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Brand Community

Every brand wants one

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Abstract

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Brand community is essentially what the term suggests: A community of people connected by their interest to a brand and to what it represents. For brands it is important to find how to create value through brand community and how to benefit from it financially. Brand community cannot just be a part of marketing strategy but a part of the DNA of the company and therefore needs a deep level of understanding of the process. Brand community is a business strategy.

This thesis is dedicated to understanding why companies look to build brand communities, what are the key-elements to building social brand communities, how organic they are, and to what extent a company or brand can control them. This thesis examines the topic of brand community through different successful brand community examples as well as a case study. For the purpose of the thesis, two surveys were conducted to gather information on how consumers and brands view and experience brand community.

The findings made in this thesis point out that successful brand communities cannot be forced but can be encouraged, supported, and enhanced. Ultimately, brand communities are created by the brands.

Keywords: Brand Community, Social, Brand, Community

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1 Introduction

The modern world is saturated with different brands competing for attention, customer loyalty and a competitive advantage over their competitors. The first image that comes to mind is the overpopulated Shibuya area in Tokyo that is being lit with the multitude of electronic billboards and screens promoting the latest telephone or the brand-new album of a local J-pop band. This competition for attention is something that can be seen in the tech industry, music and film, sports, and the list goes on.

Brands attempt to bring people closer to what they are trying to communicate by promoting a certain lifestyle and creating community. Identity and participation in community are no longer so only to religion and politics but to what brands one owns and consumes and the lifestyle it communicates. Strong brands and their parallels to certain lifestyles enable people that share the same interests to interact with each other which opens the possibility for communities to form based on their shared interests. These kinds of communities can be described as brand communities.

This thesis is dedicated to understanding why companies look to build brand communities, what are the key-elements to building social brand communities, how organic they are, and to what extent a company or brand can control them. This thesis examines the topic of brand community through different examples of successful brand communities that have stood the test of time as well as a case study examining the brand community of a music artist named Biniyam from Helsinki, Finland. For the purpose of the thesis, two surveys were conducted to gather information on how consumers and brands view and experience brand community. The first one was designed for the purpose of studying consumers' opinions and thoughts on brand community and the second was designed to study the topic from the perspective of the brands and companies.

1.1 Purpose

The author's personal interest in the topic of brand communities started from the world of music. Since I can remember I have been interested in how certain artists or bands are able to capture their listeners in such a way that the music the artists produce and the lifestyle they portray become a part of their listeners' daily life. In most cases this would include such things as dressing a certain way, using certain brands, and listening to a certain type of music.

This type of communal movement is not unique to music and clothing, and popular culture, but can also be found for example in religion and politics, meaning it affects all walks of life regardless of a person's demographics. For example, although it does not always apply, stereotypically there are differences in the way someone who supports the Green party would dress and conduct themselves in comparison to someone who supports the Finns party. People with different lifestyles identify with people who have similar interests and share a similar set of values. The way brand communities are formed and how they function has a lot to do with human behaviour and the general principles of community. This type of behaviour speaks of a built-in human need of self-expression and belonging.

From the viewpoint of a brand, a strong brand community contributes to long-lasting customer loyalty, customer retention, increase in brand value, competitive advantage, and other things that are beneficial for a brand's success (McAlexander, Schouten, and Koenig 2002). For brands it is important to find how to create value through brand community and how to also benefit financially from it. To build a strong social brand community, the intention to build one cannot just be a part of marketing strategy but a part of the DNA of the company and therefore needs a deep level of understanding of the process. Brand community is a business strategy.

The idea of brand community also plays into brand preference and relevance. As Aaker (2012) suggests, the only route to real growth is winning the brand

relevance competition. Aaker (2012) goes into depth about the different methods of going down the road of brand relevance, where a brand instead of focusing on making improvements to already existing categories, should create new categories and subcategories. By doing so a brand can introduce something new to the market and by doing turn heads and gain momentum. Aaker (2012) also states that is important for brands to succeed to be innovative, take risks, and have the willingness to leave their comfort zone as well as organize and support the community around the brand rather than market the brand, emphasizing that the communities should be authentic.

In this time of active social media use, anyone has the potential to gain social influence. This is a very organic and genuine form of influence where the public follow a brand for their likeability, excitement or whatever the reason may be. These social media influencers control very sizeable brand communities that are not controlled by large marketing teams and membership programs but through active sharing of content and a strong everyday presence in their followers' lives. This type of social influence is extremely valuable and is something that companies want to get a piece of and are willing to pay good money for.

In conclusion, the significance in studying the topic of brand community lies in understanding the surrounding, brand saturated, world that affects our daily lives. We are all more or less a part of some brand community, some more actively than others. It is about understanding the relationship between brands and people and to be able to analyse and review it.

1.2 Brand Community

The term 'brand' is a widely debated concept in terms of what the actual definition of the word is. The term is traditionally connected with being a name, a design or a logo that identifies companies and products, but as brand expert Marty Neumeier (2003) suggests, it can be much more than that. Neumeier (2003) has been quoted saying: "a brand is a person's gut feeling about a product, service, experience, or organization". This point of view opens a whole new dimension to the concept of 'brand'. A brand is not only a constructed image of a company or a product, but the feeling people get when they see or interact with a person, organization or product.

However, on the topic of brand community, the emphasis is on the latter word 'community', since it seems to be the more definitive concept of the two. To understand brand communities, one must understand communities in general and how they function.

Community is generally understood as a group of people living together within a greater society or as a group of people sharing common interests, goals, and attitudes. Whatever the setting may be, certain characteristics are shared between all communities. The three main elements that Muniz & O'Guinn (2001) suggest define a community consist of consciousness of kind which essentially is a shared knowing of belonging, shared rituals and traditions, and a sense of moral responsibility and obligation to the community. These characteristics can be found in all types of communities, whether it be communities built around sports teams, sneaker culture, politics, or intimate apartment buildings on the more exclusive side of the Töölö, an upper-class area in Helsinki, Finland.

Brand community is essentially what the term suggests: A community of people connected by their interest and liking to a brand and what it represents. Muniz & O'Guinn (2001) describe brand community as a relationship between customer and brand in a form of customer-customer-brand connection, while

McAlexander, Schouten, and Koenig (2002) suggest an extended visualization (as seen in Figure 2) for the relationship where in addition to the customer-brand connection, also marketer, focal customer, and product is added into the mix. According to McAlexander, Schouten, and Koenig (2002) the customer-brand relationship is not exclusively between customer and brand, suggesting that the focal customer sits at the centre having separate interactions with the product, brand, customer, and marketer.

Examples of companies with successful brand communities would be considered such as Nike, who have a wide following of consumers, especially amongst the youth. It is not uncommon to see teenage kids wearing Nike clothes from head to toe, claiming Nike's superiority over their competitor Adidas. Another example of a company with a strong brand community is the technology company Apple. Apple, as a brand, bases its image on being the choice for creators, which pulls people who want to identify as such. Some brand communities exist mostly on social media and internet platforms where members can engage on a daily basis, while some are more present in different kinds of events dedicated to the community.

A prime example of the latter kind of community would be the Harley-Davidson motorcyclists as mentioned by Algesheimer, Dholakia & Herrmann (2005). The Harley-Davidson community is actively taken care of by the company. The local dealerships host meetings and events where community members are invited to. The events are funded by the Harley-Davidson company. This enables the staff members of Harley-Davidson to be closely involved with their customers and the culture around the motorcycling scene and understand the customers they serve. This has earned Harley-Davidson the position of being the one motorcycle company that knows and understands its customers. Another example of this would be sports teams such as the third most valuable football club in the world in the year of 2021, Manchester United. Though a lot of the buzz tied to the brand happens online and smaller meetings, the main gatherings of the followers happen at the football games, where fans come from all over, dressed in appropriate attire chanting their team on. In the case of

Manchester United the huge fanbase does not only come from Manchester area or even inside the United Kingdom, but from all over the world.



Figure 1. Manchester United fans in South-Korea. Getty Images.

Similar approaches to building brand communities can also be found in the way personal brands operate. The significant difference between company and a personal brand is, the personal brand usually has a face, which makes connecting with the audience more straightforward. Personal brands can range from artists, actors, athletes, politicians, social media personalities, and the list goes on. Personal brands usually operate with a different approach than big companies but still have similar goals: to gain and then monetize social influence. For example, the American music artist Kanye West gained a large following through the popularity of his music and has years later utilized that platform and large quantity of followers and finances gained from his popularity as a musician to build an independent multibillion-dollar clothing company called Yeezy.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Relevant Literature

When researching articles and literature on the topic of brand communities, one can find lots of lightly written articles providing tips and steps on how to build a brand community. The usual steps provided consist of concise, tweetable suggestions such as 'Stop selling and start building community', 'Find the right platform to communicate with your community', or 'Be consistent and patient'.

The idea of building brand community seems to be something that a lot of business-to-consumer companies, especially the ones that rely on a social media presence and look to thrive in that environment, are attracted to and therefore a lot of practical suggestions on implementation can be found, especially exploitable by smaller companies and personal brands.

Theory on brand communities and how they are formed is quite accessible from a period of over 20 years. Commonly the theory on the topic of brand community touches on larger subjects such as community, tribalism, participation and engagement, clearly focusing more on the human behavioural side more than the brands' effect in the cases of successful brand communities. In addition to this, a lot of case studies have been conducted on the topic of brand communities with a wide scope of industries., whether it be through examples from the automobile industry or the world of football.

A fair number of important articles and books on the topic of brand community lean more on the literature touching community alone. After all, a brand community is first and foremost a community. A lot of literature touching on the topic can also be found from the perspective of leadership from authors such as John C. Maxwell and Jim Collins.

A significant piece of literature on the subject of community is 'Brand Community' by Muniz & O'Guinn (2001) where the authors tap into the essentials of brand community by providing clear definition and theory to the

topic. Early in the article the authors make a remark about the lack of conversation about community in the context of consumer behaviour, approaching the topic of brand community in an introductory manner, introducing the actual concept of brand community. A notable book on the topic of community building is 'Building Brand Community' by McAlexander, Schouten, and Koenig (2002), sharing some of the same views communicated by Muniz & O'Guinn (2001), while expanding some of the presented ideas and bringing new angles into the conversation. 'Brand Communities and Personal Identities: Negotiations in Cyberspace' by Schau & Muniz Jr (2002) touches on how brand community membership is an extension to personal identity and the two relate between each other.

Traditional Model of Customer–Brand Relationship



Muniz and O'Guinn's (2001) Brand Community Triad

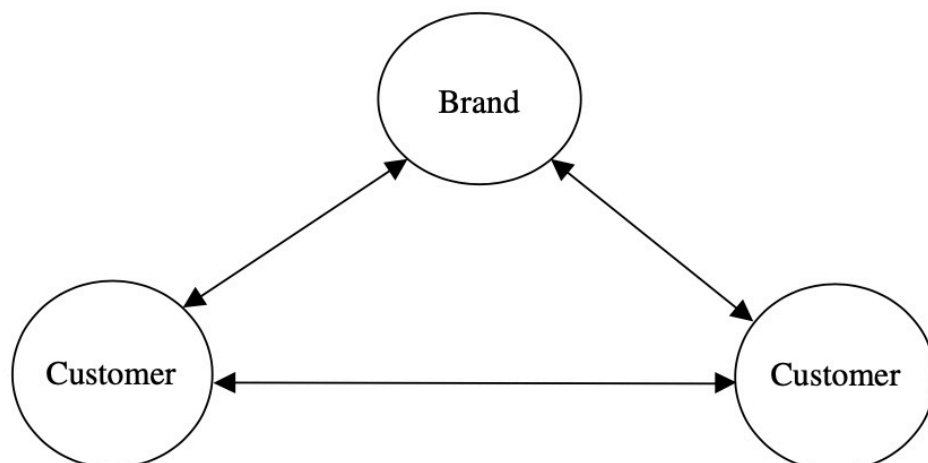


Figure 2. 1/2 Key Relationships of Brand Community. McAlexander, Schouten & Koenig (2002).

Traditional Model of Customer–Brand Relationship



Muniz and O’Guinn’s (2001) Brand Community Triad

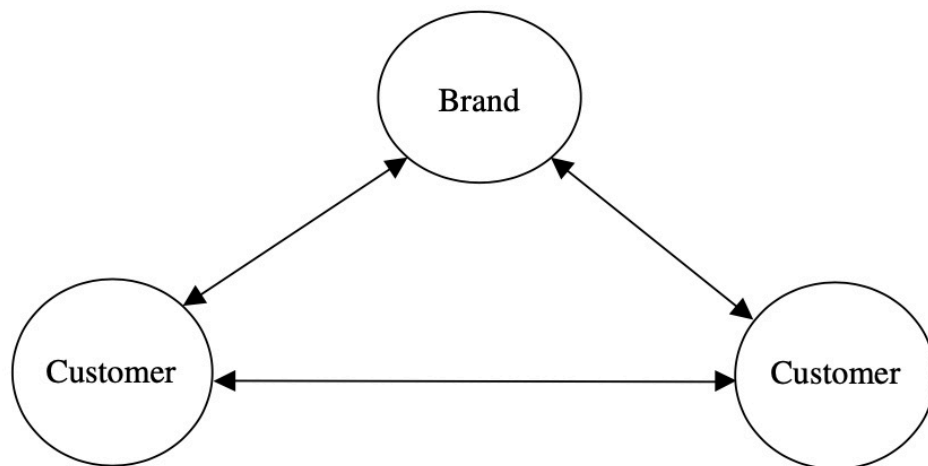


Figure 3. 1/2 Key Relationships of Brand Community. McAlexander, Schouten & Koenig (2002).

Interesting suggestions on the topic of brand community and customer relations can be found in the different visualizations of brand-customer relationships such as Muniz & O’Guinn (2001), McAlexander, Schouten, and Koenig (2002), and Algesheimer, Dholakia & Herrmann (2005) as seen in Figure 2 and Figure 3. These suggestions offer a comprehensive idea of how the relationship between brand and customer exists and functions.

2.2 Gap in the literature, or an unresolved issue

Though plenty of theory exists on the topic of forming communities from the human behavioural view point, it is not clear what the concrete benefits of a brand community are in relation to the brand's success. One reason for this might be the differences between industries. For example, in music or fashion, the effects of increased popularity are more easily recognized and measured compared to the tech industry where financial success and share price are more definitive to the brand's success. It is also unclear to what extent brand communities enhance brand loyalty and sales. "There is a need to further develop and refine instruments that measure the relationships of brand community and integration within it" (McAlexander, Schouten & Koenig 2002).

Since most of the important literature on brand community is written before the age of social media, it needs to be balanced against the more current literature on the topic that also includes the effects of social media and cross analyse the articles from different time periods for similarities and differences. Social media and increased internet use have radically changed the way people communicate with each other and how brands communicate with their followers. "The emergence of social media has changed the consumers' role in storytelling from that of a passive listener to a more active participant" (Singh & Sonnenburg 2012). Much of the important literature on the topic of brand community was written before the arrival and growth of social media, so the literature does not cover this side of customer engagement, though the main principles of engagement and community do not differ.

According to Cova & Paraque (2010) the way consumers are relating to brands is changing. Through the internet the consumers are not just buyers of products but actively form communities around their favourite brands. "Literature about social media's impact on brands is evolving but lacks a systematic identification of key challenges related to managing brands in this new environment" (Gensler, Völckner, Liu-Thompkins & Wiertz. 2013).

This current era of active social media exposure and use on the other hand has had a big impact on how brands communicate with their fans and customers. The number of platforms for expression, marketing and communication has multiplied since the arrival of social media as how we understand it. While the topic of social media has been thoroughly studied and published, its possibilities and impact on building brand communities is not so widely written about.

Some significant question marks in the literature touching on the subjects of brand community and community are the differences of opinion in defining some of the important terms touching on the topic. For example, the concept of 'community' is something that has a great amount of literature written about it but because of the changes to how we can experience community the definition of the word has been altered and edited. "One of the continuing theoretical debates in community studies is about the definition of community, especially whether the concept of community includes groups of people who share common interests and interaction but who do not share common geographical locality" (Bradshaw, 2008).

The term 'brand community' itself is quite vague and can be defined in many ways and exist in many forms. McAlexander, Schouten & Koenig (2002) argue: "Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) envision brand communities as a customer–customer–brand triad. We suggest an extension of their model as well as a shift of perspective". The intention for this thesis is to have a clear definition for the term with a more specific approach to the topic itself. In addition to this the author wants to dive into what kind of actions done by brands grow and strengthen their brand community.

3 Research Methodology

This thesis utilizes a variety of different research methods to achieve a comprehensive perspective on the research topic of brand community and the benefit of it. This thesis studies the research topic mainly through two different methods: surveys and a case study. As Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill (2009)

state: “The survey strategy allows you to collect quantitative data which you can analyse quantitatively using descriptive and inferential statistics”. The survey is designed to gain a clear perspective on the topic from the perspective of brands as well as the brand community members. The case study on the other hand examines a real-life scenario providing a reflection surface for the already existing theory on the topic. As Gagnon (2010) suggests, a case study makes it possible to examine and analyse phenomena as a single and integrated whole.

3.1 Surveys

To understand community and brand community better and to answer the research question of why brands look to build community around them, an effective way of gaining insight on the topic is through quantitative research. The research question that the first survey looks to answer is what does the consumer look for from a brand in exchange for their loyalty? The purpose of the question is for brands to understand how to serve their customers and followers better and to meet their wants and needs within their area of expertise. The second survey examines the topic from the other side, asking searching to find out how focused and invested brands are to serve their customers.

The quantitative research designed to answer the research questions at hand were done by conducting surveys in the form of online questionnaires. The online questionnaires were sent to a sizeable network of people and companies from different demographics to gain a realistic view on how the research topic is viewed from a wider angle. To understand the research topic from the perspective of the consumer as well as the companies two surveys were carried out. Both of the surveys were designed to be short in terms of the amount of questions and to be easy to answer while being effective in terms of results. Questions in both surveys were multiple choice questions for the most part to give the ones taking the survey options to choose from without guiding them to certain answers. Most of the questions also had the option to choose “other...”

and write their own answer in case the answer that applied to their situation was not represented in the options given.

The first survey designed for consumers was distributed through different groups on social media platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp during October 2021. The questionnaires were sent to a total of 177 people. 45 responses to the first survey sets the response percentage of the questionnaire at 25,4%. The second survey made for brands and companies was also distributed during October 2021 but was directed to different companies separately. Some companies were contacted through existing connections while some company representatives were contacted by email requesting them to take the survey on behalf of their company or brand. The second survey was sent to a total of 50 companies operating from Finland, which generated a total of 16 responses making the response percentage of the survey 32%.

Although the response rates are relatively small, the responses came from a wide scope of different people from different demographics and backgrounds as well as from companies operating in widely different industries therefore giving the survey credibility due to its versatility in point of view.

3.2 Survey for consumers

The first survey was directed at consumers to find out how the average consumer thinks about brand community and what they want brands to offer them in exchange for their loyalty and participation. The survey was conducted in English so it could be sent to consumers living in Finland as well as consumers living outside of Finland.

Survey 1: A brand you like (For consumers)

The first question was to find out the ages of the consumers. The reason for it was to find out if the age of the responder affected their wants and needs and how they interact with the brands they follow.

Question 1: Age

- 12-17
- 18-24
- 25-34
- 35-44
- 45-54
- 55-64
- 65-74
- 75 or older

To obtain effective answers on the topic a point of reference had to be stated. Instead of setting a brand that would not have any relevance to the responders, they could set their own brand of preference which would become their personal focal point for which to base their answers on for the rest of the survey, therefore the second question was done as open question.

Question 2: Think of a brand you like (Open question)

By understanding how consumers find out about brands they follow and are loyal customers to tells a lot about how to get the consumers attention and most of all, how to get them to become customers and eventually part of the brand community. A lot of positive movement can be achieved with advertising campaigns but in most cases a consumer cannot be forced to become a loyal customer.

Question 3: How did you first hear about the brand?

- From a friend
- Social Media
- TV / Radio
- I don't remember
- Other...

It is critical for brands to be able to maintain their customers for as long as possible. Competition in different business areas can be intense and maintaining a brands advantage over the competitor for long time periods can be challenging. The purpose of this question was to find out how long consumers are willing and capable to be customers and fans of a brand.

Question 4: How long have you been a customer / follower of the brand?

- Over 10 years
- 9-5 years
- 3-4 years
- 1-2 years
- Less than a year

In the same way as understanding how brands get the attention of consumers it is important to know and understand how consumers prefer to communicate and follow the brands that they are fans of. It is important that the content brands offer for their followers and customers is easily accessible and contributes to their already existing relationship. This question's purpose was to understand the consumers preferences on where and how they like to interact with their favourite brands.

Question 5: How do you follow the brand?

- Social Media
- Youtube
- TV / Radio
- Online Community
- Events
- Website
- Other...

Companies and their competitors may not have too many differences between each other in terms of product and their features. The differentiating factor in many cases is the how the company or product is perceived by the customer. For example, the difference between Nike's football boots and Adidas football boots in terms of technical aspects or even design might be minimal but the lifestyle that they communicate on their own terms tells its own story. The purpose of this survey question is to find out what kind of things interest the consumer when talking about brands.

Question 6: What makes the brand interesting for you?

- Aesthetics
- Content
- Ecological Aspects (Sustainability etc.)
- Popularity
- Product
- Social Aspects (Social equality)
- Other...

The term 'brand community' is very much defined by the latter of the words. Community is concept that revolves around communication. This question was meant to find out if consumers communicate about the brand of their liking with other people that are fans of the brand, and if so, how actively they do so.

Question 7: Do you communicate about the brand with other people who like the brand?

- All the time
- Sometimes
- Never

Being a fan of a brand does not always mean that the consumers are buying customers for various reasons. One of the reasons could be availability. A consumer may live in a country where they might not have access to the

products provided by the brand that they are drawn to. Another reason could be price. Ferrari is a well-known luxury sports car brand that has a large following, but not many consumers are capable of buying the brands products. The purpose of the question was to find out to what extent brand community members of a certain brand are also buying customers.

Question 8: Do you buy products from the brand?

- Yes
- No
- They don't sell any products

For a brand to exist, it must have something to offer to the lives of the consumers. For different brands it is different things, whether it may be tangible things such as product or experiences in the forms of events or intangible things such as entertainment, information or inspiration. The purpose of this question was to find out what the consumers get from the brands that they follow and more importantly what makes the brand worth spending their time and money on.

Question 9: What do you get from the brand?

- Entertainment
- Information
- Inspiration
- Product
- Other...

The purpose of the question was to find out what the consumer wishes from the brands they follow in addition to what the brand is already offering, whether it may be more content, interaction, information, events are something else. It's important for brands to understand their brand community and wants and needs. This will be the key to growth and progress.

Question 10: Is there something more you would want from the brand?

- Content
- Interaction
- Information
- Events
- Other...

Being a part of a brand community for the consumer is very rarely conscious. Consumers become fans and followers of the brand because of the added value that the brand brings to their lives. As a result, the consumer interacts with the brand in different ways, whether it may be buying their products, following their social media channels or attending their events. The purpose of the question was to find out how conscious the survey takers are about their participation in brand communities.

Question 11: Do you feel like you are a part of the brands community?

- Yes
- No
- I'm not sure

The purpose of the question was to find out if the consumer is aware of their participation in the brand community of a brand of their liking, and if so, do they actively contribute to the community and interact with other fans of the brand.

Question 12: *If you said yes, do you actively interact with other members of the community?

- Yes
- No
- I'm not sure

3.3 Survey for brands

The second survey was directed at companies and brands to find out their dedication and willingness to invest in and grow their brand community and if they see it to be beneficial to their business activities. The survey was conducted in Finnish for it was primarily sent to companies operating from Finland and was translated into English for the purpose of this thesis.

Firstly, it is important to understand what industries the companies in question operate in. This will dictate the nature of the companies' business activities and therefore give a better idea about the importance of brand community in their line of business. The question was done as an open question where companies could type in their line of business.

Survey 2: Brand community (For brands)

Question 1: What industry does your company / brand operate in?
(Open question)

To understand the companies at hand better, it is useful to know how long the companies have been active. Companies that have been active for a longer time period have had the possibility to grow their brand community for a longer time and therefore may have more structures to support the growth of their brand community. On the other hand, it is important for the brands to be able to evolve and transform with the time in order to serve their customers and brand community members in the best way possible.

Question 2: How long has your company been active?

- Less than a year
- 1-2 years
- 3-5 years
- 6-10 years
- More than 10 years

This is a crucial question when talking about brand community. A brand community can form organically by consumers liking the brand and their product, but in order to maintain and grow the brand community it must be managed and invested into. To be able to gain a competitive advantage over their competitors, brands must continually invest into growing their brand community whether it be with time, finances or other ways and resources.

Question 3: Do you invest in growing your brand community?

- Yes
- No

For a brand to invest in growing their brand community, it must be beneficial for their business. Although the benefits of a growing brand community may not be straight forward and clear, there are multiple ways they can be experienced. The obvious signs of a functioning brand community are the participants in online communities and events, followers on social media platforms, newsletter subscribers and other following of a similar nature. For example, social media followers do not automatically contribute into sales, but speak of social influence which can be used as a tool to affect sales. The purpose of the question was to find out the companies have recognized their efforts of growing and investing in their brand community to be effective and fruitful in the form of sales.

Question 4: *If you said 'yes', has it affected your sales?

- Yes
- No

As discussed, when breaking down the first questionnaire which was designed for consumers, it is important for the brands to understand how they can reach and communicate with their customers in effective ways. In a time when brands must fight for attention in an overcrowded environment of information and competition they must understand where the consumers spend their time and direct their attention.

Question 5: In what ways do you communicate with your brand community?

- Social Media
- Youtube
- TV / Radio
- Online community
- Events
- Product
- Website
- Other...

3.4 Case study

In addition to the survey conducted on brand communities from the perspective of the consumer as well as brands themselves a case study from the perspective of a Helsinki based music artist Biniyam's brand.

The 'Biniyam' artist brand has been active since the year 2014 mainly operating in Helsinki, Finland. The artist writes, produces and performs alternative pop music in English. Since 2014 the artist has released three extended play records and has done live multiple live performances that include shows in the popular Flow Festival in Helsinki, the Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma in Helsinki as well as the Harare International Festival of the Arts in Harare, Zimbabwe.

Biniyam currently has a record deal with the record label Universal Music Finland. As the brand belongs to the author of this thesis, instead of conducting an interview, the gathering of information was done by searching the existing information and evidence collected during the years of active business as well as studying the details of the case in question.

The case study will concentrate on an independent song release done by Biniyam in June 2019 and how the brand community interested in the brand played a part in the implementation of the song release

This case study examines the effects of brand community on a brand's performance, more specifically, on a single occurrence touching on the influence of brand community. In June 2019 Biniyam had left his previous record label and was aiming to release his first single as an independent artist with a minimal budget that would only cover the costs of making the product, meaning there was no budget available to run a proper marketing campaign necessary to get to the streaming numbers that were aimed for.

The only marketing done for the single release was by using existing local radio and music media connections as well as social media platforms. As the single was released in June 2019, the song received minimal radio and media support during its first weeks and no shows were booked to promote the new song. In many ways the release did not go as planned, but still achieved higher streaming numbers than expected.

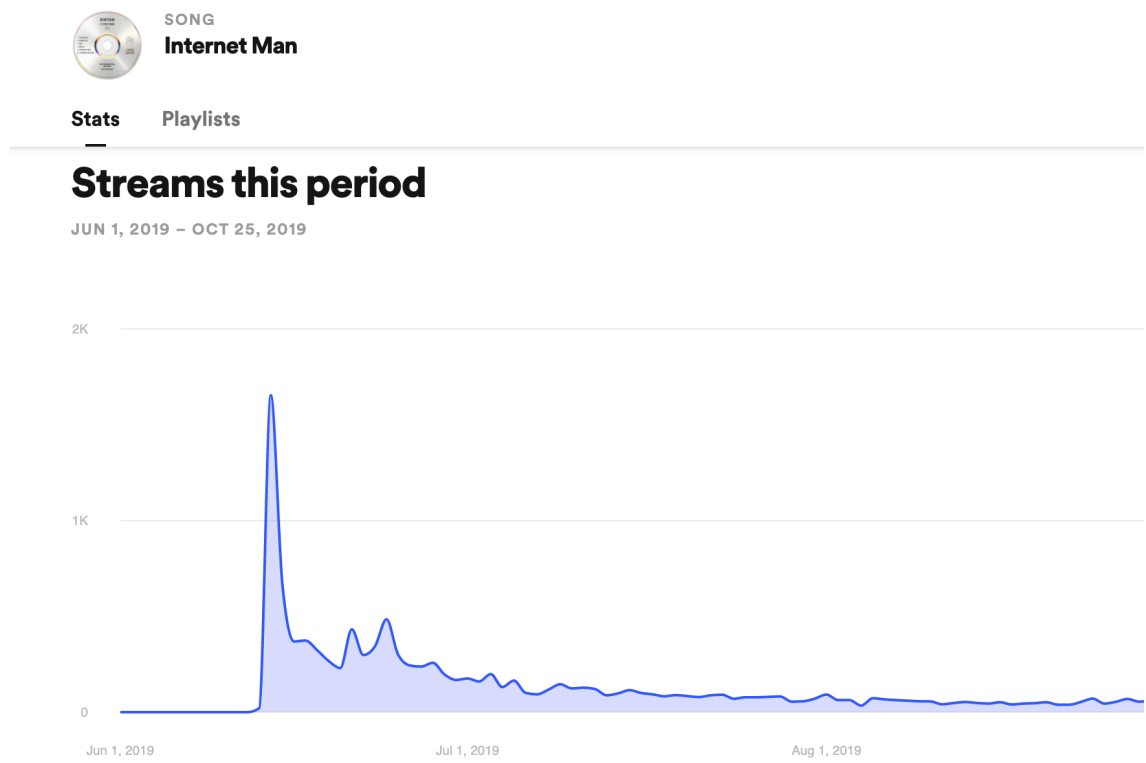


Figure 4. Streaming curve from the first month of the single release. Spotify for Artists.

During the time of the release, the brand had a following of 2,350 on Instagram and 2,450 on the brand's Facebook fan page. The amount of Spotify streaming platform subscribers was at 1,110. The brand community around the Biniyam brand, although relatively small in size, shared the song actively on social media and spread awareness of the song by word-of-mouth.

The activity of the brand community was encouraged by social media advertising with calls to action but was not payed for. The expected streaming amount for the first week considering the size of social media following and the lack of a marketing budget, though difficult to predict was estimated at approximately 2,500 streams. The streaming estimate was made based on previous releases by the brand and other artists operating within the same genre in a similar surrounding.

The song was shared on Instagram alone for over a total of 100 times within the first two weeks of the release. This enabled the song streams to peak during the first days of the release which caused it to spread out to a wider audience, which increased the streaming number and therefore had a positive effect on the income the song generated as seen in Figure 4. Through the activity of the brand community around the Biniyam brand the streaming amount for the single during its first week surpassed the estimate by 72,84% generating a total of 4,321 streams.

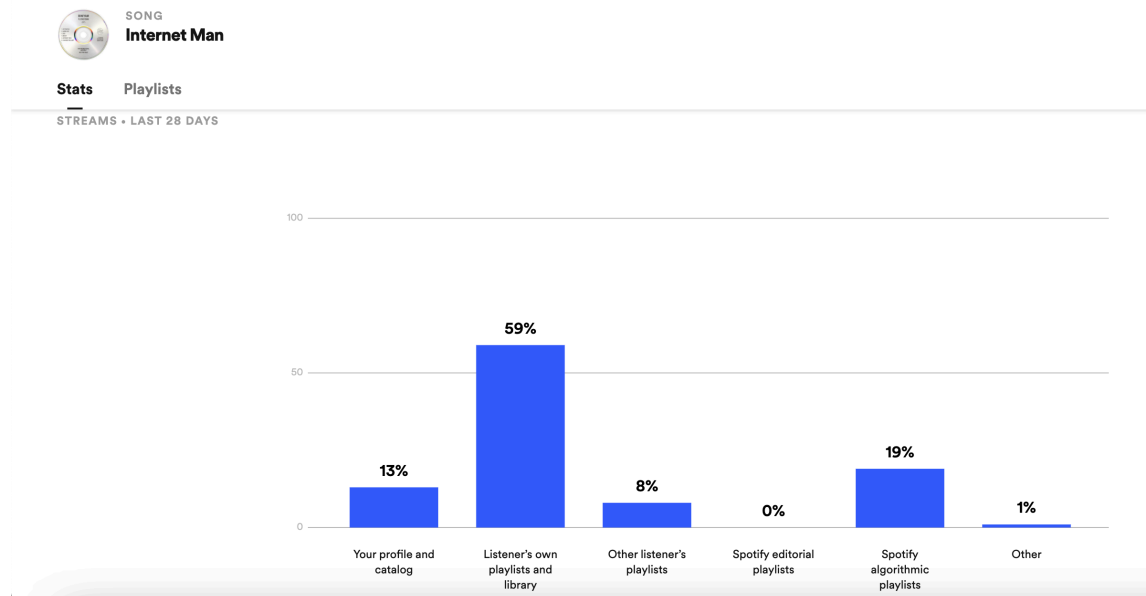


Figure 5. Source of streams from the first month of the single release. Spotify for Artists.

Even though the single release did not get the expected support from the local music medias or the Spotify streaming platform, the buzz generated by the fans of the music helped spread the song and extended its lifespan.

4 Analysis and Findings

In the analysis of the information gained about brand communities through the conducted surveys and case studies parallels and common characteristics as well as the significant differences must be compared to achieve a comprehensive image of the subject at hand. Firstly, we will examine the results of the survey questions designed for the consumer, after which the survey conducted for brands will be analyzed. After the examination of the survey responses the analysis will focus on the case study on the music brand 'Biniyam'.

4.1 Survey Results

The first survey was made in the form of an online questionnaire designed to generate findings about the opinions and thoughts of consumers on the topic of brand community. The survey received a total of 45 responses. The responses came from a wide variety of people from representing different demographics and interests.

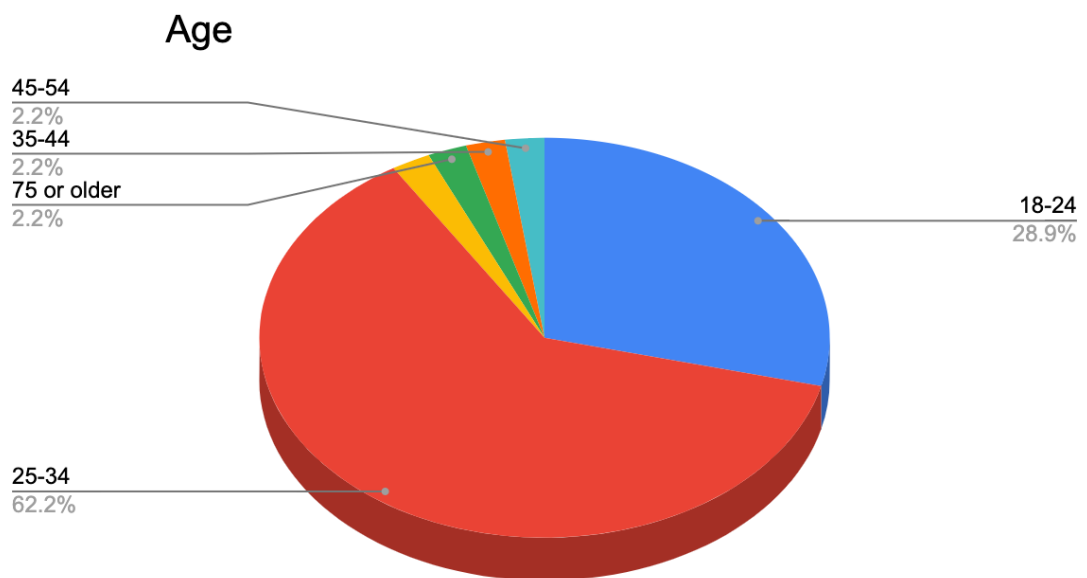


Figure 6. Result of Age. All respondents.

The largest age group of respondents was clearly 25-34 with the age group being 62.2% of those who took the survey. In second place was the age group of 18-24 with them being 28.9% of the respondents.

The second question asked the respondent to pick a brand they like. The question generated responses that brought a wide variety of different kinds of brands from different industries. Among the most popular ones were the American technology company Apple, the American sportswear brand giant Nike and their competitor, the German sportswear brand Adidas. All of these brands have a long history in their line of business and have gained a special

status in their respective industries. Apple, Nike and Adidas are known to have strong and active brand communities that have stood the test of time.

How did you first hear about the brand?		
1.	From a friend	17
2.	I don't remember	14
3.	Social Media	7
4.	TV / Radio	2
5.	Website	1
6.	Parents	1
7.	All over the world (web, media, ads, people, friends)	1
8.	Saw it in a supermarket	1
9.	History	1

Figure 7. Result of How did you first hear about the brand? All respondents.

As Bughin, Doogan & Vetvik (2010) suggest, word-of-mouth is the most efficient tool in gaining new customers. Brands can invest a lot of time and resources

into marketing and advertising, yet in often times the final decision to become a customer is inspired by word-of-mouth recommendation.

As seen in the results of the survey in Figure 7, a total of 17 out of 45 respondents heard of the brand from a friend. 14 of the 45 respondents said that they don't remember where they heard about the brand and only 7 of the 45 said they found it via social media. Word-of-mouth is a powerful tool and plays right into the idea, that a strong and active brand community is vital for a brand's success.

How long have you been a customer / follower of the brand?

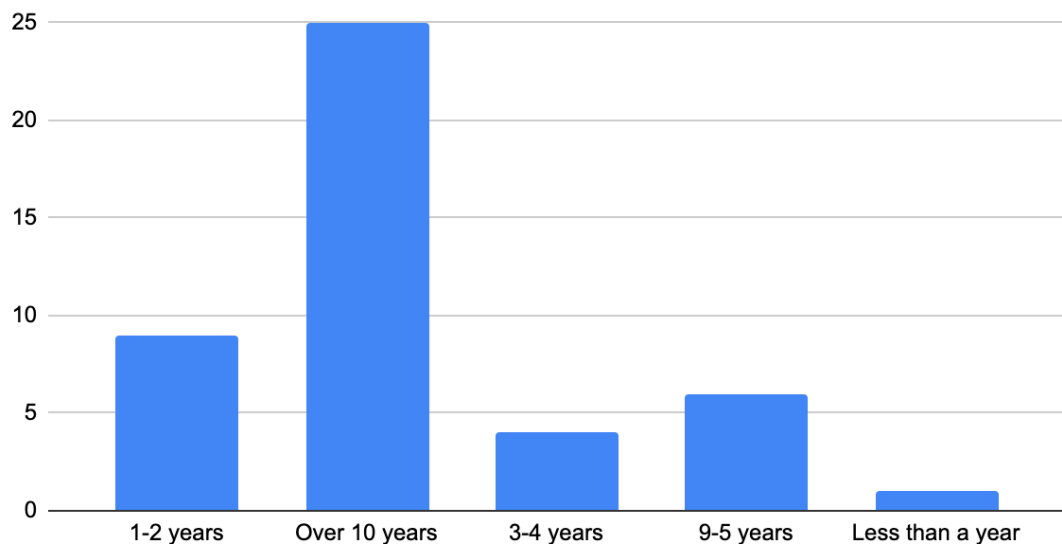


Figure 8. Result of How long have you been a customer / follower of the brand? All respondents.

For a brand it is not only important to gain new brand community members but to maintain them. Bughin, Doogan & Vetvik (2010) suggest that to maintain positive word-of-mouth promotion a brand must consistently refresh their product experience. This is something that Nike, Adidas and Apple have done throughout the years. As Bughin, Doogan & Vetvik (2010) point out, Apple has consistently evolved with their products and their brand, keeping their followers interested and excited. The majority of the respondents have followed their

brand of preference for over 10 years, meaning the brand of their choice has been capable of evolving and keeping their customers and followers satisfied.

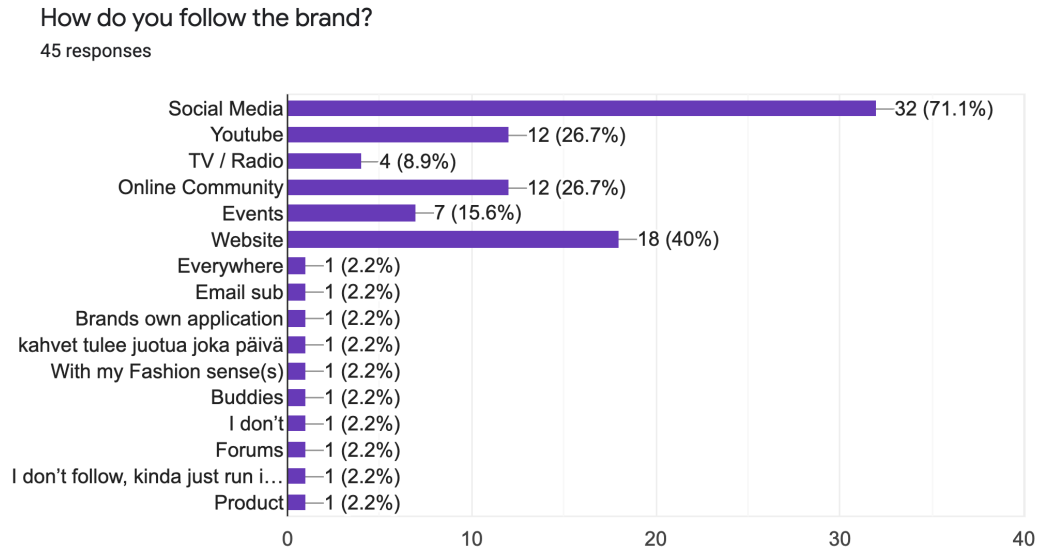


Figure 9. How do you follow the brand? All respondents.

For a brand to be able to serve their brand community, it is crucial to know where to reach and communicate with it. Social media is arguably the most convenient place for brands to share information and interact with their followers and customers. 71,1% of the respondents of the survey said they follow the brand on social media, which indicates that it is the easiest and most efficient way to reach the consumer. 40% of the respondents said they follow the brand through their website.

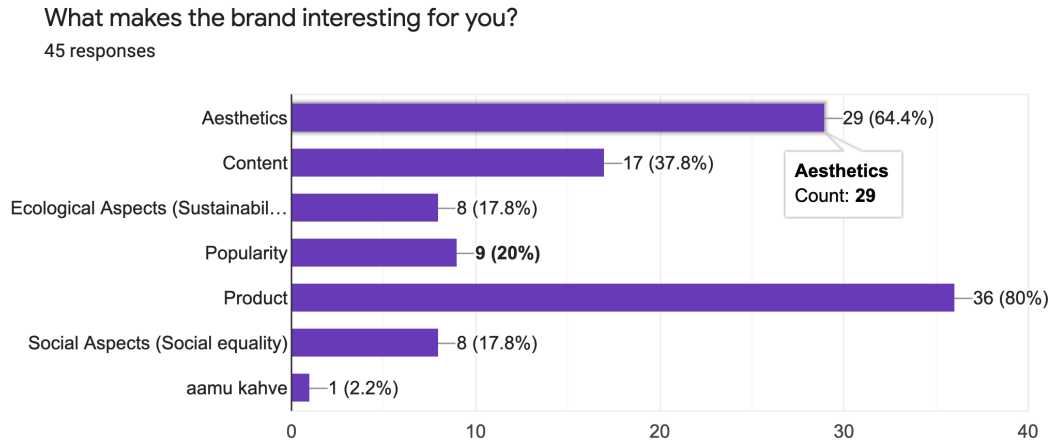


Figure 10. What makes the brand interesting for you? All respondents.

The reason we follow brands is for us to gain added value to our lives. 80% of the respondents said that the thing that makes the brand interesting for them is product. 64.4% of the respondents said the thing that draws them to the brand is aesthetics. Product can be compared and differentiated from its competitors for example by quality and features. Aesthetics on the other hand has to do more with style preferences and lifestyle. Both aspects are crucial for brands to reach their target audience and turn them into loyal customers.

Do you communicate about the brand with other people who like the brand

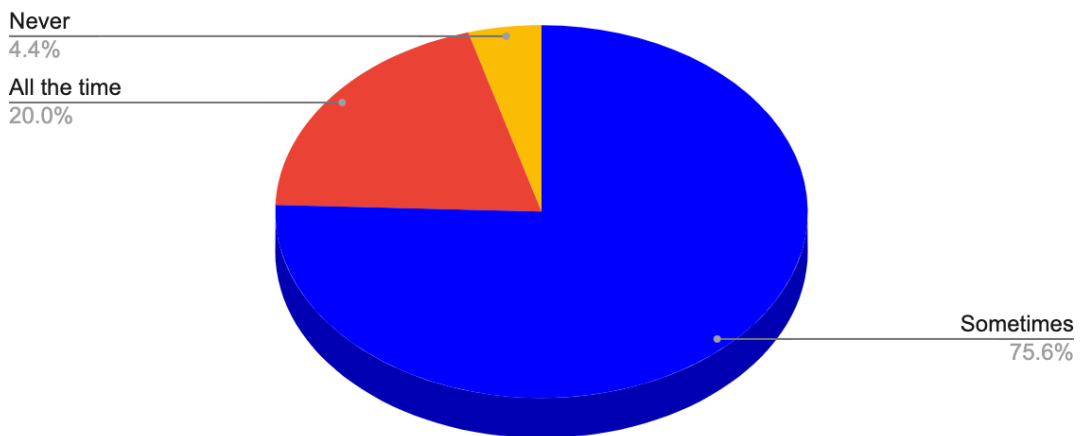


Figure 11. Result of Do you communicate about the brand with other people who like the brand? All respondents.

Like any community, communication is vital for it to exist. The same rule applies when discussing brand communities. Fournier & Lee (2009) debunk the idea that successful brand communities are tightly managed and controlled. Instead communities need to live their own lives for them to thrive. 75,6% of the respondents said they communicate about the brand only sometimes while 20,0% of the respondents said do it all the time. It indicates that for consumer it is just as important to have a communication outlet with like-minded people about the brands they follow.

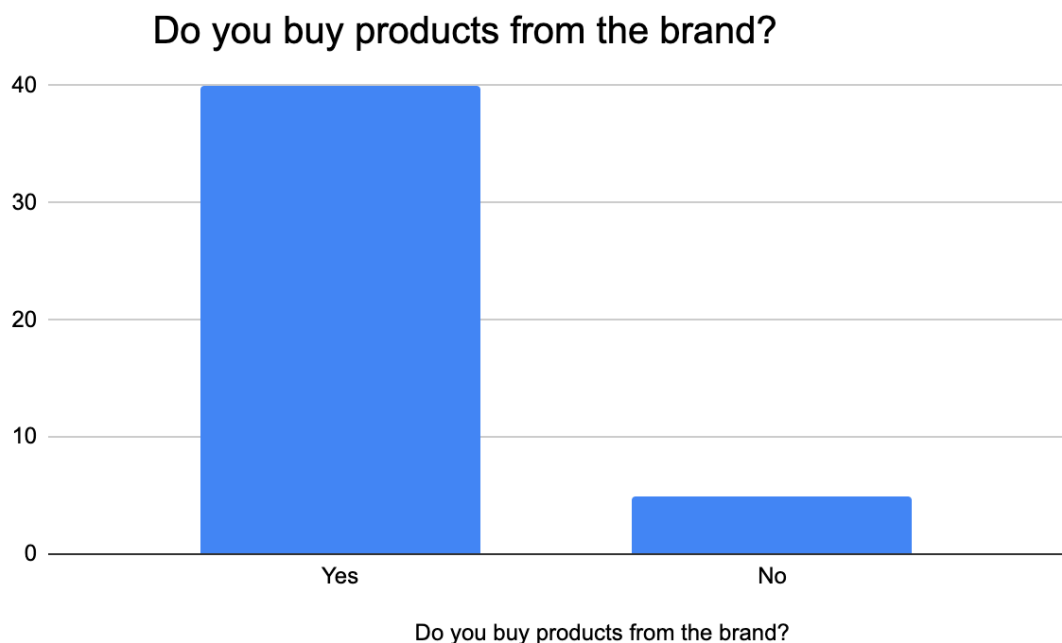


Figure 12. Result of Do you buy products from the brand? All respondents.

The clear majority of the respondents said they buy products from the brand, meaning they are not only followers but customers of the brand. For companies to have dedicated followers who are also paying customers is important, for this is where the thriving brand community can be seen in the form of sales and income.

What do you get from the brand?

45 responses

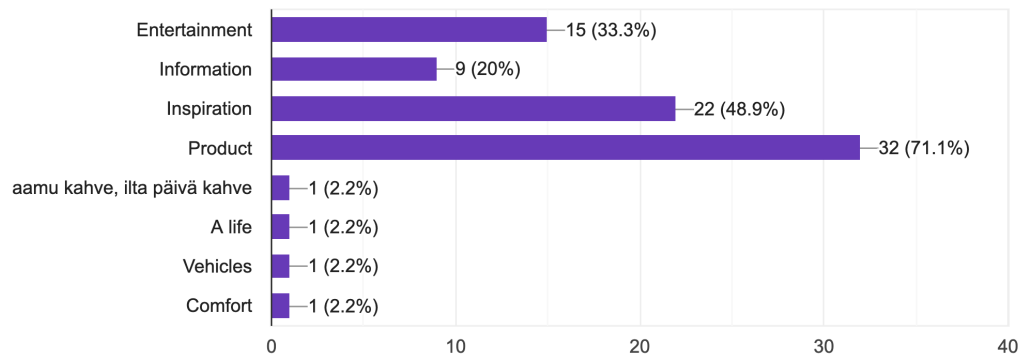


Figure 13. What do you get from the brand? All respondents.

When discussing the different things, a brand can offer its customers and followers, there are tangible and intangible elements that both hold enormous value. When asked what the respondents get from their brand of preference as portrayed in Figure 13 a total of 71,1% responded product which is a tangible and calculable thing. After product came inspiration with 48,9%, which is an intangible and incalculable thing.

Inspiration can sound like a vague and nonspecific 'product' for a brand to offer but should not be underestimated. Kornberger (2006): "Brands are symbolic resources for identity construction: they are the grammar that allows us to narrate our story." As Kornberger (2006) suggests, the intangible parts of the brands output are crucial to drawing people. Inspiration can be argued to be one of the important elements.

Is there something more you would want from the brand?

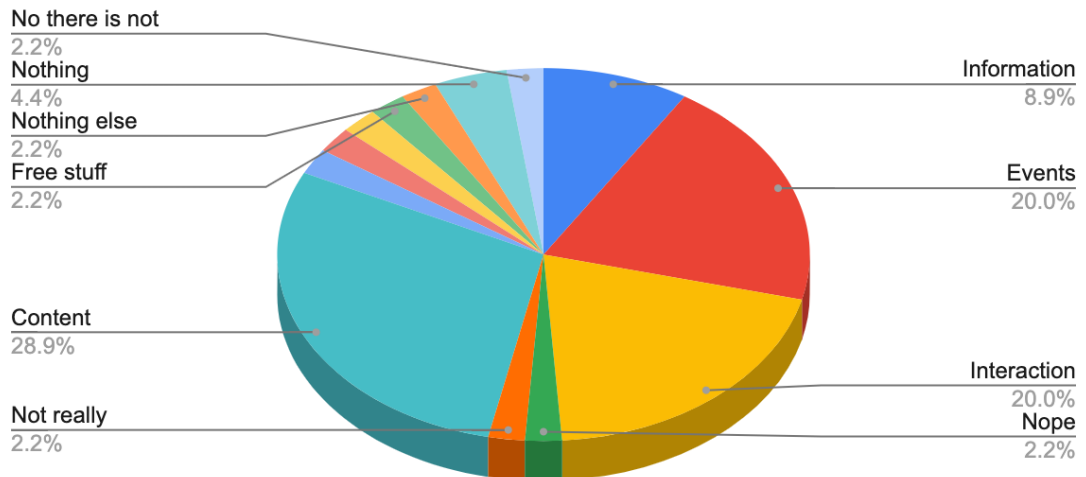


Figure 14. Result of is there something more you would want from the brand? All respondents.

Although brands spend a lot of time trying to provide for their brand community as well as the potential new customers and followers, it does not always match perfectly with the wants and needs of the customer. As social media platforms have grown, the way people consume content has changed. Most cannot afford to let just their products and TV campaigns speak for themselves.

Brands need to find new ways of keeping up with the competition and the flood of information and content. 28,9% of the respondents said they wish for more content from the brand of their liking. 20,0% said they want events and another 20,0% said they wish for more interaction. All of three top answers are connected with the element of communication. Brands can appear distant and cold, which is why companies such as Apple and Nike inject their story in all of their output. The human element makes can make the brand more approachable and understandable.

Do you feel like you are a part of the brands community?

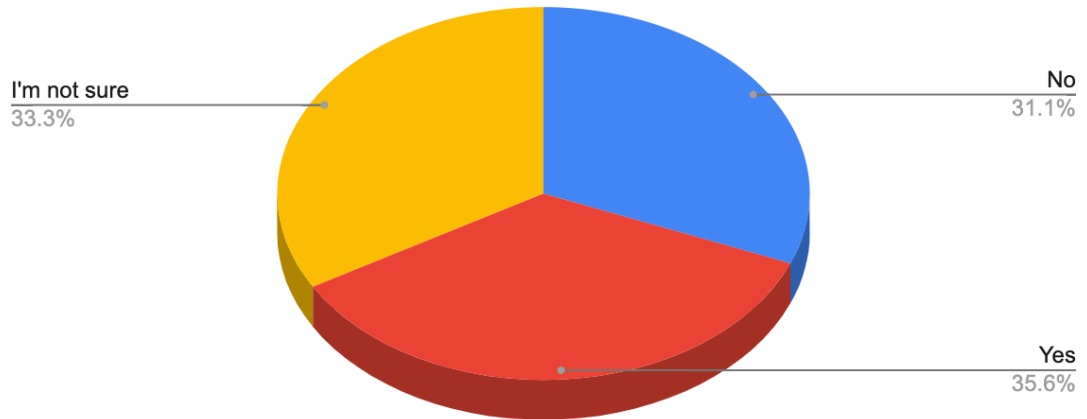


Figure 15. Result of Do you feel like you are a part of the brands community? All respondents.

Being a part of a brand community has a lifestyle choice element to it and therefore is not for the most part a very conscious thing from the perspective of the consumer. The purpose of the question was to find out how aware the respondents are of their participation in brand community. Only 35,6% of the respondents said they feel as they were a part of the brand community of the brand they chose for this survey.

***If you said yes, do you actively interact with other members of the community?**

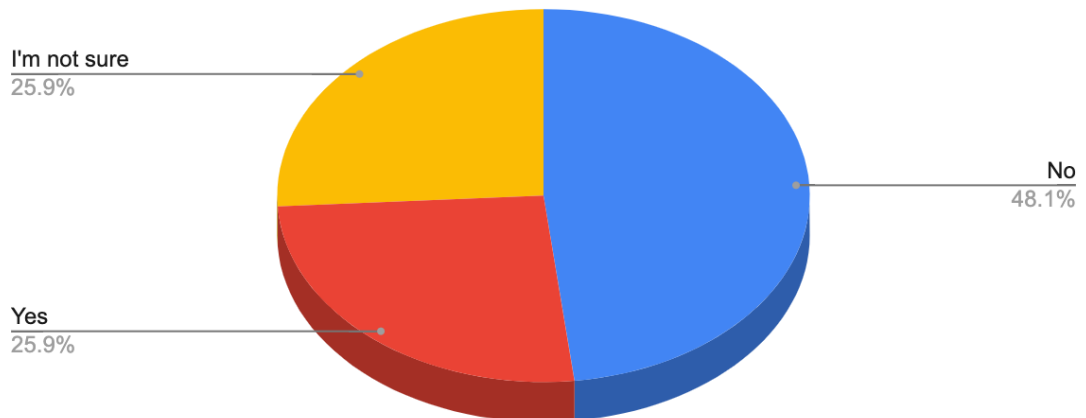


Figure 16. Result of *If you said yes, do you actively interact with other members of the community?

There are different stages to belonging to a brand community. A customer may not be active in interacting with different members of the community but might still be active in buying products and following the brand. The active communicators are usually in terms of brand community growth the most valuable ones for the brand.

“Community engagement suggests that members are interested in helping other members, participating in joint activities, and otherwise acting volitionally in ways that the community endorses and that enhance its value for themselves and others” (Algesheimer, Dholakia & Herrmann, 2005). Fournier & Lee (2009) point out that “by sharing the comments of other community members, any one member feels more secure in his or her understanding that there are many like-minded others “out there,” a prime benefit of community”. The active community members are the ones who give the word-of-mouth recommendations and create the buzz around the brand. An active brand community is a powerful testament to the brand’s success in serving their followers. As Muniz and

O'Guinn (2001) suggest, brand communities are “based on a structured set of relationships among admirers of a brand”.

The second survey directed at companies and brands about their efforts in building brand community gained a total of 16 responses mostly from brands operating in different industries. All of the companies that responded to the questionnaire operate from Finland. Some of them operate only within Finland and some operate internationally.

The first question was about the line of business the companies operate in. The replies varied from advertising agencies and companies operating in the music business to computer companies and religious organizations.

How long has your company been active?

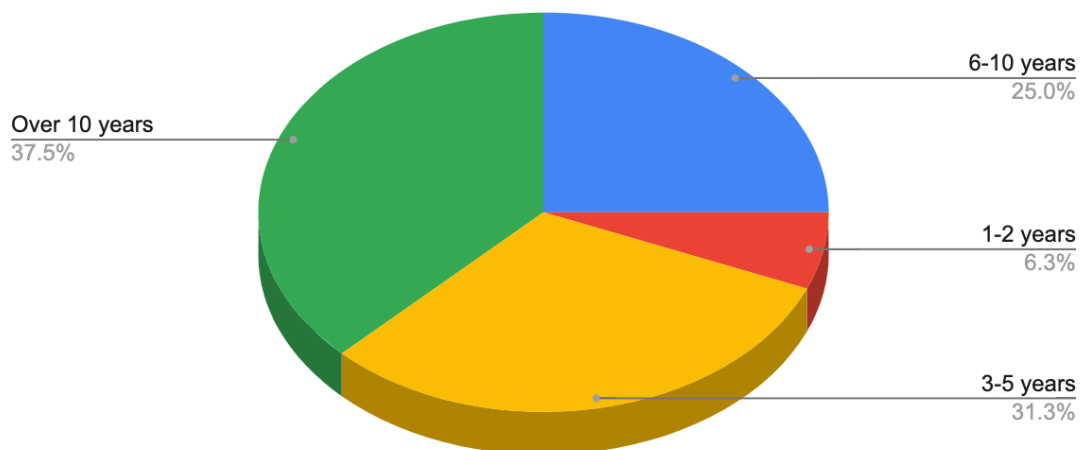


Figure 17. Result of How long has your company been active? All respondents.

As seen in Figure 17 out of the respondent companies 37,5% have in been active for over 10 years, and 25,0% for 6-10 years. Figure 17 also shows that out the respondents a total 31,3% have been active for 3 to 5 years. For a company to be able to operate for a such long time periods indicates that they

have had success in serving their customers and been able to adapt to the times and the changes and challenges that come with it.

Do you invest in growing your brand community?

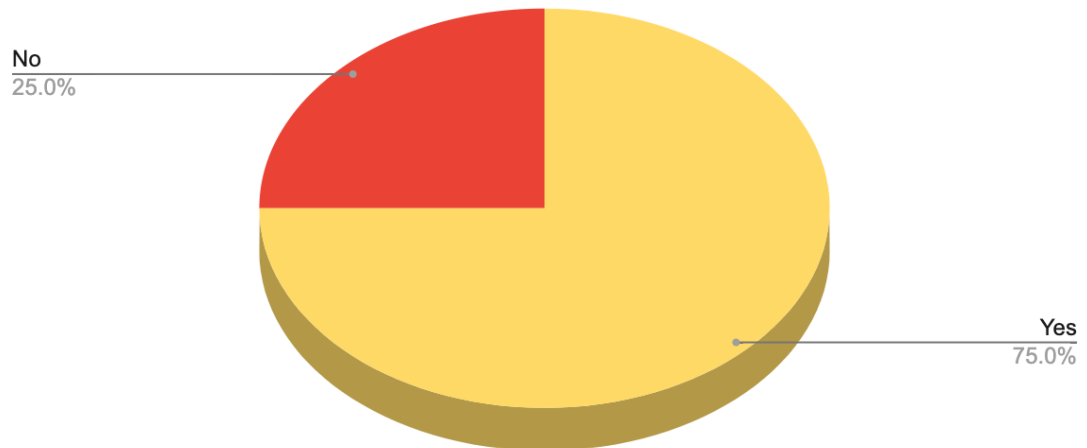


Figure 18. Result of Do you invest in growing your brand community? All respondents.

As Fournier & Lee (2009) mentioned, a widely believed myth regarding brand communities is that if you build the brand, the community will follow. Fournier & Lee (2009) turned the statement upside down by stating that if you engineer the community, the brand will be strong.

A great example is the pop singer Justin Bieber and his fan base. When Justin Bieber first became familiar to the general public in 2009, Justin Bieber's team branded the fan group mainly consisting of teenage girls to be called 'Beliebers'. Giving the movement a name intensified its impact, giving Justin Bieber brand community a stronger presence and therefore strengthened the brand itself to the point that he became one of the biggest names in pop music. A brand community cannot be forced but can and should be engineered and invested in. Of the respondents 75,0% said they invest in their brand community as seen in Figure 18.

If you said 'yes', has the investment affected your sales?

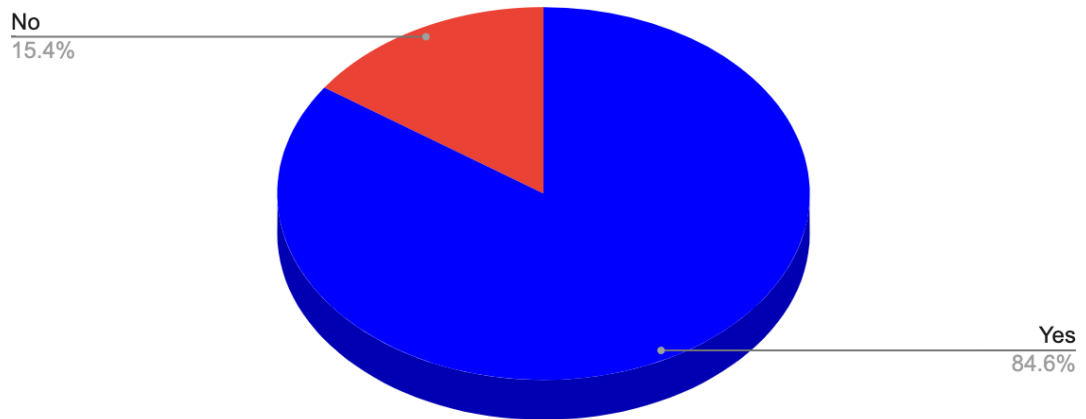


Figure 19. Result of If you said 'yes' has the investment affected your sales?

Of the respondents 84,6% said their investment in brand community has affected sales. This proves that there is a clear benefit and function to why brand community should be taken care of and invested in. Brand community at best can bring buzz to the brand and generate momentum which brings in more customers which naturally has a direct positive effect on sales.

How do you communicate with your brand community?

16 responses

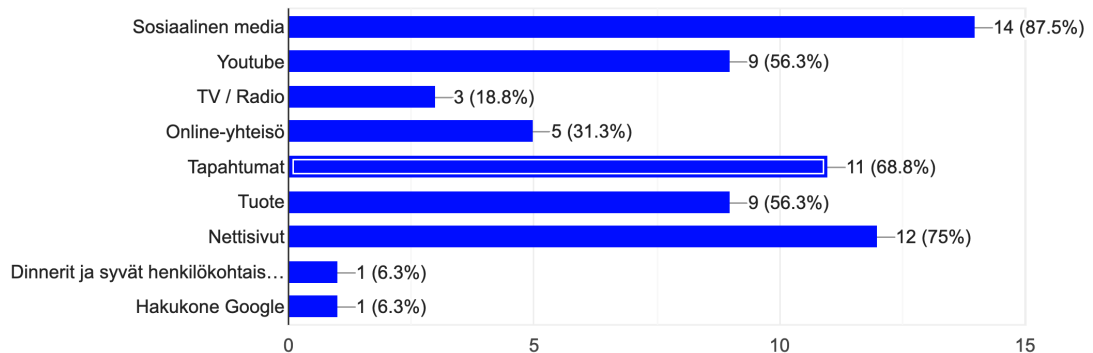


Figure 20. Result of How do you communicate with your brand community? All respondents.

For brands to communicate with their followers and customers, it is most conveniently done through internet platforms, whether it may through social media or websites. As Kapferer (2017) states: “The Internet offers open access to brands, peer-to-peer communication, evaluations of products and services, the power of communities, and ‘bloggers’ “. Internet as a communication tool is now more relevant than ever before. Of the respondents 87,5% communicate with their brand community via social media and 75% via website. It is a straight forward way of reaching their customers no matter where they are physically.

The challenge there is to cut through the competition and the mass of content and information. Evan, Bratton & McKee (2010) make an interesting statement concerning the topic, stating:” The Social Web is, in a sense the great equalizer between large brands with big budgets and small brands that simply do it better”. This contributes to the idea, that different internet platforms can offer brands possibilities to freely interact with their existing customers as well as possible new customers and brand community members. A majority of the respondents, more specifically 68,8% communicate through events, which on the other hand is more laborious but holds an effective human element to it which can generate long lasting customers and community members.

4.2 Findings

The surveys conducted on the topic of brand community came up with a lot of valuable information. Although behaviour and preferences on the topic may vary for example between different age groups, countries or socioeconomical status, the basic wants and needs tend to be quite consistent. The surveys brought interesting information on how the consumers experience brand communities as well as what consumers wish for from the brands they like.

One of the significant findings made as a result of the research conducted for this thesis was the way new customers were found. It became evident that word-of-mouth is the most effective tool when trying to gain new customers and followers. For word-of-mouth advertising to exist for a brand there must be a

brand community, a group of people excited about the brand. This finding supports the statement introduced by Bughin, Doogan & Vetvik (2010): “The rewards of pursuing excellence in word-of-mouth marketing are huge, and it can deliver a sustainable and significant competitive edge few other marketing approaches can match”. This was evident in the case study about the ‘Biniyam’ brand. Word-of-mouth and friendly recommendations have a better chance of gaining new customers than targeted advertising as pointed out by Bughin, Doogan & Vetvik (2010).

Another significant finding made through the information gained through the survey was the investment in the brand community by the brand and the effect on sales it had. Fournier & Lee (2009) suggest that a brand community is not just a marketing strategy but more so is a business strategy. It makes a valid point that a brand community is not only one marketing tool but a vital part of any successful business plan. Fournier & Lee (2009) also state: “For a brand community to yield maximum benefit, it must be framed as a high-level strategy supporting business wide goals”. If a brand wants to gain a sustainable competitive advantage over its competitors, an efficient way of achieving it to engineer and nurture its brand community.

Communication is an interesting and challenging factor when discussing the relationship between brand and consumer. One-way communication from brand to consumer is straight forward and simple to achieve. The real challenge appears with interaction and two-way communication. Evan, Bratton & McKee (2010) talk about how often times “social media projects” get treated as they were traditional marketing campaigns without the interactive and collaborative association with the customer. “As a result, the very objective – engagement, redefined in a larger social context – is missed as too many “social media campaigns” run their course and then fizzle out.” (Evan, Bratton & McKee 2010).

Two-way communication for brands can be challenging to keep up because of the constant interaction it requires, therefore making it more expensive for the companies. However, as the evidence shows in many cases the investment will be profitable. A brand with a powerful sense of community generally has a greater value to a marketer than a brand with a weak sense of community (Muniz & O'Guinn 2001).

In the survey when asked about what more the consumer would want from the brand they follow, the top three replies all spoke of connection. The top replies were content, events and interaction. With interaction and communication with the consumer they can feel closer to the brand and experience psychological ownership over the brand. Aaker (2012) suggests that a real connection based on common interests provides not only a basis for a relationship, but also a sense of authenticity.

The case study presented in this thesis examining the case of Biniyam showed interesting findings on how efficient a consumer powered brand community can be. Initially the small, yet active brand community around the Biniyam brand was engineered by engaging in active interaction with the consumers through social media platforms and events. Another factor in building the brand community examined in the case study gaining brand relevance by creating a subcategory in the field of operation. Aaker (2012) states: "The brand relevance route to competitive success involves making competitors irrelevant by developing offerings so innovative that they contain "must haves" that define a new category or subcategory". A group of consumers bought into the product and brand which laid a foundation for building an engaging brand community.

The example presented in the case study also verifies the suggestion made by Fournier & Lee (2009) that if you engineer the community, the brand will be strong. The case study also provides added emphasis to the importance of brand communities when in terms of sales as found in the brand survey results in Figure 19.

5 Conclusion and Future Research

5.1 Conclusion

The conclusion to the research question: “Why to build a brand community?”, indicates that the reason, or the ‘why’, brands and companies spend significant amounts of time, effort and resources to build brand communities is to ensure a sustainable competitive advantage over the competitors. Fournier & Lee (2009) state: “A strong brand community increases customer loyalty, lowers marketing costs, authenticates brand meanings, and yields an influx of ideas to grow the business.” Though the financial benefits of it might not be very easily calculable, the increase in brand value and popularity will be beneficial for the brand and in most cases the results will eventually also be visible in the finances of the company.

Successful brand community activity can also result in social influence, which is a very important asset, which can, when utilized in the right way significantly increase the amount of income. “Through commitment, engagement, and support, companies can cultivate brand communities that deliver powerful returns. When you get community right, the benefits are irrefutable” (Fournier & Lee 2009).

Aaker (2012) states: “The communities need to be authentic, focused on a real need like sharing knowledge or engaging in a real passion. The brand’s connection to shared interests can lead to a perception of a trusted friend and knowledgeable expert rather than just being a supplier.” In my research I found that the most important key elements in building a successful social brand community across different companies and industries, is not only elements such as promoting a certain lifestyle or social status or even product, though all of them crucial for a business to thrive, I found that more important in terms of brand community was community engagement, creating a sense of belonging and adding value to the lives of the customers and followers of the brand.

According to Fournier & Lee (2009) instead of driving sales community-based brands build loyalty by helping consumers meet their needs. For a customer to become a brand community member, it is important for the customer to feel represented in the brand and have a sense of psychological ownership. As Muniz & O'Guinn (2001) suggest, community is a common understanding of a shared identity.

I also found confirmation to the theory that successful brand communities cannot be forced but they can be encouraged, supported, and enhanced. Brand communities in most cases do not create themselves but as Fournier & Lee (2009) suggest, the brand community must be engineered, which will make the brand strong. Ultimately, the brand communities are created by the brands but if they are properly taken care of, they continue to live through and by the consumers themselves.

Though this thesis covers ground on different aspects of the research topic it also has its limitations. Due to the fact that companies in different industries operate very differently the function of brand community can vary. Future research could take the differences between industries into account to provide a more accurate point of view on the topic more specifically within different industries. This thesis examines brand communities assuming that all industries benefit similarly from brand communities. The thesis also fails to study the financial benefits of brand communities in greater detail. This is an important topic for future research to give validation and reasoning for investments in brand community growth and development. In addition, conducting wider surveys with greater amounts of respondents could provide more insight on how consumers and brands experience brand community and the importance of it.

5.2 Recommendations for future research

There is a lot of ground to be covered on the topic of brand communities. As the society evolves and changes, the ways brands engage with their customers change as well. Meeting customer expectations and finding new ways to serve the customer is most likely going to be a challenge for the future as competition only gets more intense and different operators look to increase their output of product and content.

If brands want to be able to increase their chances of gaining a sustainable competitive advantage over their competition, the brands must win the brand relevance battle as Aaker (2012) suggests. By being able to create new categories of product and content within a brand's respective industry a brand can gain new ground in their business activities. "In nearly every industry, a historical analysis will show that meaningful changes in market position almost always were connected to the entry of a new category or subcategory." (Aaker 2012).

Another suggestion for future research could be to research a more detailed method of calculating the financial effects and benefits of investing in brand community. Since a big part of the communication done between brand and customer is through different internet platforms, gathering information concerning the interaction between the two parties is now easier and more precise than ever. However, it is difficult to accurately differentiate for example which part of the growth in sales is a product of investment in brand community and not the result of another form of marketing activity.

An interesting aspect to brand community growth is micro-influencer marketing. Micro-influencers can be described as influencers with a smaller following ranging from 10 000 to 50 000 people. Bughin, Doogan & Vetvik (2010) argue: "As consumers have become overloaded, they have become increasingly sceptical about traditional company-driven advertising and marketing and

increasingly prefer to make purchasing decisions largely independent of what companies tell them about products”.

The more the consumer is exposed to information and interaction with other consumers they are able to form their own opinion and are not so reliant on traditional marketing and what the company is telling them to think. Through micro-influencer marketing brands can be more focused with niche marketing and get access to more specific audiences with the advertising having a more authentic feeling. This kind of approach could at best have a similar efficiency to a positive word-of-mouth recommendation.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Survey for consumers

Appendix 1 consists of the questions and responses of the first survey designed for consumers.

Question 1: Age

- 12-17
- 18-24
- 25-34
- 35-44
- 45-54
- 55-64
- 65-74
- 75 or older

Question 2: Think of a brand you like (Open question)

Question 3: How did you first hear about the brand?

- From a friend
- Social Media
- TV / Radio
- I don't remember
- Other...

Question 4: How long have you been a customer / follower of the brand?

- Over 10 years
- 9-5 years
- 3-4 years
- 1-2 years
- Less than a year

Question 5: How do you follow the brand?

- Social Media
- Youtube
- TV / Radio
- Online Community
- Events
- Website
- Other...

Question 6: What makes the brand interesting for you?

- Aesthetics
- Content
- Ecological Aspects (Sustainability etc.)
- Popularity
- Product
- Social Aspects (Social equality)
- Other...

Question 7: Do you communicate about the brand with other people who like the brand?

- All the time
- Sometimes
- Never

Question 8: Do you buy products from the brand?

- Yes
- No
- They don't sell any products

Question 9: What do you get from the brand?

- Entertainment
- Information
- Inspiration
- Product
- Other...

Question 10: Is there something more you would want from the brand?

- Content
- Interaction
- Information
- Events
- Other...

Question 11: Do you feel like you are a part of the brands community?

- Yes
- No
- I'm not sure

Question 12: *If you said yes, do you actively interact with other members of the community?

- Yes
- No
- I'm not sure

Survey responses

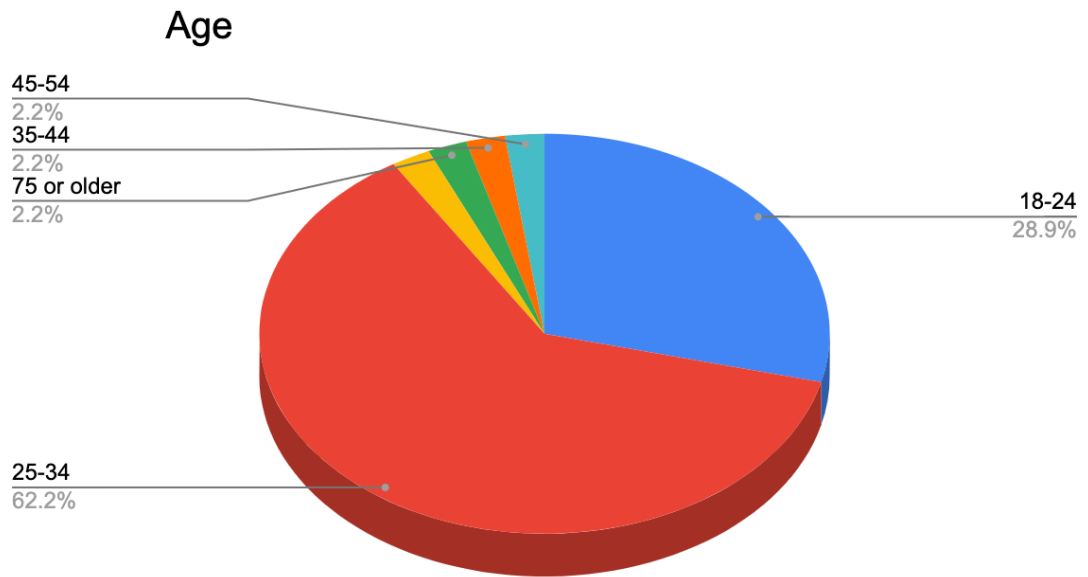


Figure 1. Result of Age. All respondents.

How did you first hear about the brand?		
1.	From a friend	17
2.	I don't remember	14
3.	Social Media	7
4.	TV / Radio	2
5.	Website	1

How did you first hear about the brand?		
6.	Parents	1
7.	All over the world (web, media, ads, people, friends)	1
8.	Saw it in a supermarket	1
9.	History	1

Figure 2. Result of How did you first hear about the brand? All respondents.

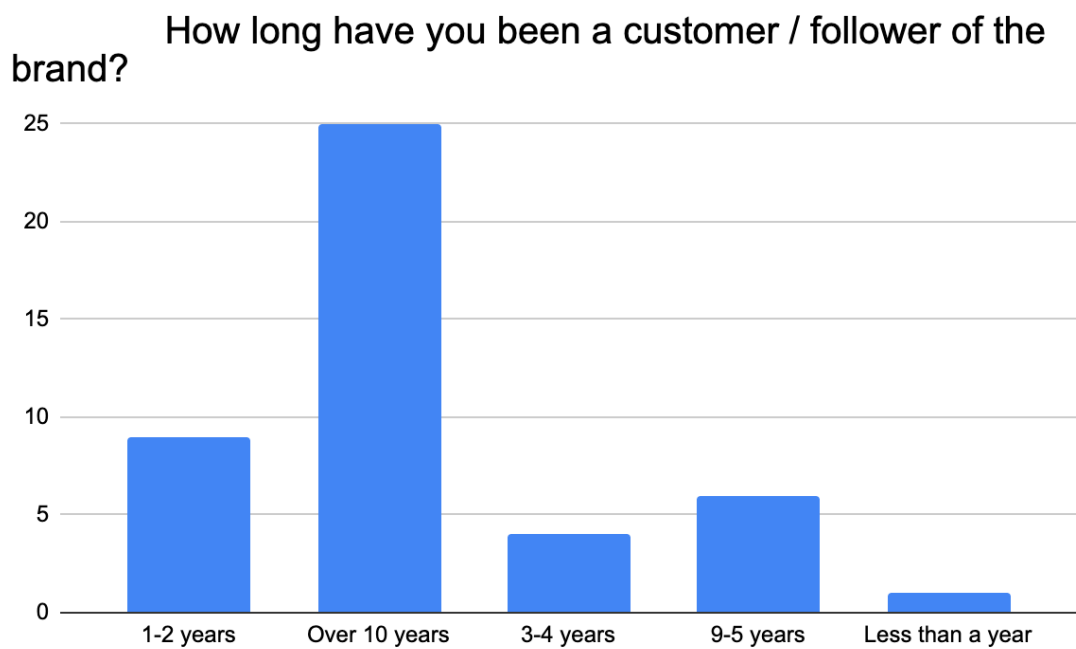


Figure 3. Result of How long have you been a customer / follower of the brand? All respondents.

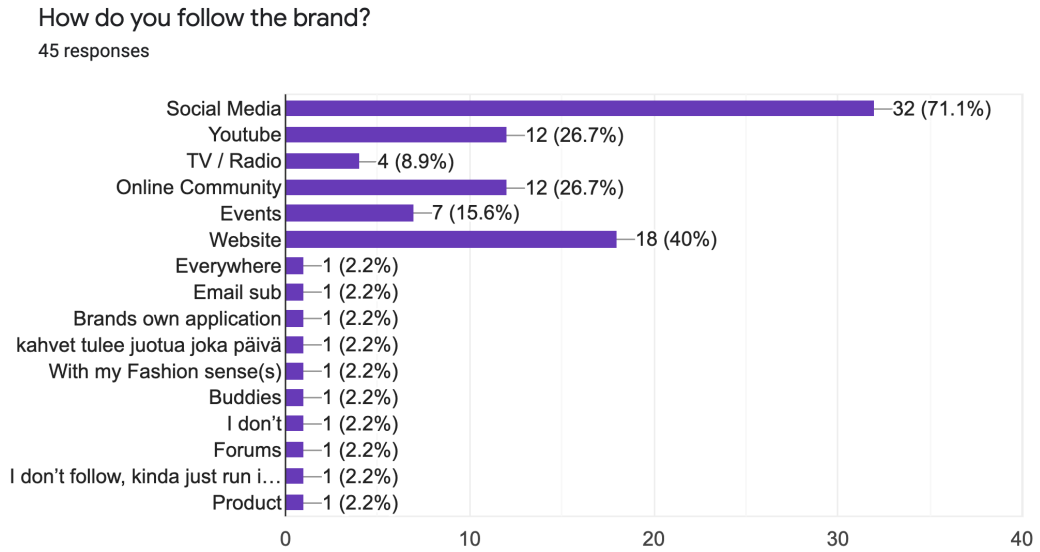


Figure 4. How do you follow the brand? All respondents.

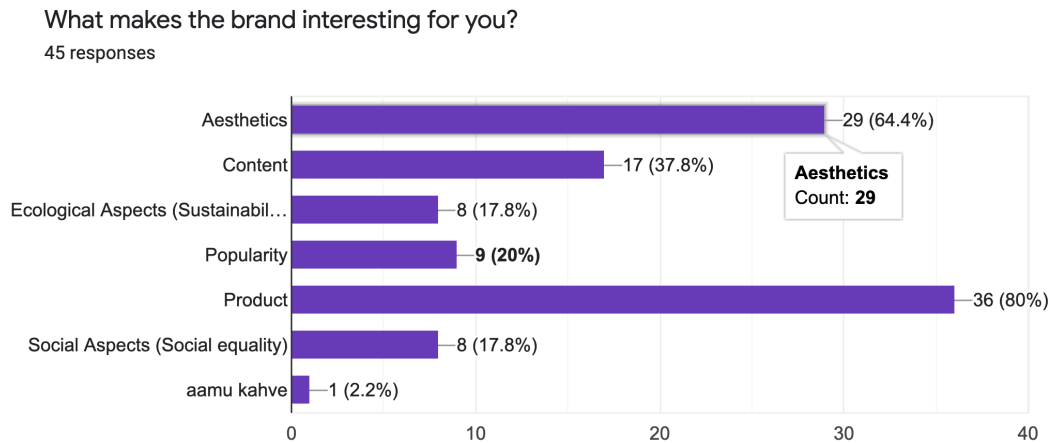


Figure 5. What makes the brand interesting for you? All respondents.

Do you communicate about the brand with other people who like the brand

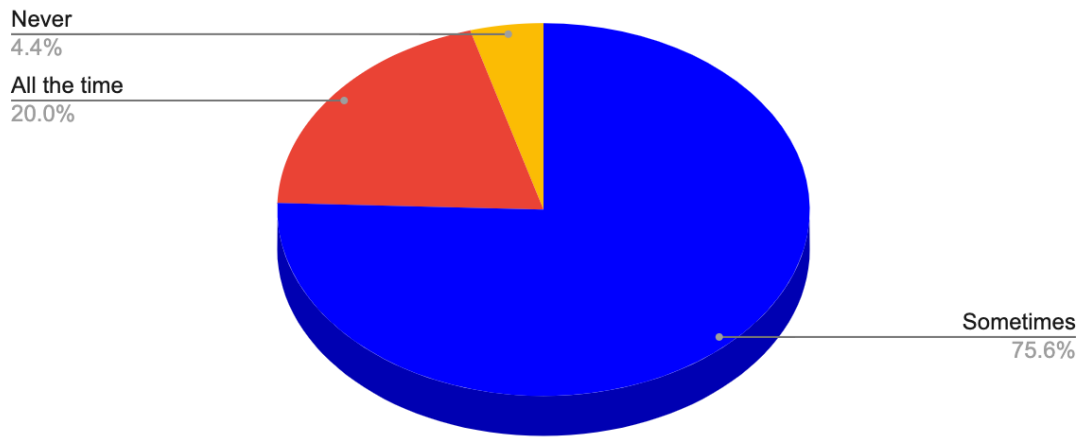


Figure 6. Result of Do you communicate about the brand with other people who like the brand? All respondents.

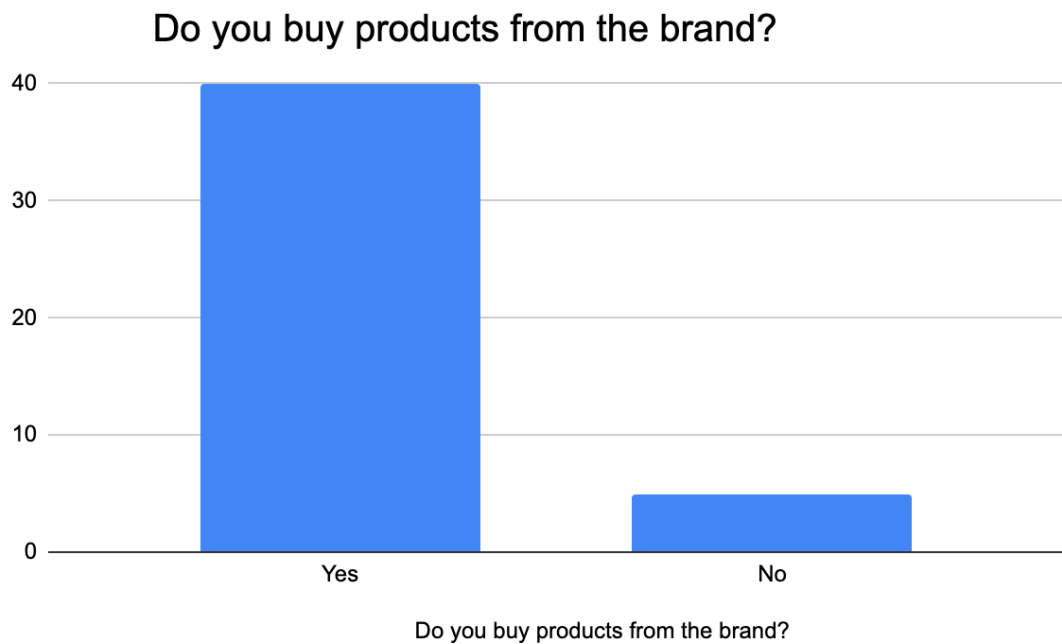


Figure 7. Result of Do you buy products from the brand? All respondents.

What do you get from the brand?

45 responses

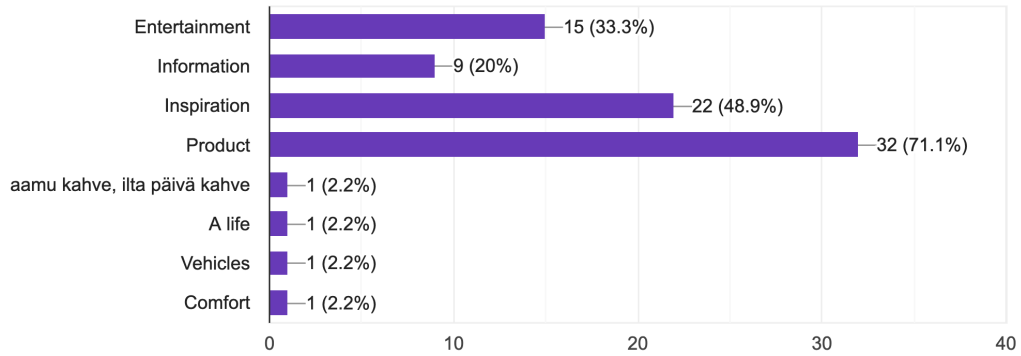


Figure 8. What do you get from the brand? All respondents.

Is there something more you would want from the brand?

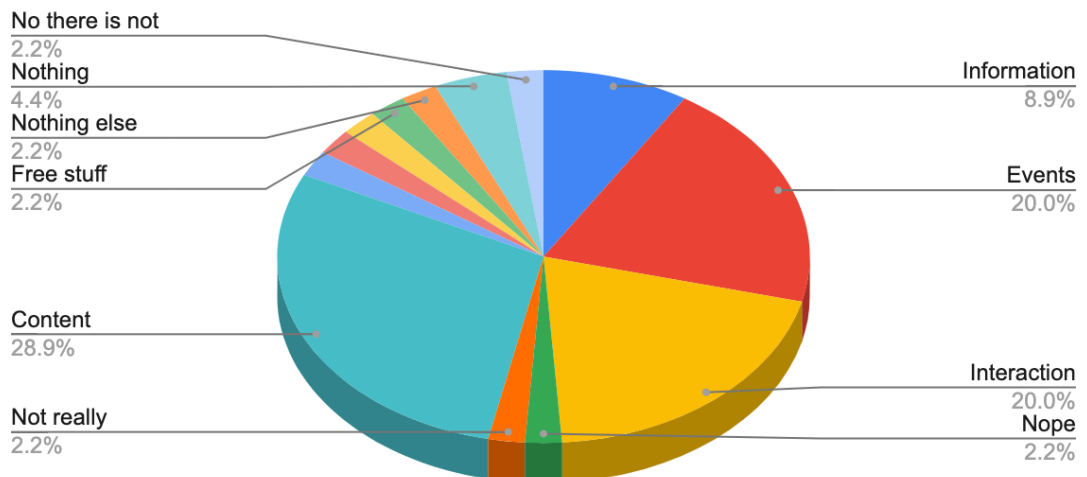


Figure 9. Result of is there something more you would want from the brand? All respondents.

Do you feel like you are a part of the brands community?

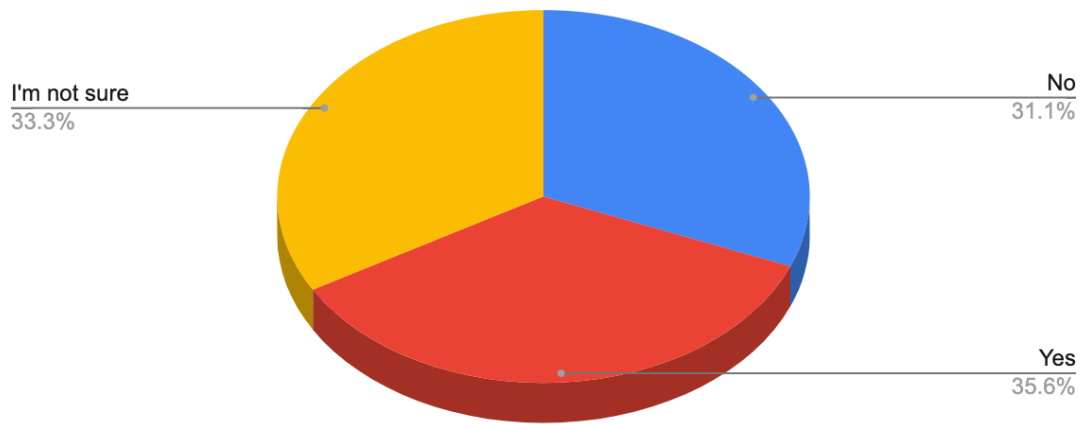


Figure 10. Result of Do you feel like you are a part of the brands community?
All respondents.

*If you said yes, do you actively interact with other members of the community?

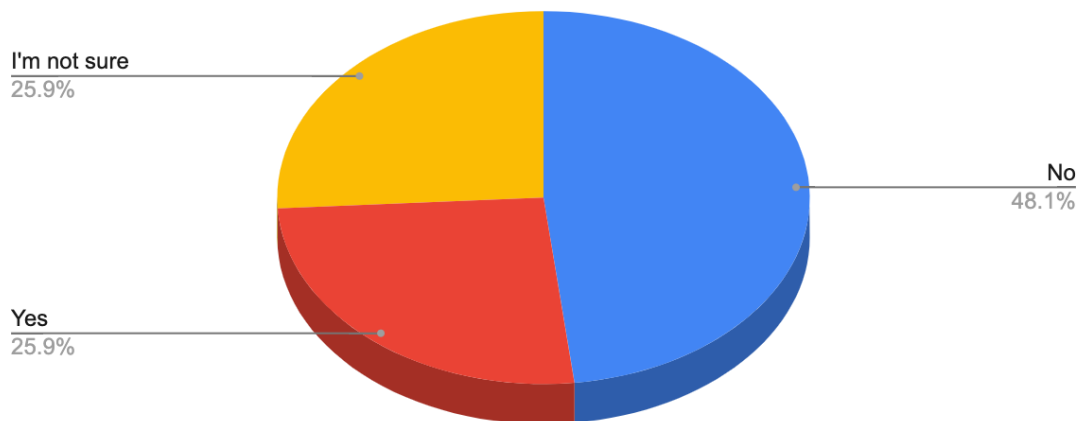


Figure 11. Result of *If you said yes, do you actively interact with other members of the community?

Appendix 2: Survey for brands

Appendix 2 consists of the questions and responses of the second survey designed for brands and companies.

Question 1: What industry does your company / brand operate in? (Open question)

Question 2: How long has your company been active?

- Less than a year
- 1-2 years
- 3-5 years
- 6-10 years
- More than 10 years

Question 3: Do you invest in growing your brand community?

- Yes
- No

Question 4: *If you said 'yes', has it affected your sales?

- Yes
- No

Question 5: In what ways do you communicate with your brand community?

- Social Media
- Youtube
- TV / Radio
- Online community
- Events
- Product
- Website
- Other...

Survey 2 responses

How long has your company been active?

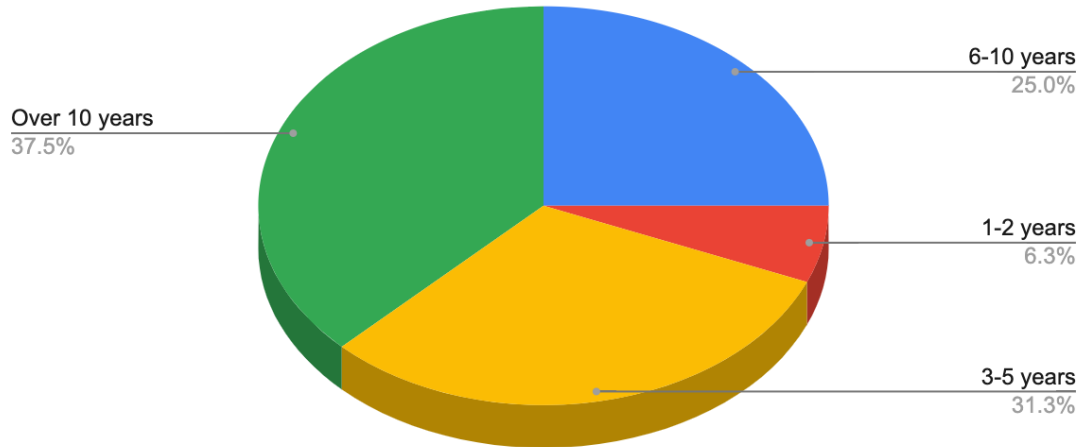


Figure 1. Result of How long has your company been active? All respondents.

Do you invest in growing your brand community?

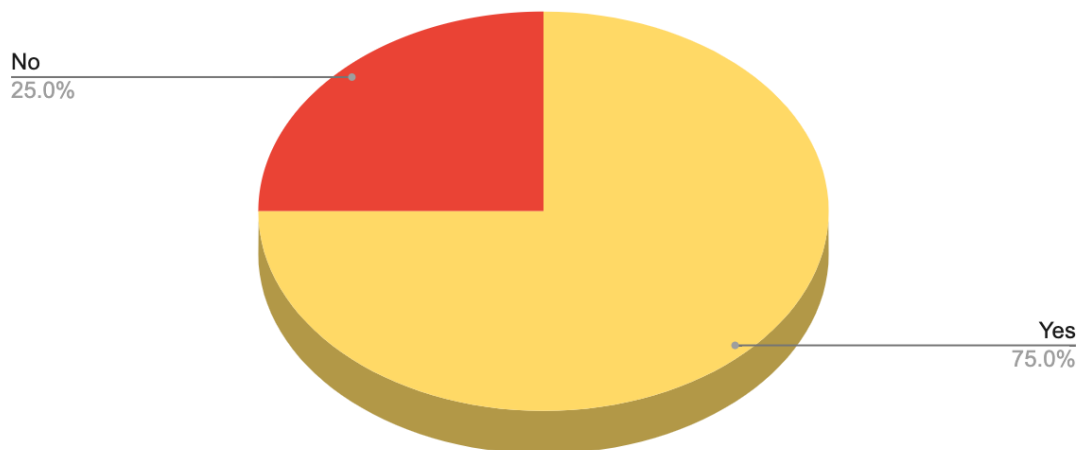


Figure 2. Result of Do you invest in growing your brand community? All respondents.

If you said 'yes', has the investment affected your sales?

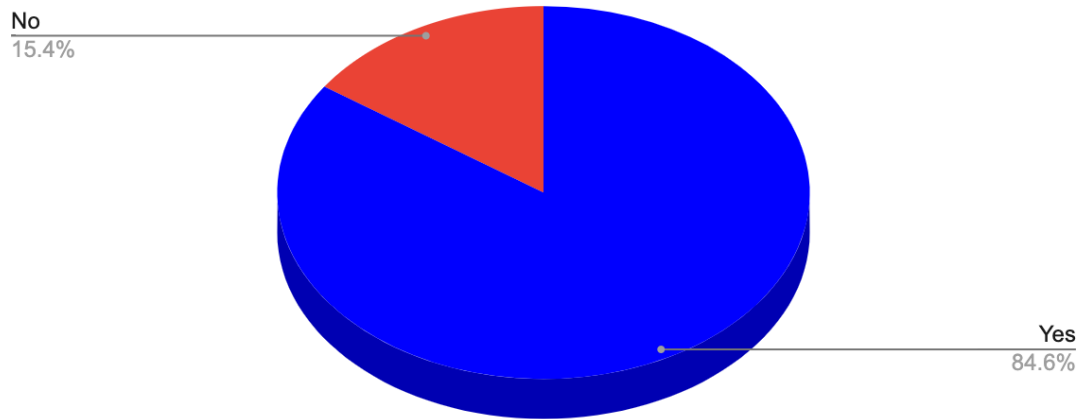


Figure 3. Result of If you said 'yes' has the investment affected your sales?

How do you communicate with your brand community?

16 responses

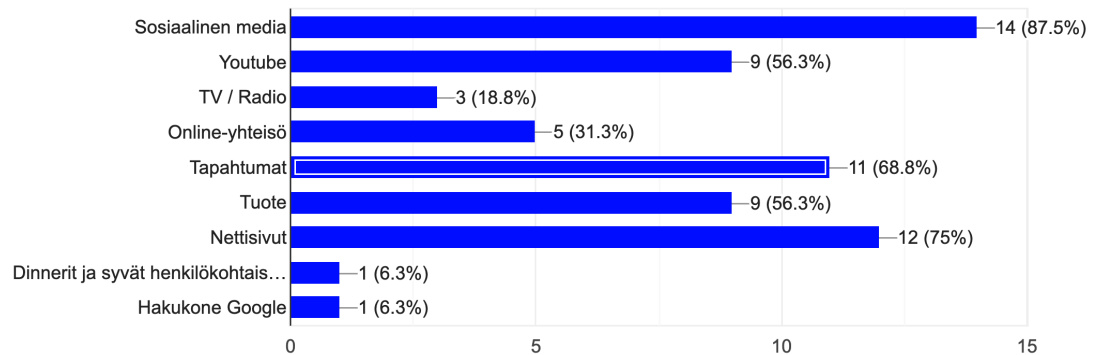


Figure 4. Result of How do you communicate with your brand community? All respondents.