newsletter during the 2003-2004 season, and one could not help but notice comments made on the bottom footer of every page.

These comments seem to speak directly to the notion of legitimacy:

"REAL FANS...KNOW THE SCORE"
"REAL FANS...CHEER, NOT JEER"
"REAL FANS...WEAR THE COLOURS"
"REAL FANS...ARE BOOSTERS"
"REAL FANS...LIVE THE GAME"
"REAL FANS...NEVER STOP CHEERING"
"REAL FANS...STAY FOR THE STARS"
"REAL FANS...KNOW THEIR TRIVIA"

To some boosters, a legitimate fan/member is a person who demonstrates these 'true believer' qualities, that is, someone who knows their trivia, never stops cheering and at the end of the game stays to see which players were named the three stars.

My first experience with this type of legitimacy happened early on in the research when I was proposing this study to various booster members and seeking their support. After telling all the members that I was a researcher, and having explained to them what the study entailed, I also mentioned that I was a Canucks fan. At that point one booster member asked me, "How long have you been a Canucks fan?" in a tone that was to suggest that I was not a Canucks fan and that perhaps I was just saying that to get their support (in other words, I had said that I was a Canucks fan for the 'wrong reasons'). At that point the first thing that went through my mind was how thankful I was that I had done quite well in the Canucks Trivia contest that took place only shortly before I began speaking to the group. My answer to her was an honest one, "I don't know the exact date, it just gradually happened, I guess I would say somewhere around the time that Gretzky got traded to the Kings". She seemed satisfied with this answer and from what I could tell other members also seemed satisfied. There were also some members who I think had a small chuckle over the moderate grilling that I had just received.

Another example of this more stringent expectation of legitimacy can be seen at the end of the hockey games in GM Place. Towards the end of games, boosters often have to stop watching the game and head towards their exits so that they can give away the post-game handout. On these occasions fans can often be seen leaving before the game is over. On one occasion there were only a few minutes left in the game, at which time the members left the television and went to their assigned exits to hand out a Vancouver

Canucks collectors glass. I was at an exit with three other boosters, and with three minutes to go in the game people started to leave the arena. At this point one of the members said to another member quietly, "It's 3-2 and their leaving with like 3:00 minutes to go? They don't deserve a glass." Although this member did not seem surprised that people were leaving, his point speaks directly to the notion of legitimacy. His comment suggests that anyone who gives up on the Canucks and leaves the game when it is possible that they could tie is obviously not a 'real' fan and really should not be rewarded with a collector's cup.

In an interview with one member, the topic of being a 'real' Canucks fan came up. He recalled the following story:

I'll bring some posters into work for a couple of guys you know and someone will come up to me and say 'Oh I am a big hockey fan, can I have one of those' and I'll start asking about the hockey game and you can tell just by what they're saying about the hockey game, that they're not really a hockey fan. They just want a free poster, or whatever I happen to have. So there are people who like to play the roles, to be, I guess, in with the crowd. We actually have some people who are in the Booster Club who are like that. That you don't see them all the time, you only see them at the players dinner or the Christmas dinner. They're people that, you know they're here for more of the social event or a happening, or getting together with a bunch of people, more so than they are for hockey. You can tell just by talking to them, they don't know anything about the players. They don't know anything about who they're playing next or what the standings are. (Steve, Booster Club member)

However, when I asked if these members were accepted given the "roles" that they played, he replied, "Oh sure....for the most part, everyone is accepted." This would reflect the words of another member who simply put it, "If you're a fan, you're a fan. If you're not, you're not."

This more generalized and simplistic notion of legitimacy seems to include those boosters who did not appear to have a strong knowledge about the Canucks. Although these boosters were the minority in the club, they often seemed to not be paying as close

attention to the game as the other members. These members were often difficult to interview because they were reluctant to be in the focus groups and/or did not want to be tape recorded. They often commented, "No, you don't want to interview me, interview him or her. They are much bigger fans than me" or "No, you don't want me to be there [at the Focus Group], I wouldn't be good for your study." With these individuals I relied on one-to-one unrecorded, casual conversations as well as observations of their interactions with others. It appeared that these members attended booster events and games more for their social experience, and that the fact that the event involved the Canucks was less important. Furthermore, because their knowledge about the team, attention to the game or appreciation towards the Canucks would not fit under the "real fans..." definition, one could argue that these boosters were not legitimate members. As one member told the story:

You'll even have members that sometimes I'm wondering how dedicated they are as a fan because often times you'll see them just walking around the perimeter, not listening to the game or watching the game, or just talking to their table, or looking at the TV or paying attention to it. And there was one time [NAME] was sitting there reading a book, and everybody's watching the TV set, I said to her; "[NAME], you're supposed to be a Canucks fan, how come you're not watching the game", and she says, "Well to be honest with you, the book is more interesting right now. (Stacey, Booster Club member)

However during this focus group another member was quick to add,

It's not so much a matter of [Name] not being a Canuck fan, or these other people, I think it's the advantage of socializing with people, and to them that is more important than actually watching the game, or enjoying the game. (Jim, Booster Club member)

This dialogue was very indicative of the complexities of the notion of legitimacy within the Booster Club. However, no fan who I found lacked knowledge or attentiveness was treated as any less a member within the club. If a fan inadvertently cheered at the wrong time or got a simple Canucks trivia question wrong, there would be only polite and

playful jeers. The general rule that was often echoed within the club was to be supportive of the Canucks. As one member suggested, "I think the main definition [of being a real Canucks fan] is just sticking with the team through thick and thin, but mainly through thin." As one member said about finding out who is or who is not a real Canucks fans, "Oh there are easy tests. When the Canucks are playing badly, they're 'your' Canucks, when they play well they're 'our' Canucks."

Opponents, or, opposition for the brand was also an interesting theme throughout this study. It was not a factor that was frequently discussed by members of the club in terms of its importance to their fandom or membership, but the significance was observable and tangible. The findings suggest that the distinction of an opposition worked in much the same manner in this study as was found in Muniz and O'Guinn's (2001) brand community work whereby the sense of opposition plays a key role in separating the various consumer/fan groups or brand communities and in turn works to enhance the consumer's experience. As Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) pointed out, "the opposition" can serve "to delineate what the brand is not, and who the brand community members are not" (p. 420).

For the Canucks Booster Club it is safe to say that their opposition included any and all competing teams in the National Hockey League, and as a result the fans/clubs of those teams would not be members of their community. Members of this study often spoke of fan experiences where they have had to 'stick-up' for 'their' Canucks when a fan of another team challenged some aspect of their team (i.e., quality of play, quality of players) or perhaps more importantly their decision to support the Canucks. As one member recalls, "When they [the Canucks] were going for the Stanley Cup in 93-94, everybody was making fun of me. 'Oh look they're going to lose', and I was like, 'You know what, if you don't want to be on the team or for the team, why do you bother coming [to watch the Canucks], get out of here. (Ronda, Booster Club member)"

Another fan recalls his experience watching the Canucks play the Montreal Canadians at a game when the Canucks ended up losing. This booster was wearing a Canucks jersey and a Montreal fan walked up to him after the game and said, "You should get a new jersey". After that experience this member no longer likes Montreal fans.

During my trip to Edmonton with a few Canucks boosters for Hockey Day in Canada, these 'challenges' from the opposition were also highly noticeable. What was also noticeable was how the opposition factor can enhance the fan experience. The boosters and I watched the game with a larger Canucks fan group (approximately 30 in total) who also traveled to Edmonton for the game. Around our section the spectators were obviously Edmonton Oilers fans, and by appearance alone it was very easy to determine who was a Canucks fan and who was an Oilers fan by their painted faces, jerseys the and signs they held up for all to see.

Throughout the game, Canucks fans and Oiler fans exchanged verbal taunts. For example, Oilers fans would say things such as "Hey Cloutier [the goalie for the Canucks] don't let one in from centre ice", in hopes of reminding Cloutier of the playoff game against Detroit where he was scored on by a slap shot from the centre ice area. In response to this, Canucks fans collectively cheered "Belarus, Belarus, Belarus" in an effort to remind Oiler goalie Tommy Salo of the unexpected defeat by his team [Sweden] to the Belarus team during the 2004 Olympic quarterfinal. The Canucks fans also yelled "...don't let one in off your head", as he did in that game versus Belarus.

What was most interesting was that throughout the cross fan banter, all fans seemed to laugh at all of the jokes. It was not a serious argument, nor did it strike up any bad blood between the fans. While I do not doubt that more hostile confrontations can happen

between fans, it is important to note that oppositional/rival fans can also serve to enhance the fan experience. What was also interesting was that this banter and exchanging of verbal taunts seemed to be done with more thought than simply saying, 'Hey Cloutier, you're terrible' or 'Hey Salo, you stink'. While I am sure these types of comments can sometimes be made, the exchanges that I observed were done in a way that demonstrated people's knowledge of hockey and past hockey events, instead of just thoughtless insults.

One booster that I interviewed spoke of rivals from this point of view

Vancouver and Calgary are always more interesting than Vancouver and Florida. There's just not that rivalry. In terms of being a fan of a team where there is another team down the road, again you have to be a little stronger as a fan because they're cheering just as loud for their team. When do the Canucks get this, when Toronto's in town because they know that half the building is theirs. My feeling is the whole NHL is important as opposed to just my team. (Adam, Booster Club member)

Such a comment brings to light the importance of the opponent and necessity for healthy rivals. This is not unlike other brand communities that have been studied. For example, Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) found that among the Macintosh brand community "the common enemy against whom to unite [Microsoft] makes this brand community particularly strong." (p. 420). In this same fashion, Canucks boosters rely on other franchises of the National Hockey League, particularly their acknowledged rivals, to enhance their fan experience and thus develop their 'shared consciousness'.

This study also found that the VCBC members demonstrated a great appreciation for the historical aspects of the Canucks hockey club and as well demonstrated a strong desire to share their Canucks stories among the membership. Although it was found that the historical appreciation and sharing of stories that existed in the Booster Club varied from the very subtle and casual interaction to the overwhelmingly loud and obvious, there were also clear indicators that appreciating the Canucks history and sharing stories relating

to the Canucks brand were fundamental and instrumental to the ways in which members socially and symbolically interacted with one another.

There were a number of dimensions to the social processes through which the members reflected their affinities for and link with the Canucks, one of which was fashion around an appreciation for the team's history and tradition. For example, at the Christmas Dinner, instead of using the conventional method of pulling numbers or members' names out of a hat to determine who got which Christmas gifts, the boosters drew out former Canucks names and those names corresponded with specific gifts. I drew Orland Kurtenbach who subsequently I learned from other boosters was the Vancouver Canucks' first team captain. Even though those sitting at my table were convinced that I was going to win an autographed Canucks jersey with that name, my actual prize was a very nice Canucks t-shirt.

Another illustration of this phenomenon could be seen in the storage room at GM Place where the Booster Club meets on game days. During the season a couple of boosters took the initiative to put up collector newspaper posters of current Canucks along the walls. During the playoffs, collector posters of players from the 1993-94 season were also posted too, representing the last time the Vancouver Canucks went to the Stanley Cup final.

Similarly, the Canucks Bingo Trivia which is played at the annual general meeting, allows boosters to show off their knowledge as well as learn new information relating to the history of the Canucks. Throughout the season members are also asked to give their opinions relating to the history of the Canucks and submit their opinions via their website. Questions such as: "Who is the all-time best Canuck defenseman (based on his performance as a Canuck)" (Two Points Newsletter, October 2003) or "Which number do

you think the Canucks should be preparing to raise to the rafters” (Two Points Newsletter, February 2004).

Another ritual and tradition celebrated by the boosters is the presentation of the Unsung Hero Award, also known as the Frank J. Hume Memorial Award. The presentation of this award dates back to 1965 when the Canucks competed in the Western Hockey League. The recipient of this award is decided by boosters by an annual vote. As the Club president stated when encouraging members to vote in the March (2004) edition of the ‘Two Points’,

Who do you think deserves to win this award? It is not a popularity contest so please don’t vote for your favourite player. It’s the player that played his heart and soul and hardly got any recognition from the media.

The above findings might appear to be examples of ‘normal’ or even ‘trivial’ fan behaviour, however, these fan experiences mean much more. As Muniz and O’Guinn (2001) state, “the inculcation of history keeps communities vital and reproduces their culture” (p. 422). Each of the above examples demonstrates how members constantly find themselves in situations where they are asked to acknowledge and interact with various historical aspects of the Vancouver Canucks, a history that is specific and unique to the Vancouver Canucks, and that in turn was celebrated and embraced as part of a group culture and infused into the day-day activities of the club.

This study found the act of sharing Canucks stories was an important component of socialization among the boosters. Brand stories often involved close encounters that members have had with members of the Canucks organization, particularly players. It is not uncommon to hear stories like the time one member saw player Trevor Linden purchase a magazine with the Canucks on the cover, autograph it and give it to a child who

recognized him while shopping at Safeway. I also heard a member recall how the former Canuck, Pavel Bure, let him cut into his driving lane when he was driving down the same street. Another member told me that she met Brendan Morrison at Burnaby Eight Rinks shortly after moving to Canada and then saw him again at a player signing appearance at Save-on-Foods and said that Morrison remembered her.

These close encounters may last only moments, however, the impressions made are often re-lived time and time again. For example, at the Booster Club Players Dinner the impressions that the players made with the booster members in attendance were talked about long after the dinner was over through the sharing of personal stories about the club members' encounters. One story was about Trevor Letowski who after a booster offered to buy him a drink, politely insisted that because he makes a lot of money playing hockey he should pay. Andrew Cassels was another big hit at the player's dinner because of his eagerness to socialize with members. Not all players were popular however, and some player attendees, like Mike Brown, were not spoken of so highly. Brown in particular seemed to live in infamy for his unwillingness to socialize with members while at the Player's Dinner. Even the Orca Bay staff representative who was at the Player's Dinner was able to interact with booster members, largely because she too could share some of her colorful experiences while working with certain Canucks players and management.

Some of the stories had little to do with hockey itself, but still took place in the presence of the Canucks franchise. These stories stemmed from the member's experience while doing Booster Club activities. In these instances, members talked about activities such as: past road trips, eventful post-game hand-outs, funny stories while attending charity functions or funny moments that occurred at Christmas dinners and Player's Dinners. I too

learned first hand how these moments and stories can be created. While at a Player's Dinner I went to the washroom and as I was just about to leave the washroom two Canucks players who attended this year's dinner, Fedor Fedorov and Nolan Baumgartner, were walking in. As I came out of the washroom a couple tables of members looked over to me, and I turned to them and said, "That's something that doesn't happen every day." Everyone from those tables laughed. Shortly after I realized that I had just experienced and shared the kind of close encounters I had heard members talk about with each other.

Members also shared brand stories that were directly related to hockey, such as their personal accounts of the Canucks' history. These stories involved reminiscing about moments such as the 1982 playoffs where the Vancouver Canucks made the Stanley Cup Finals against the New York Islanders. Listening to members speak of the 1981-82 season, it was easy to sense how special the experience was for them. During these reflections many members spoke of the man who coached the Canucks to the Stanley Cup final that year – Roger Nielson. They spoke of Roger Nielson not so much because he coached the Canucks to the Stanley Cup final, but because he provided a colourful ritual for Canucks fans. Today this can be summed up in two words: 'Towel Power'.

"Towel Power" is a Canucks tradition that persists to this day and involves Canucks fans waving a white towel during the playoffs. In the words of one member, 'Towel Power' began as follows:

They were playing a game in Chicago, and the refs were just horrible. And that was Roger Nielson's, I hate to say, way of surrendering. He put the towel on the bench on someone's stick; put it up in the air, and then a couple of the players followed suit. I think it was Tiger Williams, Gerry Minor, there was [sic] about 3 or 4 of them and that's what got it. And all of a sudden people who saw the game on TV, promoters here thought, okay, let's do these towels. And by the time they came back from being in Chicago for the remaining playoff games here, the towels were going. (Judy, Booster Club member)

What is so fascinating about 'Towel Power' is the sequence of events that has occurred over the course of time, both immediate and long-term. It started with the moment in Canucks history when Roger Nielson raised a white towel on a hockey stick in a demonstration of protest and surrender. Based on this moment we can imagine that fans, like the one above, shared this story with others who had seen or heard what Nielson had done. These stories spread, and what was once an act of protest turned into a symbol that became 'Towel Power'. This ritual has carried on and become part of the unique history, heritage and experience of being a fan.

While other teams and arenas in the NHL can also be seen waving towels, many members will quickly point out that "we [the Canucks] started that" or "that is ours". To them, and perhaps Canucks fans in general, it is a defining characteristic of the Canucks brand. Boosters can be heard sharing the story of 'Towel Power' with other members, often educating them as to the origin of the ritual. Rarely will members demonstrate displeasure towards the idea of other teams waving towels when cheering, just as long as everyone knows where 'Towel Power' all began. In fact, some members even seem proud to see how a Canucks tradition has "taken on a life of its own".

For members of the Booster Club, the act of handing out these towels during the playoffs has also become a ritual and tradition that helps to explain who they are as boosters to others who are not in the club. Often non-booster Canucks fans will see the sweatshirt that boosters wear at games and ask "What is the Booster Club?" The answer that I heard given by many boosters almost always started with, "You know the towels that are handed out during the playoffs... We hand those out." By answering this way, members display not only how much they identify with the towels, but also the way in which they

want to be identified as a club. Often their answer will remain just that short and even though there are many more activities that explain what the club does and who its members are, somehow the handing out of the towels best captures what they are about.

By handing out the towels boosters play an up-close and personal role in the continuation of this unique ritual and tradition. 'Towel Power' is a good example of how rituals and traditions operate. By handing out the towels, boosters act as almost the custodians of that 'Towel Power' tradition. Boosters provide a service to both the Canucks and to the fans, and they do so with an enjoyment and enthusiasm that is unquestionable.

The final brand community commonality identified by Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) was 'Moral Responsibility'. Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) state that moral responsibility seeks to "integrate and retain members" (p. 424) and/or "assist in the use of the brand" (p. 425). This study found that boosters also demonstrated elements of moral responsibility in ways that also spoke to increasing and retaining members, as well as helping other members have a more enjoyable experience. Furthermore, boosters are also driven to increase the fan base of the Canucks in general, and seek to help those Canucks fans who are not members to have a more enjoyable experience.

For example, when members volunteer at Canucks games and provide hand-outs, they are essentially performing a service that is of benefit not only to the Canucks organization, but to Canucks fans as well. In doing so, the boosters are constantly demonstrating a loyalty and service to the Canucks organization that serves to 'retain fans' by adding to the atmosphere and enjoyment that other fans experience. This was also evident when boosters helped fans find the section where they were sitting or the exit gate.

Normally, such a service would typically be provided by an employee at the game, not a volunteer fan.

Over and above this loyalty towards the Canucks organization, I found that members had an even greater moral responsibility towards other Canucks fans. Many boosters demonstrated a dislike in handing out items they thought fans did not really want. These types of hand-outs included such items as consumer surveys or promotional material for other events in town. Based on my observations and discussions with many members, these types of hand-outs did not seem to fall in line with the notion of 'community service' they valued because the members felt Canucks fans did not want to receive these materials.

Another example of this moral responsibility occurred when boosters were asked to sell game programs when the group that was supposed to sell the programs cancelled at the last minute. Even though the boosters stepped in willingly, I heard member boosters state their discomfort with being sales people. This meant that the act of 'selling' to fans was also outside the role they chose to play with the Canucks. It was apparent that boosters sought an experience that was less 'corporate' and more fan friendly. Boosters wished to serve the fans, by giving 'fans' only what they wanted to receive or in some cases pay for. As one member stated, "I'm not going to sell it to you or give it to you unless you want it."

The only people that boosters demonstrate a greater amount of moral responsibility to than fans are other boosters. Over the course of this season it was very apparent that boosters depended on each other and counted on each other. This type of responsibility could be seen in the ways in which members worked together on tasks and helped to orient new members. Returning members could be seen helping newer members learn how game

day hand-outs operated. It could also be seen simply in the ways boosters treated each other. As one fan stated:

The people that are in the Booster Club are very friendly and they're there to help you. If you get stuck, or you're short, like say, "Oh, I lost my bus fare," and everybody's handing you money, you know, [saying] "you'll get home, you'll get home". (Gail, Booster Club member)

Being dependable and reliable are important qualities in the VCBC. Renewing their Booster Club membership season after season, showing up to Booster Club activities and helping with hand-outs are just a few examples of how boosters demonstrated these qualities and thus demonstrated moral responsibility to the club and its members. These qualities create a family atmosphere that is important to attracting new members and retaining new members, an atmosphere that one can assume must have been lacking when the club disbanded back in 1986-87. It is important to note that without dependable and reliable members in the club, specifically those who are members of the board, the Booster Club could not exist. Interestingly enough, the Booster Club recognizes these qualities in their own Unsung Hero award and the President Three Stars awards after each season that are announced at the annual general meeting.

As a member and a researcher, I too felt a certain degree of interest and moral responsibility directed towards me by the other boosters. Often members would ask me "how school was going" or "how my paper or research was going". To me these were interesting questions because it not only reassured me that members were not forgetting that I was a researcher, but also demonstrated a genuine interest in the progress of my schooling. On other occasions, members would go to great length to introduce me to more and more boosters to help this study. It is also important to note that at no point did I give them any monetary rewards, nor did I make any promises of rewards. Therefore, to me

when members spared some time for an interview or focus group, I would like to think that it was not only because they were nice enough to help me out, but because I too demonstrated some dependable and reliable qualities of my own. By helping out like other boosters, I would like to think that despite being a researcher, I had legitimized myself as not just a Canucks fan, but also a booster member. However, this did not stop members from constantly asking me whether or not I would continue on as a member after the hockey season and the research were over.

To better understand the communication that occurs within the community of the VCBC, this study explored how boosters interacted with the various elements of brand community that had been described in the literature. As outlined in the methodology, this study began by focusing the data collection on the ways participants interacted with four elements of the brand community: the brand, the product, the marketer and other customers, as identified in the work by McAlexander et al. (2002). This was also done to explore the understanding that McAlexander et al. (2002) had of the relationships that exist within the brand community. Unlike other brands studied from a communal perspective it was understood that mass media could also be important because the Vancouver Canucks probably receive more media coverage than the brands that had been studied previously. This media coverage in turn could play a significant role within the community of the VCBC.

Although members may connect in different ways and for different reasons, these elements remain actively present within the community, albeit not all members interacted with all the elements or interacted in the same ways. The next section will report some of the ways in which members interacted with these elements, and demonstrate how the

brand, the product, the marketers, other fans and the media also seem to reflect in unique ways the core commonalties (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001) of a brand community.

4.3 Symbolic Interaction

An important dimension to the VCBC community was the specific ways in which members connected with the Vancouver Canucks franchise through their fan environment. This dimension can be best understood using the concept of symbolic interaction (Blumer, 1969) because it specifically addresses the actions that take place between people and the elements of their environments. Moreover, symbolic interaction not only looks deeply at these actions to determine meaningfulness, it also can help us understand the interpretations that construct these meanings.

4.3.1 Brand

This study found examples of instances where members could be understood to be symbolically interacting with the Vancouver Canuck's brand. The logo and team uniform of the Vancouver Canucks, for example, was an aspect of the brand that members routinely interacted with. During the season, the Canucks, along with other teams in the NHL, sported their original historical uniform and logo for specific games. Members often openly shared and demonstrated their appreciation for logos and uniforms through comment or by purchase. Members seemed to connect with the logos and uniforms aesthetically and symbolically.

Another example of this interaction was found in members differing perspectives on the Canucks ownership in relation to the team. To some members, expectations for the

owners were simple, “provide a good product”, statements that one would expect from customers of any brand. To these members, it was acceptable for ownership to only be involved at a business level and not at a personal level. They understood that the “bottom-line is you know, how much money they’re going to make because that’s what they’re in it for....and that’s fine ... as they have the right people in place that are going to operate the organization.” However, to other members, there appeared to be a much stronger interest in who owned the Canucks. To these members it was desirable that ownership be more local or at least more regularly visible at games or in the community. At the time, the owners to some members were very distant, or in other words not part of the Vancouver Canucks brand community. When I asked a group of members about the Canucks ownership one replied simply, “What ownership?” These members seemed to expect owners to demonstrate a higher degree of emotional and social investment in the club. As one member stated when talking about ownership pride, “I just think that an owner [should be] local, somebody who you can trust, somebody that is going to do everything that the fans want them to do, almost like a mayor”.

The previous owner of the Canucks was someone local (from Vancouver) and visible not only within the city of Vancouver, but with the Vancouver Canucks community. He was someone who members spoke of in a much more inclusive way. This study suggests that members would likely feel more comfortable if ownership demonstrated the core commonalities of their brand community like a shared consciousness as fans, an appreciation for the history and tradition of the Canucks and a moral responsibility towards the fans. Instead, my impression was that some members saw the owners as mainly corporate or as one member stated, “Orca Bay, I just see it as a big dollar sign.”

4.3.2 Product

Interaction between fans and the product was also quite evident particularly with regards to the entertainment experience, including the style of the game, the quality of the players/team, and their performance on the ice. Whether they were talking to other boosters or to general Canucks fans, or even talking to the television while the game was being played, members were constantly interacting with the product of the Vancouver Canucks. Often members would make suggestions as to how the players and team should play. They would comment on which player trades were good and which were not as good. In these ways, members acted as evaluators and expressed whether or not they were happy with the quality of the players, the team and the game that they were watching.

They could be heard not only offering words of wisdom, but words of encouragement. Even if members were sitting around a pair of televisions in the club section of the food court of GM Place or watching a game on a big screen at a local sports bar, some would publicly evaluate and encourage the players and the team. While this interaction took place in an environment where there was no possible way the players or the team could hear these cheers, the interaction was in the midst of other members. Each and every time I watched a game with the VSBC I would ask myself, "Why are they cheering and clapping towards the television?" The answer can be attributed in part, to the desire for members to symbolically interact with the team and players, which in turn connects them to an element of their brand community.

4.3.3 Vancouver Canucks Employees

The interaction between members and the employees of the Vancouver Canucks was also evident in this study. Even though the Booster Club By-Laws (Part II, Article 8, Section 4, p. 3) state that only the President and Vice President of the club “may initiate contact with any person from the Vancouver Canucks Hockey Club”, relationships still develop between booster members and many of the game day personnel such as ticket scanners, ushers and security.

At the games that I attended at GM Place with the Booster Club it was clear to me that as time passed the members, especially those who have been with the club for quite some time, eventually got to know the game day employees. Some employees were only friendly recognizable faces, but with others there were closer friendships that developed. The topic of the conversations within these relationships was mostly about the Canucks, but in some cases the closer relationships involved more personal, non-hockey related dialogue. Also, there were reciprocal exchanges of favours. On some occasions members were given seats when empty seats were available. Similarly, some game day staff received a handout from the boosters when technically they were supposed to be working when the items were given out. In the 10 games that I attended with the Booster Club, I learned first hand how such relationships can develop, as I too began to recognize faces, converse with game day staff and even find my way into a seat on occasion.

This type of community interaction also took place between members and the Canucks players. This was particularly evident in the ‘close encounters’ members had with players. These interactions, however brief, were remembered by members and shared with other members, and played a distinct role in how members viewed that player, particularly

as a person. A positive encounter strengthened the member's commitment to the community, while a negative encounter, which was rare, had a negative effect.

Even if members had never met or had a close encounter with a player, they still managed to talk about them in a manner that would suggest that they knew them on a more personal level. This was illustrated in the ways that many members did not identify the players by their proper first names, but used their nicknames instead. For example, Markus Naslund was called, "Nazy", or Todd Bertuzzi was referred to as "Bert" and Ed Jovonoski as "Jovo". On the other hand, some members did not use a nickname and instead referred to a player by their first name in such a way that one would think that the member was on a first name basis with that player.

This was the case, for example, with Trevor Linden, who was almost always referred to as Trevor. In the eyes of many boosters, Trevor was the model Canuck and revered as "Mr. Canuck" and "Vancouver thru and thru". Linden was one of the players that many boosters seemed attached too, and therefore it was understandable that the members were upset when he was traded from the Canucks. The resulting dialogue demonstrated the importance of key players to the community. While they were still Canucks fans, the members felt somewhat less enthusiastic about the Canucks when he was traded. Linden has since been reacquired by the Vancouver Canucks, an event which helped reestablish a stronger level of loyalty for many members.

It was interesting to see that even though players could be traded away from the Canucks, many members still maintained an appreciation and link to those players. On many occasions I heard members compliment former players, or suggest that certain players should have never been traded away from the Canucks. Comments such as these

demonstrate how when a player who was appreciated by a member gets traded, the member no longer has a connection to the Canucks through that player. Instead this member can only wish that the player was part of the Canucks community again, or reminisce about the days when that player was a player for the Canucks.

In my discussions with members another theme which emerged was the relations some members had with the coaching staff of the Canucks. Particularly, during discussions with members who had been Canucks fans since the early 1980's, a number made a point of telling me that the Head Coach, Marc Crawford, Assistant Coach, Jack McIlhargey, and the Head Coach of the Canucks minor league affiliate, (Manitoba Moose) Stan Smyl were all former players for the Vancouver Canucks. While not all members really cared that these coaches had connections with the Canucks prior to their coaching, some took pride in having a familiar face in charge of the team. These connections perhaps demonstrated a level of Canuck loyalty and legitimacy in the eyes of some members. As one member explained to me,

I think that having somebody who has played for the team before, I think, I don't know, there is something about that I just think is a better fit. I think fans would be a little bit reluctant to have somebody like a Glen Sather or a Rich Sutter. The more familiar that former player is, I think that, people have a little bit more trust in a player that has been with the home team itself. ... You know I think that it's important for fans looking out there to have someone who has played with the team before versus somebody who hasn't played [with the Canucks]. (Tom, Booster Club member)

There was also evidence that some members related the general manager of the Canucks, Brian Burke. During my time with the boosters, Brian Burke was often a topic of discussion. Aside from his business dealings (i.e., player trades and acquisitions), many members shared with me an appreciation for what Brian Burke stood for as a hockey person. Members supported how Burke paid players "what they deserve and that's it".

With this support, there was also loyalty expressed by some boosters. For example, on one occasion, shortly after Todd Bertuzzi was suspended for the remainder of the 2003-2004 season and playoffs, one member brought a letter to a game to show some of the other members. It was a letter from Brian Burke, thanking this member for a letter that he wrote to the Commissioner of the NHL regarding the incident with Bertuzzi. A copy of this letter was also sent to Burke. I read the letter that came from Burke, and made a mental note to perhaps get a copy of it for this research. When asked if it was possible to get a copy of both his letter and Brian Burke's response he replied via e-mail,

Ummm, I can sent [sic] the letter I wrote and the answer from Todd Bertuzzi, but I don't feel right about Burke's because of the confidence he had in saying [sic] is not able to say these things publicly as he needs to get his Player [Todd] back with the team. Also with the position he is in, without the contract and all....I can send the first part...the "Form Letter". (Steve, Booster Club member)

This demonstrates how an interaction can take place between a fan and a General Manager which resembles that of a relationship that exists within a brand community. It is an interaction that suggests a certain consciousness of kind between the two regarding the Todd Bertuzzi suspension. One could also suggest that it also demonstrates a level of moral responsibility and trust for Brian Burke to speak honestly to the booster, and for the booster member to keep those words confidential.

4.3.4 Canucks Fans

The final element in the "complex web of relationships" (p. 39) that McAlexander et al. (2002) illustrated in their brand community model was other customers. While the existence of symbolic interaction between Booster Club members was omnipresent, this study also found there to be interaction between members and Canucks fans who were not

boosters. This interaction largely took place at the games, during the hand-outs, or around the concourse of GM Place. However, other than hand-outs and helping out fans with general questions while in GM Place, boosters did not interact that often with the other non-member fans (game staff excluded).

During the pre-game and post-game hand-out activities, the large majority of members told me how much they enjoyed giving things away to fans and how excited they felt being in GM Place amongst all the fans and in the charged atmosphere of the game. This was be especially true during the playoffs, where handing out the towels carries with it an energy and excitement that was difficult to put into words for many members. I found that during the playoffs there was much more random interaction with non-member fans. Whether it was a quick casual discussion or a sudden unified cheer, the playoff atmosphere and excitement seemed to reduce the distance between members and non-members, and to bring them closer together. It was in instances such as these that I saw the possibility for brand community commonalities to be extended to a wider Canucks fan base. Instances such as these made me consider that there might be general core commonalities that exist amongst all Vancouver Canucks fans.

4.3.4 Media

Although the media were not included in work done by McAlexander et al. (2002), they appeared to be a component of the VCBC symbolic interactions. In some ways this could easily be missed because it was very subtle. For example, when the members watched the games on the television in the food court at GM Place, one could see that they turned down the volume on the CBC channel and turned up the adjacent television for the

local or in-house broadcast for the commentary. I also heard other boosters say that when watching the game at home they would watch Hockey Night in Canada on CBC, but listen to the local radio for the commentating. As time passed, I began to hear discussions about this and I began to learn about how the boosters felt about CBC and TSN hockey commentators.

It seemed that local commentators were preferred over CBC and TSN commentators because local commentators talk more about the Canucks and know more about the Canucks. The non-local commentators were more likely to be accused of being boring “because they don’t know what they’re talking about” when it comes to the Canucks. They were even described as biased and negative towards the Canucks. However, when the commentators were former players such as Ryan Walters and Kirk McLean, many members seemed to appreciate their knowledge of the game and attention to the Canucks. For the same reasons, I heard more appreciation for the Regional CTV SportsNet, which is commentated by Jim Hughson and former Canuck John Garrett. To some members, the national broadcasts done by the CBC and TSN closely resembled national politics and the perceived tug of war between Eastern and Western Canada. To some members, Toronto and Ottawa were treated not only as the “center of the world” for politics, but also for hockey.

While it is easy to understand why members might see this as a regional issue and a rivalry between Toronto/Ottawa (East) vs. Vancouver (West), the findings suggest that it was less about geography and more about brand community. Commentators like Jim Hughson, John Garrett, Ryan Walters and Kirk McLean could be identified as members of the Canucks Brand Community. Their knowledge of the Canucks allowed them to

legitimize themselves and hold a consciousness of kind with their viewers. The members tended not to question the knowledge of these commentators of the history and tradition of the Canucks because they accepted that they already belonged.

Also, one should not overlook the role that the media plays in keeping the boosters informed and educated about the Canucks. Knowledge about the Canucks was a key ingredient in community communications, and the media functioned as a means to keep the members up to date and to facilitate their interactions with the brand, product, employees and other fans. In this regard, the findings suggest that members had a preference towards Canuck-oriented commentators because this helped them enjoy the game and the Canucks experience. In brand community terms, this could be perceived by members as an act or gesture of moral responsibility on the part of the commentators.

The reasons why these interpretations are plausible lie in the 'fan-centric' perspective. This perspective, again modeled after McAlexander et al.'s (2002) customer-centric approach, sees the experience of the fan as being at the heart of the brand community. As McAlexander et al. (2002) state, it is these experiences where the "existence and meaningfulness of the community inheres" (p. 39). In this sense it is quite understandable for the core commonalities to be reflected among the various groups involved with the Canucks organization including owners, general managers, players, coaches, other fans and even commentators. Such a perspective emphasizes the importance of not viewing the boosters as a group of fans who are simply socially 'feeding on the nourishment' of the Vancouver Canucks brand. As McAlexander et al. (2002) pointed out this would be too simplistic a perspective. How would one explain a booster Club trip to the bowling alley that seems to have nothing to do with hockey, let alone the Vancouver

Canucks? Such fan behaviour can only be understood with a 'fan-centric' perspective because it allows us to see that even while boosters seem to be constantly in the presence of the Vancouver Canucks brand, what nourishes them is the meaningful social interaction with the various elements of their environment as it relates to their identities as Canucks fans. It is this meaningful social interaction with elements like ownership, management, players, game staff, the hockey game, other boosters, other fans and the media that brings them together, gives them an identity and enables them to be a Brand Community.

4.4 Canucks Boosters: (Sub) Culture and Community

During the research for this thesis there were moments when I could see that the Booster Club functioned like a 'subculture'. To a certain extent the members stood out from other fans, either by wearing a Booster Club sweat shirt, or perhaps because they were the only fans handing out free stuff before and/or after games. They did not pay to get into GM Place like other fans but, instead had their name on a booster list and entered with ease. If the casual fan wears a Canucks jersey, some boosters might take that one step further and put a half dozen Canucks pins all over it.

If these were actions that stemmed from a desire to have unique 'outsider status' or to be 'different', as characterized by Hebdige (1979), I too could see the boosters as a subcultural group. One member said to me,

If I see people that are in their little club, I think "Oh what a bunch of geeks". But I kinda throw it back at myself, well I guess I am one of those geeks now because I am in a club. But further into that, I have heard people say stuff like, 'Oh there is those booster geeks' and I have to look at it from their point of view, and looking at their point of view, I could see myself doing the same thing. (Steve, Booster Club member)

However, while their appearance and behaviour may make them stand out from time to time, and perhaps even get called a name (something that I never witnessed), it is important to stress that the desire for boosters does not stem from 'outsider status', but rather the opposite, 'insider experience'. In other words, many members joined the Booster Club and enjoy the experience because as fans they can have a more up-close and behind the scenes view of the Vancouver Canucks. Part of being a booster means seeing the Canucks from a perspective that other fans do not. It means meeting people (of the Canucks community) that other Canucks fans may not meet. As one member stated,

You're part of the game, and you can get to meet the players, you get to see the warm-up. You get to see things some people don't see, and like, you're a part of it, you're part of what goes on before everything starts, before the fans start coming in. You're walking around there, sometimes you bump into players, or they're on the ice, and you can go down and watch them. It's the atmosphere that they have and you want to be a part of it. (Gail, Booster Club member)

In the words of another member,

One of the reasons I joined the boosters was to be able to see the other side of it. Seeing everything get set-up, concessions...I was standing beside one of the hosts and he said [before the gates were opened], 'Here come the animals'. (Tom, Booster Club member)

Similarly, another member spoke of

...the connections you make outside of the club, like members of the media, members of Orca Bay, and the players even. Those sorts of connections that you have that the ordinary fan probably doesn't really have as much access to. (Jim, Booster Club member)

Boosters are able to see GM Place before any of the other fans do. They get the chance to walk down to the first row and watch the warm-up with other boosters. They have the opportunity to "see what the players look like", and have the possibility of sharing some sort of non-verbal interaction with them. There was an excitement among the members when Trevor Linden tapped the glass to acknowledge them, or when Brent Sopel smiled at the sign that was made for him by the boosters congratulating him for winning

the Unsung Hero Award. These were not trivial moments. They were deep insider accounts of the Canucks Community. Whether it be the brand, product, employees, media or other fans, the boosters were on the inside of the community. This was an insider's view that was quite different from other fans, however, it was not intended to separate them from the other fans as such. On the contrary, boosters wanted to be "a part of the action" and that included being with fans who were not boosters.

In some cases there also was a desire to be amongst the crowd even when the crowd included non-Canucks fans. An example of this involved boosters feeling compelled to take part in the annual NHLBC conventions that are hosted by various NHL Booster Clubs. Members who have attended or were getting ready to attend this convention appeared to me to have a greater "die hard" appreciation for the Canucks and a strong appreciation towards those who attend from other clubs. These members demonstrated indications of a subculture, specifically with regards to their own appreciation for the Canucks and to their lifestyle as Canucks fans. The members who spoke to me about the NHLBC conventions were those members that throughout the study demonstrated a fan spirit that appeared to go deeper into the core of their identity. These boosters demonstrated that "internal coherence" (Lury, 1996) of this identity and one that could be characterized as a lifestyle choice. Furthermore, it seemed likely that while at the NHLBC convention that these boosters would be able to easily socialize with other people who shared this lifestyle even if it was connected to a different team. Even though these members were the minority within the club, their existence alone suggested the potential for subcultures within the Booster Club.

On the flip side of the subcultural and 'die hard' boosters, I also identified a small group of boosters whose status as 'real' Canucks fans could be called into question. If I had only spent a small amount of time with the boosters or perhaps only conducted a couple of focus groups or interviews, I could easily have assumed that all boosters were 'real' Canucks fans. However, throughout the participant observations, there was always a small number of members who clearly had little knowledge or appreciation for the Canucks. Instead, these members stated that they were drawn to be boosters because of the social aspects of the experience. As I reported above, these members were reluctant to be interviewed and tape recorded and/or to attend focus groups, however I did meet and talk with some members who clearly did not know very much about the Canucks. I would consider these members to be more 'social' fans, rather than Canucks fans.

At a glance the boosters who were 'social fans' were not noticeably different from other boosters who were Canucks fans. They too wanted to be a part of the action, enjoyed interacting with other elements of the community and got excited about being on the 'inside'. However, the difference was that they did not appear to have the same connection with the brand. While they had a desire to be a part of the community experience, the brand itself was somewhat irrelevant and their appreciation for the team was hardly detectable. These boosters appeared to be pursuing a neo-tribal kind of experience as described by Maffesoli (1996), but without the identity components.

These members were difficult to spot because they dressed like other boosters, cheered when expected and even talked the general fan talk when needed. These types of characteristics seemed to strongly emulate Maffesoli's (1996) neo-tribal descriptions. In discussions with the boosters who were 'social fans', they would openly admit not only

their scarcity of knowledge, but their reasons for being there. While these boosters spoke directly about the social atmosphere when asked why they came to the games to volunteer, Maffesoli (1996) would likely refer to it as “aesthetic ambience”. Atmosphere was also mentioned when they discussed the other volunteering they had done for other sporting events (i.e., Vancouver Indy, World Weight Lifting Championships) or other local professional teams (i.e., Grizzlies).

It is important to make note that not all boosters who volunteered at other sporting events and local professional sports teams can be considered ‘social fans’. On the contrary, there were also boosters who not only enjoyed the social components of these other events, but also clearly had made a “significant emotional investment” (Maffesoli, 1996, p. 76) to the Canucks that was not “instantaneous” or “fragile” (Maffesoli, 1996, p. 76). Their connection to the Canucks brand was more constant and deep-rooted than the strictly ‘social fans’, and therefore cannot be considered to be seeking a neo-tribal experience.

While the characteristics of subcultures and neo-tribes were rare and recognizable in only a small minority of the club, the boosters members were found to reflect characteristics of common culture (Willis, 1990). To best understand this starting point of common culture among boosters, one should start with what has already been reported in these findings and that is the interaction that takes place between a booster and the elements of their community (i.e. brand, product, employees, media, other fans). It is from these interactions that a booster comes to define what Willis (1990) refers to as the “extraordinary in the ordinary” (p. 2).

“Extraordinary in the ordinary” (p. 2) can be seen when one listens to a booster describe the towels waving around GM Place as “snow coming down”. It can be heard

any time they speak of the historical and emotional significance of the towels. It can be seen in their enthusiasm when they hand-out the towels. All the while it can be easy to forget that what they are taking about are 'towels'! They are about the size of a towel one would use to dry dishes. However they were not made to serve this purpose, nor would they likely be used for this purpose, because if you are a booster, the playoff towel is no 'ordinary towel'. There is something 'extraordinary' about them. It is a towel of power. This towel phenomenon is an example of what Willis (1990) refers to as "grounded aesthetics". To understand common culture one must look at how individuals interact with the 'ordinary' both 'creatively' and 'symbolically' (p. 2). This as he says is the "yeast of common culture" (p. 21).

While the playoff towels were probably the best example that I found of this "yeast", other examples were also evident such as when boosters referred to other boosters as extended family or spoke about Canucks players as if they knew them personally. As reported above, another example was a member who stated that he thought the owner should be more like a "mayor" and a booster who felt obligated not to disclose the words and opinions of the team's general manager from a letter he had received. An owner, a letter, the players and other fans, one can view these as ordinary aspects of everyday life, but from a common cultural perspective we can see a greater significance. This significance stems from the ways in which members acting as a 'collective', interact with elements of their community and environment 'creatively', 'symbolically' and 'meaningfully'.

The uniqueness and individuality of the members within the Booster Club was also an important dimension to these findings. It was found that even though as a collective the

boosters all cheered for the same team, boosters could still disagree on aspects of the team. For example, they could disagree on which players were good or not as good. They could disagree on which players should not have been traded and which trades had been good for the team. They might have different favorite players and different opinions about the Canucks logos, both past and present. Even during the Todd Bertuzzi and Steve Moore incident and aftermath, I heard boosters express varying perspectives on the event itself and the punishment that Bertuzzi received. Such behaviour suggests that boosters felt free to not only have different opinions, but also free to share these opinions. Furthermore, they did not seem to feel obligated to accept other member's opinions as their own. This once again can be linked back to the ways in which boosters interacted with elements of the Canucks community on separate and personal levels. Willis (1990) refers to this as "message made communication", while Muniz and O'Guinn (2001, pg. 414) would probably call it "socially negotiated" communication. Either way, this form of communication was very evident within the Booster Club.

The boosters also demonstrated what Willis (1990) refers to as "proto-community". The social element of being a booster was one of the most important characteristics of being part of the boosters. When boosters got together at hockey games, restaurants, bowling alleys, and the like, what motivated their behaviours was that they could socialize about something that they all had in common: the Canucks. As one member put it, "I think it's more of a social group, it's a chance to connect." The following quotes reflect similar sentiments.

If you're a fan and you want to intermingle with other people...you get to make new friends and that's important. There ain't no chance you're going to be enemies with them because you're fans of the same exact team. (Tom, Booster Club member)

There is that real need to belong to something, I mean when you go to a game you're in a group of 20, 000 fans and you don't know the people who are sitting next to you, unless they came to the game with you, but you don't know a lot of the people around you. And I think that by having a smaller group it's easy to get to know other fans. And it's nice to know that you're not the only one who was really upset when the Canucks lost in the first round, it's nice to know you're not the only one who wants to talk about Brian Burke and Nonis... (Adam, Booster Club member)

Seeing the people, becoming friends and hanging out. Even if you don't go 200 feet over to where the ice is and you're just sitting in front of a TV watching it. It's just the camaraderie of all the Boosters, and cheering together and having fun together, it [is] probably number one. (Steve, Booster Club member)

"Vancouver Canucks is a conversation", said one booster. These conversation starters exist not just within the club, but outside as well. Boosters not only enjoyed the fact that the knowledge and enjoyment of the Canucks brought them together as a social group, it also enabled conversations with Canucks fans and hockey fans outside of the group. While I would not go as far as to say that all these interactions were examples of proto-community communication, they still were part of common culture.

When I was in Edmonton watching the Canucks play, I witnessed Canucks fans and Edmonton fans heckle each other in good humor. I noticed that the Canucks fans and the Oilers fans cheered at different times and got upset at different times, in such a manner that one would think that they would never have any sort of unifying behaviour. I soon learned that was not the case when during the third period a song was played during a television timeout: It was Stompin' Tom Connors' song entitled, "Good Ol Hockey Game". This was the only time during the game when these two groups of fans became close enough to be considered one group of fans. This research would suggest that they were united by a common culture. At least until the puck was dropped and play resumed, at which point we are back to proto-community rivalries.

The common culture construct has the greatest explanatory power of the social group theories. Even those boosters who I suggested were 'social fans' or neo-tribal boosters demonstrated a special draw to the 'aesthetic ambience' of the Booster Club and could also carry a basic conversation within the proto-community. The same could surely be said about those who I would consider the more 'hardcore' and subcultural boosters.

5. DISCUSSION

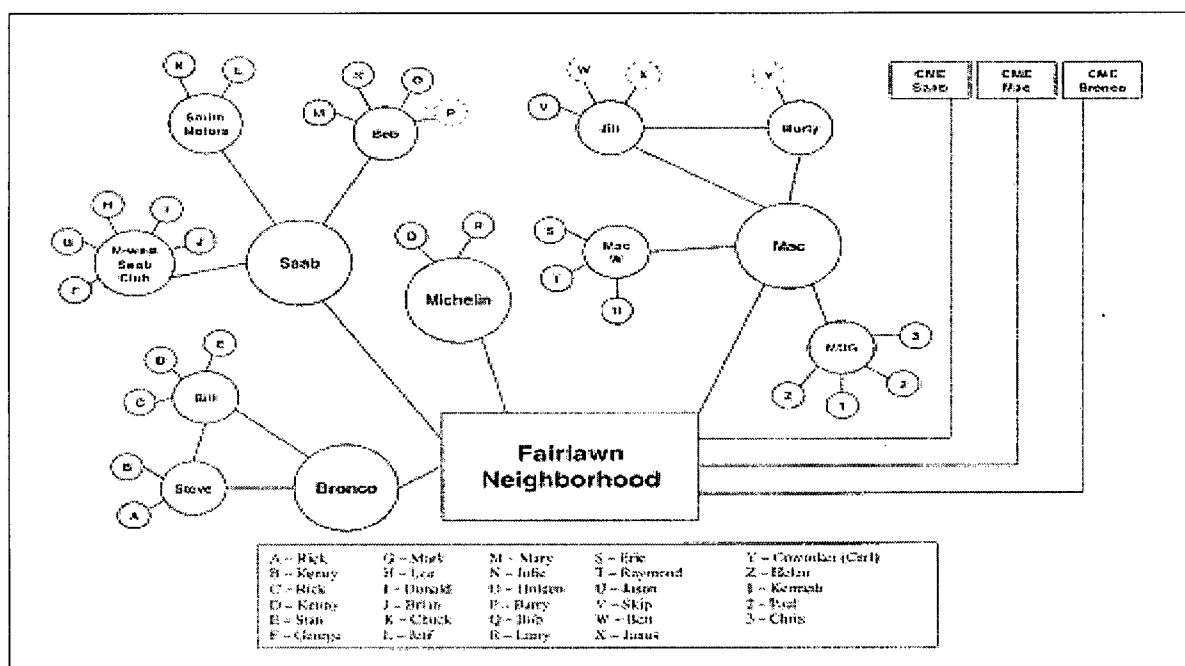
While the findings of this study demonstrated how the core commonalities of a brand community identified by Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) were also present within the Booster Club, in the following discussion I will look at 1) how the Canucks Booster Club fits with this brand community model as a whole, and 2) how the adaptation made by McAlexander et al. (2002) is also applicable. Furthermore, this discussion will also suggest that in order to have a more complete and holistic perspective on the VCBC as a brand community and perhaps other sport fan brand communities, concepts such as subculture, neo-tribe and common culture must be integrated within a new brand community model.

5.1 Canucks Boosters & Brand Community

In addition to identifying the core commonalities of a brand community, Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) used a sampling map to illustrate the social position of brand communities. This map, shown on the following page as Figure 5.1, used Fairlawn Neighborhood as their sample and identified the various brand communities present within this community, and helped clarify the interconnectedness of each brand community. The larger circles encompass brands such as Bronco, Saab, Michelin and Mac [Computers], and the foci sites/persons were identified using medium circles, also referred to as 'gathering sites', which represented smaller groups of people to which individual people, identified with the smallest circles, attach themselves. The boxes in the top right corner identify the "computer mediated environments".

Based on the results of this study, I have developed a similar map to describe what the Vancouver Canucks brand community may look like. In this brand community map (see Figure 5.2 on following page), the Vancouver Canucks replaces the neighborhood as the basic community because the focus is one brand. Emanating from the Vancouver Canucks are “foci sites” that may exist in this brand community. One of these gathering sites would consist of the Booster Club, while other gathering sites that were noticed throughout this study were the C-Force Canucks Fan Club, and local sports bars.

Figure 5.1 Brand Community (Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001, pg. 416)

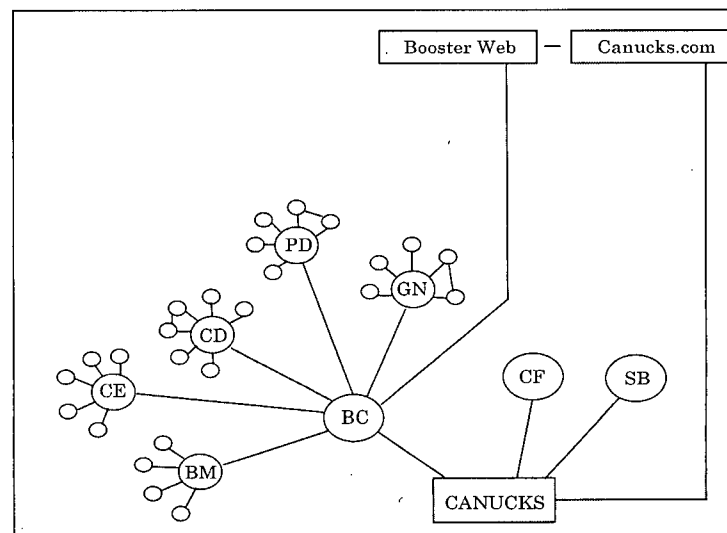


In this representation the VCBC should be seen as only a portion of the overall brand community, and furthermore the VCBC should be seen as only a portion of a boosters' Vancouver Canucks community life.

Attached to the Booster Club are smaller circles which represent the smaller 'gathering sites' where various individuals get together and remain connected to the 'foci

site'. The illustration also includes a connecting line between individuals because in some cases people joined the club and participate in the club in pairs such as spouses, siblings or friends. Furthermore, it is also important to note that while some individuals were linked exclusively to certain gathering sites, other members frequented many if not all gathering sites regularly. Like Muniz and O'Guinn (2001), the boxes in the top right corner represent the computer mediated environment.

Figure 5.2 Vancouver Canucks Brand Community (Adapted from Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001)



BM: Board Members
PD: Players Dinner
SB: Sport Bars

CE: Charity Events
GN: Game Nights

CD: Christmas Dinner
CF: C- Force Fan Club

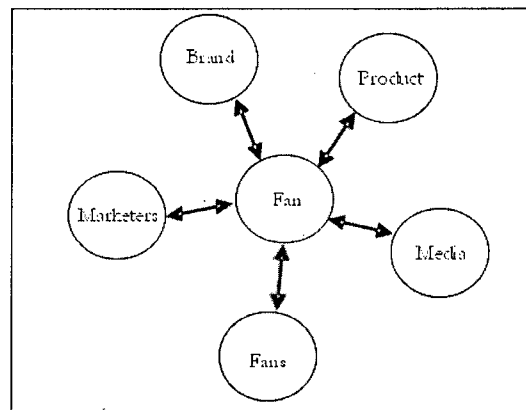
This illustration provides an example of what the Vancouver Canucks Brand Community may look like. It is important, however, to again emphasize that this study only looked at one portion of this brand community, the VCBC. The other groups highlighted such as the C-Force fan club and local sports bars would need to be explored in depth in

order to determine whether or not brand community qualities can be found within these groups. In the case of the VCBC, the way in which Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) visualized the brand communities in the Fairlawn Neighborhood was advantageous in understanding how the Vancouver Canucks brand community might look conceptually. By illustrating the Vancouver Canucks brand community in this manner, one can better understand from a macro level, the collective way in which Canucks fans were connected to the brand.

As Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) have stated in their work, this collective representation of Canucks fans and the VCBC goes beyond the geographical gathering sites to include non-geographical computer-mediated environments. The Booster Club website and the Canucks.com website, as well as other websites that are operated by individual boosters are all examples of these non-geographical and computer-mediated gatherings. Via the internet, members are able to get information as well as communicate with other fans. Along with the communication that takes place through websites, the VCBC also relies heavily on the use of e-mail for communication. Members send one-to-one e-mails or use e-mail group lists (i.e., yahoo groups).

It was also evident throughout this study that the ways in which McAlexander et al. (2002) viewed a brand community were applicable to the interaction within the VCBC. The VCBC members interacted with the brand, the product, the employees, the customers and additionally the media. Therefore, this study suggests a similar illustration could be used for the VCBC as shown in Figure 5.3. This study suggests that these relationships and the socialization that occurs within these elements seems to be what connects members to the VCBC and ultimately to the Vancouver Canucks.

Figure 5.3 Fan-Centric Brand Community (Adapted from McAlexander et al., 2002)



5.2 Socially Inclusive Brand Community

Given that this study's findings suggest that the VCBC functions as a Brand Community, as well as demonstrates the characteristics of subcultures, neo-tribalism and common culture, I would like to explore how or if these theories can conceptually fit together. This is a unique undertaking as social group theories have been used to explain what a brand community is not (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001). Others (McAlexander et al., 2002) have acknowledged that subcultural consumption communities such as seen in the Harley Davidson study by Shouten and McAlexander (1995) are "a different kind of community" (p. 39) from the brand community defined by Muniz and O'Guinn.

Nevertheless, it is appropriate based on the findings of this research to consider a brand community model that is not differentiated by social group theories, but rather is inclusive of these theories. Therefore I propose a more Socially Inclusive Brand Community (SIBC) model that perhaps better suits the Canucks Booster Club, and perhaps sport fans in general, than the current Brand Community model.

The SIBC model encompasses members such as the 'social fans' who sought a more "neo-tribal" experience, while also accepting those boosters who had a more hard core and "subcultural" fan lifestyle. This perspective also embraces the understanding that through the collective experience within the club there were common cultural forces at play that enabled the members to find meaning and personal significance within their fan environment. This environment exists in the form of "gathering sites" (Muinz and O'Guinn) and "proto-communities" (Willis, 1990) where boosters could engage in "socially negotiated" (Muinz and O'Guinn) / "message-made" (Willis, 1990) communication.

Members' communicate and relate to each other on the basis of their relating to their "core commonalities" (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001). However, the SIBC accepts that members can vary as to how and how much they connect with the "shared consciousness", "history and tradition", and "moral responsibility" that has been established within the group. For example, a "volunteer" booster who is attending a game for "neo-tribal" purposes can cheer and support the Canucks and thus demonstrate a degree of "legitimacy". They can even wave a towel and take part in the history and tradition of the Canucks without knowing where it originated. They can also be willing to do hand-outs, show others how to do hand-outs or help fans in the concourse find whatever they are looking for, and thus demonstrate a degree of "moral responsibility".

Due to the varying degree to which members can connect with the community's core commonalities, it is difficult to determine how much commonality is needed in order to be a Brand Community member. Is it even possible to determine how much consciousness one needs to share in order to be considered a legitimate or 'real' member of

a Brand Community? What happens when one can celebrate the history of the brand (i.e., wave a towel) and even share brand stories (i.e., talk about a player encounter), yet know very little about hockey, let alone the Canucks? If I am helping other boosters and Canucks fans have a better experience at a game, does it really matter to me or to others if I pay close attention to the game itself?

Using the definition provided by Muniz and O'Guinn (2001), a brand community is defined as "a specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relationships among admirers of a brand" (p. 412). This is a workable definition, but in practical lived terms, what we do not know is how much admiration is needed to be an acceptable member of a brand community. Therefore, in the case of the boosters an inclusive approach towards the Brand Community seems more reasonable because it still acknowledges the significance of the core commonalities (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001) that exist throughout the club, but allows more flexibility (and realism) regarding the ways that members tap into experiences, and express these commonalities. Using a "fan-centric model" or "customer-centric" model it is possible to demonstrate how a booster can interact and establish relationships with elements of the brand community even though the 'brand' may not be of primary importance or may even be of very little or no importance at all. Just as McAlexander et al. (2002) expanded upon the brand community to highlight the importance of all the elements of brand community, boosters demonstrate that a Brand Community model should also be opened up to include a wider spectrum of fans.

The SIBC also speaks to literary work discussed in this study on sports fan identities, identification and loyalty. As Giulianotti (2002) demonstrated, there are many different types of fans, each landing somewhere on his continuum. Some are more

“traditional”, some are more “consumer driven”, and some have “hotter” forms of “solidarity” and “identification” (Giulianotti, 2002). Based on these characteristics, Giulianotti (2002) identified them as Supporters, Followers, Fans or Flâneurs. This study suggests that by using the conception of the SIBC these types of fans can very well belong to the Canucks Booster Club and thus belong to the same brand community, but have different experiences and roles in the club.

The SIBC also is in line with the work done by Underwood et al. (2001). Similar to the brand community commonalities (Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001) Underwood et al. (2001) stress the importance of “group experience”, “history/tradition”, “physical facility” and “rituals” all within the “highly social marketplace” when looking at fostering fan loyalty. However, while Underwood et al. (2001) claim that these marketplace characteristics are a “mechanism for tapping into the emotional connection between the consumer and service brand” (p. 2), the SIBC framework further elucidates this connection and shows that boosters can have emotional connections with these marketplace characteristics, yet their relationship with the brand can vary greatly. In others words, a booster who demonstrates more “volunteer”, “neo-tribal”, and “Flâneur” type individuality can have emotional connections with elements of the brand community, yet may not have a connection with the Vancouver Canucks brand itself.

Finally, the SIBC can also draw from the ontological (Segrave, 2000) and ethnographical (Trujillo and Krizek, 1994) perspectives discussed in the literature review. This work distinctly points out how the sports fan environment has special qualities that are different from other consumption environments. It is not “just another bank, department store, or amusement park” (Trujillo and Krizek, 1994, p. 306). Therefore, it would be

understandable for a sport fan Brand Community to also be different from other brand communities. Thus, it may also be understandable for a sport fan brand community to be more inclusive of the social group theories. When referring to a baseball club Trujillo and Krizek (1994) wrote:

“In some ways, a baseball stadium is a community in a literal sense. Each ballpark is a self-contained environment that accommodates thousands of regular residents (season ticket holders) and one time visitors. Each has food and drink to keep citizens nourished, medical facilities to treat the injured, security forces to keep the peace, retail stores to provide clothing (with the home team logo, media facilities to inform people about community events, and entertainment for residents and guests” (p. 306).

To conclude this discussion, this study takes this analogy a step further. In a brand community, ownership can be understood as a “mayor”. The tax paying (consumer) residents (as per Trujillo and Krizek, 1994) are the fans and they take on the responsibility to evaluate the work done by the city workers (players/coaches) and the city council (management). In the trenches and on the frontlines are the support staff (game day staff) who help keep the community running smoothly and work directly with the residents (fans). In the brand community, media needs to be local and attentive to the concerns and needs of the community to be considered community media. In this brand community there are also smaller gatherings that form (like neighborhoods or clubs) and together they take part in activities and exchange community communication. However, as a whole, all tax paying residents (fans) and guests (fans of other teams) can be seen together at mass community events (hockey games). Together as a whole: the fans, the owners, the players, the coaches, the game staff and the media are all citizens of the brand community. Together they all make up the broader brand community of the franchise, the league and the sport.

IMPLICATIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

I believe that the findings of this study can potentially make significant methodological, theoretical and practical contributions to the literature reviewed. Methodologically this study was distinct because, in addition to using ethnographic methods of participant observation, I conducted two focus group sessions that encouraged inter-group discussion and more formalized interaction. This combination proved invaluable as a multi-faceted means for collecting data, specifically because it provided an avenue to record interaction between participants as well as a more formal method to understand the data that was collected during the participant observations and casual conversations. Due to the effectiveness of the focus groups in this study, I would suggest that future ethnographies on consumer groups may also benefit from this type of combined approach. In addition to using focus groups, this study would also suggest that future ethnographies on consumer groups explore the use of quantitative methodology just as McAlexander et al. (2002) integrated quantitative triangulation into their ethnographic work.

Theoretically, the findings of this study made three contributions. First, the use of a group/community perspective was a novel approach that has extended our knowledge of the identities (Guiliunotti, 2002), group experiences (Underwood et al., 2001), and sense of community (Trujillo and Krizek, 1994; Segrave, 2000) in sports. The second contribution was the application of concepts from group consumption and brand community literature to the context of sports. The third contribution was the use of social group theories to explore the inner group dynamics of the brand community, including subculture (Hebdige, 1979),

neo-tribalism (Maffesoli, 1996) and common culture (Willis, 1990), within the context of sport fan culture.

Based on the theoretical contributions made by this study, I would suggest three recommendations for further research in order to gain more knowledge about the application of social group and brand community frameworks to sport fan groups. The first recommendation is to examine multiple fan gathering sites for a sports entertainment franchise, in order to gather a more holistic perspective on the overall structure of fan communities and their activities. A second possibility is to study two separate, but opposing fan communities (with multiple gathering sites) in the same sport. These two studies would allow a more complex range of comparisons of the interactions and commonalities between gathering sites and brand communities. The third recommendation is to investigate the role of social class and socio-demographic factors such as age, gender, and ethnicity in the interpersonal relationships, activities and culture of sports fan communities.

The practical implications of this study lie in bringing theoretical tenets regarding brand communities and cultures to organizations involved in sports entertainment (i.e. Canucks Booster Club, Vancouver Canucks Franchise). Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) have suggested that brand community awareness may significantly influence how marketers approach customer relationships marketing and their branding efforts and may help with strategies to develop greater loyalty and increased brand equity (p. 427). Similarly, other brand community researchers such as McAlexander et al. (2002) have suggested that brand community awareness allows marketers to gain a better understanding of the consumption practices/experiences of their customers and the reasons why customers become brand

loyal. Due to the practical significance of this concept, it is possible that sports marketers may benefit from an exploration into how the brand community concept fits within the context of their sports.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The procedures for this study were approved by the Behavioural Research Ethics Board of the University of British Columbia. Consent of participants was obtained for both participant observations and focus groups. Furthermore, during participant observations, those individuals who I interacted with were reminded that I was a researcher, allowing them an additional opportunity to disengage from the study should they so chose. Verbal permission and written consent was obtained from the Canucks Booster Club president and the members of the Board to conduct this study. Included in this consent was permission to use the club's name when publishing the findings of the study. The privacy of the Canucks Booster Club members has been protected by using pseudonyms in place of real names. Also, unlike some studies on Hooliganism (Giulianotti, 1995), this research was not dangerous or harmful to either the participants or myself.

It is possible, however, that the study might be criticized due its commercial and marketing-related focus. Sport sociologists may see this study as being exploitive of the Canucks Booster Club because of the potential marketing implications discussed earlier. This type of criticism is not unexpected, nor is it relatively new. As Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) pointed out in their brand community study, social critics have commonly viewed commerce as being "deconstructive of traditional community" and "to blame for hordes of wandering spirits, experiencing only simulacra" (p. 426). However, Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) found that even though brand communities may "occasionally" hinder the consumer from attending to "other social responsibilities", "the communities actually serve to strengthen family and other interpersonal ties" (p. 426). Furthermore, Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) take a different stand, one that does not view the brand community as "any

more nor less real than many other forms of community... [but as] simply an essential form humans invariably employ in their social existence" (p. 426)

Willis (1990) sets a similar tone in his discussion of the inseparable nature of commercialism and culture. However, his standpoint is that "commodities are catalyst[s], not product[s], a stage in, not destination of, cultural affairs" and that "consumerism now has to be understood as an active, not passive, process" (p. 18). Furthermore, Willis (1990) feels that:

commercial entrepreneurship of the cultural field has discovered something real. For whatever self serving reason it was accomplished.... It counts and is irreversible. Commercial cultural forms have helped produce an historical present from which we cannot now escape. (p. 18-19).

The ethical view of this study embraces the positions held by Willis (1990) and Muniz and O'Guinn (2001). This study accepts that the relationship between commerce, consumption and culture is a real and unavoidable aspect of the lived experiences of Canucks boosters. This study is not ignorant of the marketing implications, but rather takes a non-pessimistic¹ approach that simply believes this subject area is important and deserves to be studied.

¹ Willis (1990) did not agree with the "underlying pessimism" that comes with the "...condemnation of consumerism and especially of the penetration of the market into cultural matters" (p. 17)

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APPENDIX A

Focus Group Guide of Questions

1. How did you become a Canucks fan?
2. Why are you a Canucks fan?
3. How did you become a Booster Club member?
4. Why did you decide to become a Booster Club member?
5. Do you consider yourself to be a "legitimate" Canucks fan?
Explain?
6. What does mean to be a "legitimate" Canucks fan?
7. Is there such a thing as an "illegitimate" Canucks fan?
Explain?
8. Are their aspects of the Canucks Booster Club that are meaningful to you?
If yes, what are they?
9. Are there aspects of the Canucks organization that are meaningful to you?
If yes, what are they?
10. Are there aspects of the Canucks Team that are meaningful to you?
If yes, what are they?
11. Are there aspects of the Canucks Players that are meaningful to you?
If yes, what are they?
12. Are there aspects of other Canucks Fans that are meaningful to you?
If yes, what are they?
13. To what extent does your identity as a fan impact or affect your life as a whole?