

ABSTRACT

Brand Community Practices of the BMW Electronauts

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Drawing from practice theory, this study examines the online brand community comprised of BMW ActiveE electric vehicle field trial drivers, dubbed the Electronauts. In-depth interviews were also conducted to explore the Electronaut experience and the extent to which BMW communicated with and designed the activities of the community. The brand community thrived with very little contact or investment from the company, instead organically forming a structure of its own, providing technical and personal support to one another, and maintaining relationships long after the field trial ended in 2014. This study uncovers new understanding of the positive impact organic power relations has in online brand community. Implications to brand marketers are evident: 1) invest in community over one-on-one brand relationships, 2) grass-roots brand community is highly sustainable, 3) monitor the community and be ready to step in to resolve small issues before they become problems and 4) regard members of the brand community as equals in product development and brand meaning.

Brand Community Practices of the BMW Electronauts

by

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A Thesis

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DEDICATION

To the Electronauts, who played an important role in the introduction and adoption of electric vehicles in the United States.

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

This thesis explores brand community practices as they pertain to a specific group of pioneers in the electric car industry known as the BMW Electronauts. The study approaches the subject from the perspective of practice theory. The field trial lasted from 2012 to 2014, during which the Electronauts organically developed a thriving brand community on Facebook and at in-person events.

Scholars studying brand relationships have established that brand affiliation and community have a positive impact on brand love, which in progression has a positive impact on loyalty and engagement, as well as leading to deeply emotional and long-term relationships with brands (Bergkvist & Bech-larsen, 2010; Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006; Fournier, 1998). Less studied, but critically important, partly due to the rise of social networking platforms on the internet, is the concept of brand community. Brand marketers should see the consumer as equal and welcome—and should even co-opt—consumer input and feedback (Lusch & Vargo, 2014; O’Guinn & Muniz, 2015; Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2000). Schau et al. (2009) identified four categories of practices in a meta-study of nine brand communities, which will serve as a theoretical framework for this analysis of the BMW Electronaut community.

The first half of the 2010s in the U.S. was the genesis of a watershed era for the automobile industry, and we are still witnessing this transformation today. This short span of time marked a turning point for car manufacturers, as they started introducing

electric vehicles to the heretofore internal combustion engine market (Egbue & Long, 2012; Plucinsky, 2012). From 2012 to 2014, BMW, a major car manufacturer based in Germany, conducted a U.S. field trial for a prototype electric car called the “ActiveE” (Duda, 2011). Of tens of thousands of driver applications for the program, BMW selected 700 people to be “Electronauts.” These field-trial testers paid for the opportunity to lease and drive the electric car prototype for a two-year period. Having occurred at such a recent time in history, many factual contemporaneous media accounts, company press releases, blog posts, and video documentaries are available, as are almost all of the Electronauts themselves. Remarkably, six years after the field trial ended, the Electronaut Facebook community is still quite active.

Although there is a large body of work in which scholars have explored brand relationships and brand loyalty (Correia Loureiro et al., 2017; Fernandes & Moreira, 2019; Giovanis & Athanasopoulou, 2018; Newman & Werbel, 1974), there is a much smaller set of studies pertaining to brand community specifically, fewer exploring how brand marketers can best leverage brand community in their favor, and other than the Schau et al. (2009) meta-study, no major work in this arena is rooted in practice theory. This study of the BMW Electronauts adds to that small body of work, aiming to identify and classify specific value-creating practices in the brand community, as well as identify the degree to which Electronauts perceived BMW brand marketers interacted with the group and whether there was lost opportunity to the company as a result. To examine these issues, 12 in-depth interviews were conducted with Electronauts and posts from the Facebook group were analyzed.

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

The perspective of this literature review about brand community is rooted in practice theory. It includes an overview of research about what brand community is, the impact of Internet technology on the phenomenon, and what this might mean to brand marketers.

Practice Theory

French theorist and sociologist Pierre Bourdieu is perhaps the most well-known scholar associated with practice theory (Darity, Jr., 2008; Rouse, 2007). He introduced the concept of “habitus” to describe how the human body internalizes societal order (Bourdieu, 1977). Although practice theory emphasizes intentionality and expression, it also incorporates the notion that individual actions are shaped by societal norms (Rouse, 2007). Practice theory is a way of explaining how social beings, with all of their various and different intentions and motives, shape the world in which they exist. It describes an interaction between societal structure and individuals’ actions, operating to and fro in an ever-changing relationship (Dougherty, 2004).

Five key distinctions of practice theory are outlined by Nicolini (2013). First, activity is of great importance in practice theory, such as activities of performance, work, and social life. They tend to be process oriented. Second, practice theory recognizes the essential role of the body, as well as other material things, in all social matters. Third, individual agency and agents make rational decisions and carry out social practices. This

accounts for human creativity and individual expression. Fourth, looking at the world through a lens of practice theory changes our perception of knowledge, meaning, and discourse. Last, practice theory highlights the importance of power, struggle, and politics in our societal structure.

A practice is a behavior that may be routine and incorporates both the body and mind, objects, shared skills, and knowledge (Reckwitz, 2002). Practices are interconnected with other practices and have relationships within societal structures (e.g. political, legal, economic) (Röpke, 2009). Practices are influenced by society, technology, and power relations, while concurrently, they reciprocally shape those same structures (Bourdieu, 1977).

Schau et al. (2009) used the lens of practice theory in their meta-analysis of nine brand communities to identify how brand community practices create value. They described practices as possessing an “anatomy,” which consists of “1) general procedural understandings and rules (explicit, discursive knowledge); 2) skills, abilities, and culturally appropriate consumption projects (tacit, embedded knowledge or how-to); and 3) emotional commitments expressed through actions and representations” (Schau et al., 2009, p. 30).

Brand Community

A foremost contributor to research in the field, Fournier (2015), asserts three tenets apply to brand relationships. First, there is a purpose to the consumer-brand relationship and brand meaning is provided to consumers who interact with the brand. Strong brand relationships result when brands understand consumer needs and seek a resonance with consumers. Second, brand relationships, like other relationships, are

“multiplex phenomena” (Fournier, 1998, p. 344). Relationships are complex, with many dimensions and forms. Third, a brand relationship is a process. This relationship will evolve and change over time with communication exchanges and environmental changes.

A brand community “is a specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relationships among admirers of a brand” (Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001, p. 412). The researchers alter their wording in a subsequent publication, preferring to refer to brand communities as “consumer collectives” (O’Guinn & Muniz, 2015). Consumer brand communities diverge from traditional communities because of their commercial nature and the members’ common focus, regard, support and even love for the brand (Albert et al., 2008). These communities are loosely comparable to French sociologist Maffesoli’s (1996) concept of “affectual tribes,” lacking any official organizational structure. Using similar nomenclature, Veloutsou and Moutinho (2009) referred to brand communities as “tribal brands.” Regardless of the preferred moniker, brands are formed through relationships and interactions of various people, entities, and social influences. Brand communities are social, in that they reflect the deep and daily integration of brands in the lives of consumers (Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001; O’Guinn & Muniz, 2015). Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2000) identified a change away from formal roles in business relationships and encouraged companies to see their customers as equals. Prevailing research of brand relationships points to the consumer as a vital “meaning maker” and should cause marketers to embrace the schema of co-creation present in today’s environment (Allen et al., 2008).

The brand communities are social entities that reflect the situated embeddedness of brands in the day-to-day lives of consumers and the ways in which brands connect consumer to brand, and consumer to consumer. Three essential markers of community (consciousness of kind,

rituals and traditions, and moral responsibility) are present, but differences in their expression make brand communities something significant in their own right (Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001, p. 418).

The most vital aspect of community is *consciousness of kind* (Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001), in which members feel what has been described as “we-ness” by Bender (1982), when they feel a connection to the brand, but the connection to the community members is stronger. In a brand community, influence from other users of the brand comes to exert more authority than brand characteristics or reputation on the consumer-brand relationship (Veloutsou & Moutinho, 2009). Consumers who are heavily engaged in the brand community are “emotionally invested in the welfare of the company and desire to contribute to its success” (McAlexander et al., 2002, p. 51).

Brand communities practice *rituals and traditions*. These are fundamental social activities that further develop the meaning of the community, even communicating that meaning outside the community (Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001). Community-engaged customers function as brand evangelists, carrying the marketing messaging into other communities. They are less likely to switch brands, even if they are presented with superior competitive products. They provide vital feedback to companies and are a ripe market for brand extensions and licensed products (McAlexander et al., 2002). Usually, the rituals and traditions are focused on the practices of mutual consumption of the brand and sustain the culture of the brand community. Rituals and traditions may include activities such as celebrating a historical event associated with the brand, or sharing stories about the brand repeatedly, which strengthen consciousness of kind (Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001). Social bonding of brand consumers can occur as a result of brand consumption (Fournier & Avery, 2011).

Members of a brand community feel a *moral responsibility* to the community as a whole, as well as the individuals of which it is comprised. Moral responsibility evokes cooperative action and bolsters group cohesion. This sense of responsibility assists with retention of older group members and recruitment of new ones, and the mentorship of newer members in relation to consuming the brand (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). For instance, Pitta and Fowler (2005) suggested that product managers and developers be involved in online consumer forums to provide support to members of the community. There are many positive outcomes to companies who nurture brand community (McAlexander et al., 2002). Virtual communities have a positive impact on the consumers' commitment to the brand (Casaló et al., 2008).

In their interviews with Harley Davidson HOG motorcycle rider chapters, Bagozzi and Dholakia (2006) found that consumer involvement in group activities within small group brand communities can be understood as a combination of social and psychological variables. They focused on a variable "social intentions," which they argued is not given enough attention by marketers, referring to shared volition of the group members. The second social variable the researchers factored into their explanation of brand community activities was the social identity of members, frequently communicating within their small circle of friends, which they view as an expansion of Muñiz and O'Guinn's (2001) consciousness of kind.

In the Schau et al. (2009) meta-study of nine brand communities, the researchers applied practice theory to consumer behavior. They observed 12 value-creating practices common to the communities examined and sorted these into four themes: social networking, impression management, community engagement, and brand use.

The first theme, *social networking practices*, refers to practices which create, enhance and maintain connections between community members. Welcoming, empathizing and governing practices are consistent activities across brand communities that serve to recruit new members, emotionally knit members of the group more tightly together, and reinforce norms of behavior (Schau et al., 2009). Active participation in virtual brand communities is a significant element in sustaining a cohesive group (Algesheimer et al., 2005; Koh & Kim, 2004).

The second theme from the Schau et al. (2009) meta-study, *impression management practices*, are outward-facing practices advocating the positive reputation of the brand. Members justify and evangelize outside the community, acting as promoters and proselytizers for the brand. These advocate consumers are passionate about a brand and want to share their sentiments with others, which has the promise of building more robust brand communities (Matzler et al., 2007). Doss (2010) found that the key concepts leading to brand evangelism were consumer-brand identification, brand salience, and opinion leadership.

The third theme found in the Schau et al. (2009) meta-study is *community engagement practices*, which encourage and support the members' increasing engagement with the community. Findings from a study done by Bergkvist and Bech-Larsen (2010) indicated that brand love results from a combination of brand loyalty and active engagement. Shao (2009) argued that brand engagement online consists of three different activities: consuming content, interacting with content and other users, and users producing content.

Brand use practices was the last theme identified by Schau et al. (2009). These practices enhance members' use of the brand. Successful brands understand that the development of relationships between the brands and the consumers are enhanced with consumption experience in brand tribes (Veloutsou & Moutinho, 2009). Kara et al. (2018) found in a study of married couples that "consumers incorporate brands into their interpersonal relationships through shared brand consumption and that relational brand connections influence brand-related outcomes, such as brand attitudes, purchase intentions, brand affect, and brand separation distress" (p. 325). Further, Schau et al. (2009) proposed that these brand community practices all work together and propel one another in a synergistic way to collectively yield value creation.

Brand Communities and Social Media

With the rise of Web 2.0 after the dot-com bubble at the beginning of the century, the Web environment shifted to social networking and user-created content (Hosch, 2019). In this interactive, consumer-directed milieu, Fournier and Avery (2011) identified power shifting from brand marketers to brand consumers, dubbing the phenomenon "open source branding."

Open source branding takes place when a brand is embedded in a cultural conversation such that consumers gain an equal, if not greater, say than marketers in what the brand looks like and how it behaves. Open source branding implicates participatory, collaborative, and socially-linked behaviors whereby consumers serve as creators and disseminators of branded content (p. 194).

Cova and Cova (2002) asserted that in addition to aiming for one-on-one relationships with consumers,

...the future of marketing is in offering and supporting a renewed sense of community. Marketing becomes tribal marketing. In a marketing profession

challenged by the Internet phenomenon, tribal marketing is by no means just another passing fad but a Trojan horse to induce companies to take on board the re-emergence of the quest for community (p. 595).

The technologically-networked environment of social media gives a boost to consumers' commitment to a brand (Casaló et al., 2008). With very little effort, the Internet enables consumers to find and develop their own self-directed virtual brand communities, which can be quite cohesive in nature (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2000). Online-based social communities are emerging as essential channels for sharing product information and experiences via customer-to-customer relationships. These virtual communities influence sales, and positive information shared in these communities outweighs negative information when it comes to purchase behavior (Adjei et al., 2010).

The power of such communities derives in large measure from the speed with which they can be mobilized. Word spreads so fast on the Internet that people now refer to word of mouth as 'viral marketing.' That's already transforming the management of brands. In the past, companies pushed an image concept that was positioned through advertising, packaging, and so on, to individual consumers. But in the new market, positioning evolves with consumers' collective personalized experiences (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2000, p. 83).

Brand community is important in social media environments. Consumers with high levels of engagement in these communities have stronger relationships with the brand, the product, fellow customers, and the company (Habibi et al., 2014b). The networked nature of social media makes it ideal for brand communities (Habibi et al., 2014a).

How Marketers Should Adapt

The consumer-controlled nature of brand communities on social media leads to some differences of opinion about how involved the corporate marketing organization should be in directing brand community activities. On one hand, a study conducted in China asserts that companies should supply funds, staff, location, rewards, stories of consumption, and activities to nurture the brand community (Zhou et al., 2012). Similarly, in a study of brand relationships with hockey fans, Aledin (2015) encouraged team managers to create activities and events for their brand communities to win over new, younger fans, resulting in a lifelong brand relationship. In contrast, Veloutsou and Moutinho (2009) contended that grass-roots brand communities are more sustainable than those controlled by brand marketers, and Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2000) proposed that customers are not willing to accept company-contrived experiences. Rather, customers desire to form those experiences themselves, increasingly with like-minded consumers of the same brand. A shift from formal roles in business relationships signals companies to see their customers as equals. This is echoed in the contentions of O'Guinn and Muniz (2015) who asserted that members of the community assume some of the activities that would traditionally be the responsibility of the corporate marketing organization when they engage together in brand or product utilization, impact product development, and explain the brand to those inside and outside of the community. In fact, companies would do well to work together with consumers to develop the entire marketing plan (Lusch & Vargo, 2014).

Although Web 2.0 functionality raises many exciting possibilities for brand marketers—such as using the power of the collective brand community to achieve an

objective, or giving power to the community to complete a specific decision, or even hijacking organically-created user content and taking it for the benefit of the brand—it is important to note the risks inherent to consumer-created branding, said Fournier and Avery (2011). The risks they present include communities that make demands of the brand that are not in line with the brand mission, communities that uncover damaging information that harms brand reputation, and communities that form in opposition to a brand.

Another consideration offered by Fournier and Avery (2011) concerns brand organizations and staffing. While the public relations function is probably more equipped to deal with the risk presented to brands on social media, many organizations have separate, siloed marketing and public relations staff. The authors contend that, in general, brand managers are not trained or equipped for this role. “[T]he artificial silos separating marketing and PR functions do little to encourage the integration and cross-fertilization that can service brand protection goals” (Fournier & Avery, 2011, p. 204). Although seminal researchers such as Toth, Hon and Grunig (2001) focused on feminization of the field they called “public relations,” the term for that function has evolved to encompass a more inclusive view of the communication function. The emergence of a more integrated communication approach, which takes into account several tools in the communication mix, including public relations, marketing communication, exhibitions and word of mouth, among others (Grunig et al., 2001), has changed the more traditional perception of “public relations” as a discrete function within an organization.

The purpose of this review was to explore academic literature about brand communities, using practice theory as a framework. The groups of people who coalesce

around the love of a brand display consciousness of kind, rituals and traditions, and moral responsibility. Brand communities are observed to manifest value-creating practices, which include social networking practices, impression management practices, community engagement practices, and brand use practices. The technology of social media enables consumers to easily create and participate in brand communities. There is a difference of opinion among researchers about whether brand marketers should contrive activities for the community or if consumer members should be self-directed without company interference, and whether brand marketing organizations are equipped to handle the unique challenges and risks associated with online brand communities.

The “BMW ActiveE” Facebook group, comprised of about half of the 700 Electronauts, functioned as the virtual brand community for the field-test drivers, who were located in metro areas around three areas of the U. S.: New York City, Southern California, and the Bay Area of Northern California. Additionally, since the field trial happened between 2012 and 2014, there were many Electronauts available to participate in interviews.

Based on this review of the literature, the specific questions that should be addressed include:

RQ1: What elements of a brand community exist within the BMW Electronauts’ brand community?

RQ2: What was the experience of the Electronauts in the BMW ActiveE field trial?

RQ3: To what degree did Electronauts perceive that BMW brand marketers interacted with the brand community?

CHAPTER THREE

Methods

To satisfy the research questions, qualitative research is appropriate. Personal interviews are one of the methods that have been employed by other researchers to examine brand communities (Muñiz Jr. et al., 2005; Schau et al., 2009) and consumer brand love (Albert et al., 2009; Batra et al., 2012). Qualitative research, which characteristically involves thorough interviews with a limited number of subjects, can yield understanding and insights about consumer feelings, relationships, and motivations in their own words (Davis, 2012). This approach allows for enhanced exploration of communication processes that are not replicable in a lab (Keyton, 2019). In addition, content analysis of posts from the BMW ActiveE Facebook community is appropriate to gain insights about the group's brand community practices.

Attempts were made via email and telephone voice messages to contact public relations liaisons at BMW North America to gain more understanding of the company perspective, but all communications were unanswered.

Sampling

To answer the research questions, two different data collection methods were used. First, Facebook posts were extracted from the "BMW ActiveE" Facebook group, which was the main nexus for the Electronaut community between the dates of August 1, 2013 and January 2, 2014. This was accomplished after being granted administrative privileges to the group by Electronaut Tom Molughney, and scrolling backward as far as

possible in the timeline of postings to obtain a sample from a portion of the period between January 2012 and January 2014. The Facebook platform only allowed scrolling back as far as July 2013, so the sample posts are those from July 2013 to January 2014. This yielded 1,385 posts. Using a random number generator to determine a manageable number of posts to analyze, every fifth post was captured with a screen shot for examination resulting in a final sample of 277 posts.

Second, in-depth interviews were completed with 12 Electronauts. The participants were selected using purposive sampling, based on whether they were a participant in the BMW ActiveE field trial. Because the BMW i3 was the production car resulting from the ActiveE field trial, a recruiting message was posted on both the Facebook “BMW i3 Worldwide Group” and on Reddit’s subreddit (a topical discussion forum) “BMW i3.” The Facebook social media platform is ranked third in the U.S. by Alexa (2019b) (an Amazon company) and Reddit is ranked sixth. Alexa (2019a) calculates rankings based on a rolling three-month period, measuring the number of unique visitors and page views. Within a few minutes, an invitation to join the private Facebook group “BMW ActiveE” was received. There, a recruiting post resulted in 17 volunteers. Qualtrics survey software was used to design and administer a data form, collecting demographic and other personal information, as well as a query for what should be read or studied before the interviews. There were several suggestions, including books, documents, videos, and Internet groups.

From the total group of volunteers, participants were selected based on whether they completed the online demographic survey and responded to communications aimed at scheduling interviews, and whether informed consent and deed of gift forms were

completed. The sample size was 12 Electronauts, most of them white males. There were 10 male and two female participants, with an average age of 55. There were 10 subjects who identified as white, one Asian, and one Hispanic. At the time of the field trial, four lived in Southern California, four lived in Northern California, and four lived in the greater New York City area. Highest completed education levels were spread, but all included at least some college: two completed doctoral degrees, five completed master's degrees, two completed bachelor's degrees, one completed an associate degree, and two reported some college, but no degree. Half of them worked in the professional, scientific or technical services industry and 10 of them were in a management, professional or related occupation.

The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis, yielding 365 pages of typed, double-spaced text, representing about 15 hours of interviews.

Analysis

Facebook posts were analyzed with a codebook adapted from the mega-study done by Schau et al. (2009), classifying member posts within the four major groups of brand community practices. A second coder analyzed 79 (25%) Facebook posts, which yielded 89% agreement with the primary investigator. Interview transcripts were analyzed using methods described by Keyton (2019). The process was inductive and cyclical. Themes were identified based on frequency and resonance among interviewees, and then there was an analysis done of relationships between those themes. After this, a codebook was developed, and then data was categorized and later interpreted. A second coder analyzed three randomly chosen interview transcripts, which resulted in 100% agreement with the primary investigator.

CHAPTER FOUR

Findings

Analysis of the data revealed representation of every one of the brand practice categories, as well as strong themes resonating across the interviews.

Practices

Examination of the Facebook sample yielded examples of each of the categories of brand practices outlined by the Schau et al. (2009) meta-study. Brand use practices, including commoditizing, customizing, and grooming were the most prevalent, representing 41.9% of the sample. Refer to Figures 4.1 and 4.2 for examples. Posts displaying commoditizing practices were predominant in this category. This is due to the window of time these samples were taken from, when much of the focus in the community was on the upcoming BMW i3, the company's first commercially-available electric model, positioned by BMW as the logical next step for the Electronauts (S. Betz, personal communication, August 6, 2019, personal communication, August 6, 2019; J. Brown, personal communication, March 28, 2019; J. Endsley, personal communication, July 19, 2019; K. Kluzak, personal communication, August 7, 2019; T. Moloughney, personal communication, May 8, 2019; Molughney, 2014; P. Norby, personal communication, March 22, 2019; D. Padilla, personal communication, May 1, 2019; T. Scrapchansky, personal communication, May 8, 2019; L. Stearns, personal communication, March 21, 2019; Tuncer, personal communication, July 24, 2019; T.

Watanabe, personal communication, July 19, 2019), and whether or not group members were planning to purchase the new model. Refer to Table 4.1 for a detailed accounting.

Community engagement practices, including badging, documenting, milestoneing and staking, represented 26.6% of the sample. Refer to Figures 4.3, 4.4, 4.5, and 4.6 for examples. Impression management practices, including evangelizing and justifying, comprised 14.3% of the sample. See Figures 4.7 and 4.8 for examples. Social networking practices, including empathizing, governing, and welcoming, represented 10.4% of the sample. Refer to Figure 4.9 for an example.

Within the *social networking* practices category, while welcoming and governing activities were not present due to the fact that the sample was taken from a time frame in the later months of the field trial, empathizing was observed in posts about well-wishes for an accident victim and sympathy for a splining incident. *Impression management* was represented strongly with posts about evangelizing activities like car shows and events, but justifying posts were not present. *Community engagement practices* were all present in the sample. Badging was evident in posts about the literal badge for the “Electronaut edition” of the BMW i3 automobile, documenting was seen in slice-of-life stories shared, staking was present in posts that identified variances within members lifestyles, and milestoneing manifest in many ways, including dashboard photos showing an empty battery or a lengthy mileage feat. *Brand use practices* like grooming were observed in posts about charging the car or washing it, customizing was seen in posts about the ways Electronauts made personal changes to the color or some other aspect of their cars, and commoditizing surpassed all other observations in the many posts giving opinions about

whether to purchase the BMW i3 when the field trial was complete, and whether the electric automobile market would soon flourish.

Themes

In-depth interviews with the Electronauts revealed recurring themes. The most resonant were themes of community, BMW communication, pushing limits, language, evangelism, environmental concerns, grief, an initial inspirational experience that piqued their interest in electric cars, and energy independence.

Community

Every Electronaut in the sample discussed “community.” Montclair, New Jersey restaurant owner Tom Moloughney, a veteran of a previous field trial program for the MiniE electric car prototype, was referred to by some of the other Electronauts as “Sensei,” a term of respect meaning teacher, or “one who has come before” (L. Stearns, personal communication, March 21, 2019). He started the ActiveE Facebook group and functioned as an unofficial BMW ambassador (T. Moloughney, personal communication, May 8, 2019; P. Norby, personal communication, March 22, 2019; L. Stearns, personal communication, March 21, 2019). Moloughney also authored a blog about the field trial experience.

We had Facebook groups for the ActiveE—the Electronauts. We kind of really communicated on this group and we helped each other with the problems that the cars were having. Like if somebody would log in and just say, ‘Hey, I noticed this weird thing when I turn the car on a red light comes on.’ About six people would respond and say, ‘Okay, yeah, that means that this is about to happen,’ or ‘This is going to break so you need to bring it in and get it fixed.’ Or one of the big problems on the car was that the main gear that fits in the motor would shear—the splines would shear on it. That’s one of the things BMW learned they had to improve that for the i3. And when the car started making a certain noise, people would chime in and say, ‘Hey, my car’s making this noise,’ and everyone would

be like, ‘Okay! Just bring it in immediately, because your splines are about to shear!’ We were kind of like this big group that were just helping each other out and finding our way through this. (T. Moloughney, personal communication, May 8, 2019).

IBM retiree Lorin Stearns said she communicated with other Electronauts primarily through the Facebook group.

We developed a Facebook group in the Electronaut program. Maybe half of us were involved, because there were 700 cars brought into the States and maybe 300-350 people were in the Facebook group, some more active than others. And the folks from California! They knew so much about electric cars. I felt so ignorant. They were wonderful sharing their knowledge and letting people know what their experiences had been.

I was on [the Facebook group] almost every day... Because in the beginning, it was for knowledge—to go and learn more, to understand the pros and cons, what issues people were having, what was working, what wasn’t. Then it became a place to share knowledge and then lobby for where we felt the program should go with BMW (L. Stearns, personal communication, March 21, 2019).

Pushing Limits

In nine of the interviews, Electronauts shared narratives about how they tested the envelope of the car’s capabilities. Bill Ferro, in the first class to graduate with a computer science degree from Boston University and now a team leader at IBM, described how he got to know his ActiveE prototype car.

I would test out its limits every day. I mean, when I drove to work on those stop-and-go roads, I would hope that I would be the first guy at the red light, and I would, you know, double-check and make sure there weren’t any local police officers in my view, and then when the light turned green I just punched it. Just, how fast can I get to seventy? And how is the car handling it? And I would do that almost every day. I think I wore out—my first set of tires on the ActiveE, I wore them out at ten thousand miles (B. Ferro, personal communication, July 20, 2019).

Jack Brown, who has made a career of pushing the limit in more than one industry, started as an aerospace engineer, then was employed at Tesla, and now is a software engineer at Waymo, Google's self-driving car project.

There was a bunch of us that were trying to see who could have the most miles on the car and there was a guy, Tom Moloughny, which—thinking back, he was probably one of the people that's gotten a lot of notoriety over that time. I think he was one of the top drivers in there. One of the categories was how many miles in a day has somebody driven. I came up with a crazy idea of 'I'm going to try to drive my car from Santa Cruz to Los Angeles in a day.' This was back when there was no supercharger fast-charging infrastructure out there at all. There was a few electric chargers that were out there from the [Tesla] Roadster. I figured out we can use the same charging plug as an RV to charge the car, so I incorporated some RV parks on my trip. I basically calculated out that I could spend about 17 hours charging and seven hours driving, but I could do this in a day. I created a website about—studying—it literally took me weeks to lay everything out, to have contingency plans on if this charger was broken what would I do. I pulled it off. I held the record for quite a while for 300-and-something miles in a day—actually, maybe it was more like 400 miles. This was like one week before the first Tesla supercharger opened. (laughs) It was pretty cool. Now I've done probably three or four dozen trips to LA in my Teslas, but it was quite an accomplishment back then to get an electric vehicle to go that far (J. Brown, personal communication, March 28, 2019).

Language

Electronauts shared a unique language and symbols. The display that indicated the number of miles estimated to be remaining on the battery was called the “guess-o-meter” because of its notorious inaccuracy (T. Scrapchansky, personal communication, May 8, 2019). The term “Darth Maul” was not referring to an evil *Star Wars* movie character, rather, it was in reference to a red dash indicator light, which looked like the character's face and signaled a serious failure with the car. San Diego native Peder Norby, a son of Danish immigrants, was the owner of bakeries and then became involved in public planning. He explained some of the unique nomenclature.

So we have our own language, you know? We did go through some stuff, and BMW would always be great, get you in a loaner, but, you know, we'd been Darth Maul'd, that was a little indicator that came up in the Mini-E that said, "You're dead." (laughs) You can't move, and it looked like a Star Wars guy, so we called him Darth Maul. And we've been splined and we've been kle'd. K-l-e-apostrophe-d, which is their—it's a three-word German name for their inverter that they have in the car (P. Norby, personal communication, March 22, 2019).

A splining situation was a catastrophic failure, requiring the car to be taken to a main BMW location for major system replacements. Within the Facebook group, a splining error was embodied as "Spliney," a beastly cartoon character symbolizing the situation. Kris Kluzak, an electrician by trade, went on to become head of customer service for a major provider of residential and commercial charging stations.

Oh, and then the motor thing, when the motor went out on my car and it had to be replaced, I wasn't the first one, but there was also a nickname for that with a little cartoon. We called it "Spliney," because we joked—the splines broke, so we said it splined the motor, and Spliney was the abominable snowman from the land of misfit toys. And Jack Brown came up with that one (K. Kluzak, personal communication, August 7, 2019).

Evangelism

Preaching the good news about electric vehicles was a common activity among the Electronauts, and eight of the interviewees discussed it, sometimes referring to this specifically as "EVangelism" (note the upper case letters "E" and "V," which are commonly used to mean "electric vehicle"). David Padilla was the youngest Electronaut in the sample. He was a senior in college when he applied for the program. His evangelism efforts took a decidedly modern and creative approach.

I drove it to Coachella for the festival, and I made sure to charge it right before I entered the grounds. So I had my car there, and it was sitting on the front aisle. When you have a car that's that special, you want to show it off. I made sure it was parked, that it was visible and that could show people that the car made it [the distance to the festival]. I had even taken window markers and I continued the pattern that was on the hood and on the sides of the car. I continued it onto the

windows. It was this electronic chip pattern. It was on purpose. I made sure that I was there and I was decorating. Random people came up and asked me if they could decorate my car... I just gave them a marker and they continued the pattern with me. It was to get them involved. And it also gave an opportunity for people who were like, 'Where'd you get that car?' 'Why does it look like that?' It gives you an opportunity to go, 'Well, it's 100 percent electric.' And they're like, 'But that doesn't exist.' But it does (D. Padilla, personal communication, May 1, 2019).

Grief

When the BMW ActiveE field trial ended over the January-April 2014 time period, Electronauts gathered in Morro Bay, California to have a "wake" and grieve the loss of their cars (T. Watanabe, personal communication, July 19, 2019). Seven of the interviewees expressed ways in which they grieved. Brown's description was poignant:

The only hard part was, you know, we knew that this was a prototype program and that these cars weren't going to be used again, but they had collected all the cars and then they harvested the batteries and the drive units so they could check to see how they wore and stuff like that. But then they crushed the cars and just put them on exposed flat-bed trailers to the salvage yards that they sold them to. It was really reminiscent of how the EV1 program was killed off. How GM had crushed all the cars. So there was a big uproar in the ActiveE community of, you know, at least close the casket, man! You know, we knew you were going to destroy the cars, but don't be so open about it. Because we had a lot of love and pride for those cars. To see them destroyed like that was kind of sad (J. Brown, personal communication, March 28, 2019).

Environmental Concerns

Issues of environmental concern were raised by seven Electronauts in the sample, but not as the overriding factor for their interest in electric cars. Jay Endsley, a computer scientist specializing in digital imaging systems, expressed this notion:

Even if you're not an environmentalist, electric cars are great to drive just if you want to have a nice car. They're just really nice cars to drive, and I think for many people, if they just drove one, they would find out, like, "Well, you know what? I don't care about the environment, but I love the way this car drives. So I would

want one for that reason. And the benefits to the environment are just sort of icing on the cake (J. Endsley, personal communication, July 19, 2019).

Triggering Experience

Seven drivers narrated lived experiences that sparked their interest in electric vehicles. In some cases it was witnessing something new in a foreign land. More often, it was friends or fathers who sparked this interest early in their lives. Troy Scrapchansky is a chemist at a major pharmaceutical company. He also authored a blog about his experience in the field trial.

One of the things that I really remember about my childhood specifically with regards to sustainability and that type of stuff is I remember my father bringing in someone to give us an estimate on having solar for the house, and I was completely intrigued as a kid by the whole premise, and that event in my childhood springboarded me to where we are today with electric vehicles in our household and solar on our roof (T. Scrapchansky, personal communication, May 8, 2019).

Energy Independence

Lastly, energy independence was identified by interviewees as a factor that brought them to participate in the ActiveE field trial.

There was interest, but purely as they could run on solar power, it was like it was this giant—I think back to Richard Dreyfus in the *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* and he kept on making the Devil’s Tower, right, you know, out of mashed potatoes or whatever, and he was just solely focused. For me the sole focus was can I drive on solar power. Can I drive on energy that I make at my house above the garage? That was huge for me. And it really wasn’t—it could’ve been any car in the world, if it was available, I would’ve probably tried it at that time because of the drive to drive on solar energy, not necessarily that BMW did it (P. Norby, personal communication, March 22, 2019).

BMW Communications

During the in-depth interviews, the Electronauts were asked about communication coming from and with BMW. Tactics used by BMW to recruit Electronaut field-test drivers included direct mail, email, the BMW car club magazine, and earned media (S. Betz, personal communication, August 6, 2019; BMW USA, 2012; Duda, 2011; L. Stearns, personal communication, March 21, 2019; Tuncer, personal communication, July 24, 2019; T. Watanabe, personal communication, July 19, 2019). During the two-year field trial, BMW introduced “The Electronaut Effect” website, which aggregated actual range, cost savings and mileage data on the 700 ActiveE field-test drivers (AutocarBazar Staff, 2013; Loveday, 2013). There was a BMW employee who went by the Facebook name Idine GH. He worked at the BMW location in Oxnard, California.

[Idine is] literally U.S.-based, but he—I’m like, on the Facebook group I’m like, ‘This is so frustrating. We don’t know what’s going on,’ and Idine would pop in every now and then and he’d say, ‘Hey, we’re looking at this.’ We’re like, ‘Whoa, do you work for them? Who are you?’ you know? And then he’d say, ‘Yes, I’m in Oxnard, and we will take great care of your car.’ And I’m like, ‘Oh my gosh, okay.’ So once we all got to know Idine, then when something would happen we could say, ‘Hey, can you check on our car? Can you tell us what’s going on?’ And he would be pretty good and forthcoming with what he could tell us (K. Kluzak, personal communication, August 7, 2019).

As the trial neared its completion, BMW hosted events in which Electronauts were given an exclusive chance to examine and test-drive the about-to-be released commercial i3 model car (J. Brown, personal communication, March 28, 2019; B. Ferro, personal communication, July 20, 2019). At the conclusion of the field trial program, the company sent each Electronaut a personalized book containing data about their specific car statistics and community posts (J. Brown, personal communication, March 28, 2019; L. Stearns, personal communication, March 21, 2019).

At the end of the program they sent us all a book, sort of like a scrap book or year book of articles and pictures of us and stuff like that. They had scraped a lot of the data we had put on the ActiveE website community boards and created a nice little memento of our experience, which was really nice” (J. Brown, personal communication, March 28, 2019).

CHAPTER FIVE

Discussion

Using a combination of in-depth interviews and textual analysis of Facebook group postings, the present study focuses on furthering the scant amount of research about brand community practices. This project identified brand community practices, explored the brand community experience, and investigated BMW's communications with the community of 700 BMW ActiveE field trial participants, known as Electronauts. Additionally, a revelation of this study makes it distinct from prior scholarship: contrary to the egalitarian nature of Facebook, there was an organic structure of power relations within the BMW ActiveE group.

Practice Theory

Viewing brand community activity through the lens of practice theory offered insights about how humans internalize societal order and are shaped by societal norms in relation to the brands they love, and allowed a deeper understanding of how the ever-changing motivations and desires morph, shift, and form their perceptions of the world they live in (Dougherty, 2004; Rouse, 2007) and the brands they value. Practice was a helpful construct for exploring the Electronaut community's brand relationship with BMW, as it afforded the opportunity to identify activities (both virtual and physical), the Electronauts' individual creative expression, their discourse as a community, and the power relations within the societal structure.

Elements of Brand Community

The community of Electronauts revealed a rich specimen of a thriving relationship with the BMW ActiveE brand. The field trial itself gave the community members a purpose in the relationship and provided brand meaning to them, not only as consumers, but as co-opted agents developing that brand meaning using various practices. The Electronauts embraced their role as meaning-makers for the brand (Allen et al., 2008), and their deep, daily integration of the brand with their lives (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001; O'Guinn & Muniz, 2015) is witnessed through the posts in their private Facebook group. The group displayed consciousness of kind (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001), or “we-ness” (Bender, 1982) in their deep connection to the brand, but also to one another, achieving a state where members held opinions of other Electronauts in higher esteem than that of the brand company (Veloutsou & Moutinho, 2009) on topics ranging from tires to charging to the decision regarding whether to purchase the first commercially available BMW i3 electric vehicle. They also practiced rituals and traditions (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001) as seen in their acts of “EVangelism,” providing feedback to BMW, and holding a wake for their cars and gathering at regular meet-ups in Morro Bay. The community members showed a sense of moral responsibility (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001), most specifically with informal leaders like Tom Moloughney, who nurtured group cohesion and mentored others.

The findings of this study support the Schau (2009) meta-study observations of value-creating practices, categorized into four themes. Each of these categories, social networking, impression management, community engagement, and brand use, were identified within the sample of BMW ActiveE Facebook group postings.

The rise of Facebook among regular consumers after it was opened to any user with an email address in 2006 (Phillips, 2007) made the platform accessible and common—a fertile place for a brand community to thrive. The situation allowed Electronaut Tom Moloughney to form the Facebook group “BMW ActiveE,” establishing the online community with about half of the Electronauts participating as members (T. Moloughney, personal communication, May 8, 2019; L. Stearns, personal communication, March 21, 2019). In contradiction to the nature of Facebook, a freely accessible network offering equal share of voice to users, an organic structure of power relations was observed within the BMW ActiveE group, a finding novel among previous literature. Although prior literature has noted the egalitarian nature of social media-based brand communities (Leitch & Merlot, 2018; Lillqvist et al., 2016), the perceptions of organic power constructs, even in the BMW ActiveE Facebook community, were revealed within the in-depth interviews with Electronauts, who assumed or were unofficially attributed to roles in the group. For instance, Moloughney ascended as Sensei, Norby rose as trainer, while Brown was a milestone challenger and risk-taker. Within Raven’s (1992) foundational scholarship about bases of power and interpersonal influence, these men possessed referent power, which “stems from the target identifying with the agent, or seeing the agent as a model that the target would want to emulate” (p. 3). In other words, the community respected and wanted to be like these influencers. The resulting social structure enhanced community strength and endurance. The observation is valuable because the social structure of the group is part of what made it so meaningful to members and so durable in nature.

The Electronaut Experience

The interviewees in this study perceived the field trial as a positive experience, even when describing catastrophic failures with the BMW ActiveE automobile itself. The sense of community among the Electronauts was strong, with every driver sharing feelings of kinship with fellow ActiveE drivers. In fact, the sense of “we-ness” is so strong that the Facebook group is still active and the drivers continue to have in-person events. Most of them pushed the limits of the car in various ways, to see its capabilities, which could have a connection to their own personalities as risk-takers and early adopters who were curious by nature and very comfortable around new technology. The language of the Electronauts revolved mostly around ways in which the ActiveE car broke down, including the incorporation of a simplified version of a German term (kle). Splining and Darth Maul evolved to be akin to inside jokes in the community. Many of the drivers engaged in evangelism, or as Stearns called it “proselytizing,” by attending events and spending the time to answer questions from curious friends and strangers. They grieved together over the end of the field trial program, even holding a wake as a final good-bye. Even though these people didn’t know one another before the program began, they became lasting friends who still come together to share community (J. Brown, personal communication, March 28, 2019; K. Kluzak, personal communication, August 7, 2019; T. Moloughney, personal communication, May 8, 2019; P. Norby, personal communication, March 22, 2019; D. Padilla, personal communication, May 1, 2019). A tightly-knit community, indeed.

Implications for Brand Marketers

With the exception of Moloughney and Norby, Electronauts expressed a general lack of communication with BMW, even though most Electronauts thought BMW was monitoring their online conversations and product suggestions. The company distanced itself from the Facebook community. Although Idine Gh was a member of the online group, he was not an official BMW representative to the Electronauts. The Electronaut Effect website developed by BMW was appreciated by most of the drivers, specifically for milestone practices, but when it came to community, the Electronauts perceived very little interaction with the auto manufacturer. The personalized remembrance book gifted to the drivers was viewed positively. Stearns not only retained it but physically found it during the interview and leafed through the pages as she answered questions.

The nature of social media makes it a natural platform for grassroots brand community (Habibi et al., 2014a), and as mentioned previously, grassroots does not necessarily imply that there is no power structure, which enhances community cohesiveness. The continued closeness of the Electronaut community members gives credence to Veloutsou and Moutinho's (2009) and Prahalad and Ramaswamy's (2000) assertions that grassroots communities are more sustainable than those contrived by brand marketers. These researchers, along with O'Guinn and Muniz (2015), assert the importance of treating consumers as equals in forming the meaning of the brand, as well as product development. Clearly, the Electronauts perceived their own role as co-creators and equals with company developers and marketers. Within the interviews and among the Facebook posts, drivers expressed as much and complained at BMW's failure to listen. Interviewees complained that the BMW i3 was not the car they expected or wished to

purchase—it was positioned by BMW marketers as a city car and was designed with a short battery range, which was a disappointment and a surprise to the Electronauts. The outcome represents missed opportunity for BMW, due to its failure to listen.

This study reveals key takeaways for marketers who desire a healthy and devoted brand community. First, consistent with previous researchers' results, marketers should prioritize investments in brand community experiences over one-on-one relationships with consumers (Cova & Cova, 2002). Second, they would do well to maintain a minimum of meddling and contrivance to nurture a thriving community, with its own social power relations, that loves the brand. Third, as the company listens, it must also be prepared to step in and help resolve issues before they become problems that erode brand love. Finally, this study reveals a cautionary tale to brand marketers about listening closely to the community, and taking input offered from true devotees to develop better products and make brand meaning.

Limitations and Further Research

This study was constrained by limited access to historical posts in the BMW ActiveE Facebook group. Although the primary investigator was granted administrative access to the group, the process for harvesting posts from 2012 to 2014 was hampered by Facebook restrictions. This resulted in a sample drawn from only the last few months of the program. A complete dataset consisting of all posts from the full time period would have been more representative.

This study suggests several extensions for future research. First, because there is only one previous study employing the lens of practice theory to examine brand community, there is ample opportunity to add to this area of research by studying other

brand communities within various industries and brand categories in similar ways. This additional exploration would inform brand marketers of more specific best practices for their circumstances. Second, it would be worthwhile to explore relevant blog posts during the time of the field trial. At least two of the Electronauts in the sample blogged during the experience, and there were other blogs covering the nascent electric vehicle industry at the time. Along these lines, examination of Twitter posts would likely provide a different perspective to the Electronaut experience. So too, would the BMW-provided and -managed discussion board for Electronauts, which is no longer accessible. The power structures of these platforms are different from Facebook, which brings us to the third aspect ripe for future research, and a discovery of this study that makes it distinct from prior scholarship: how power relations differ within brand communities across various media.

Conclusion

This examination of the BMW Electronaut community is one of the first studies to view brand community through the perspective of practice theory. The study revealed consistency with previously identified brand community practices (Schau et al., 2009) comprised of social networking, impression management, community engagement, and brand use. The Facebook community exhibited posts that fit into each of these categories. Additionally, in-depth interviews with 12 Electronauts provided insights into the motivations, emotions, and experiences they underwent, not only during the 2012-2014 field trial, but also early in their lives and after program completion, providing a deeper understanding of the members of the brand community. Observation of organic power relations within the Facebook group exhibited how social structure makes a community

more durable, and opened a new avenue for further scholarly exploration. Results of the study yielded learnings for brand marketers who wish to reap the benefits of strong brand communities, and cues for further studies stemming from these findings.

APPENDIX


APPENDIX A

Figures and Tables


Figures






Figure A.1. Brand use practices, commoditizing.



**Mary Demarest-Paraan** November 19, 2013 · Pennington, NJ


Check your email. I just received a lease turn in email with finance info for i3.


 2 23 Comments


 Like  Comment

**Ye Wang** Yup. Got it too!
Like · Reply · 6y

**Don Louv** But no mention of a discount on an i3. #bmwFail  1
Like · Reply · 6y

**Michael Badalov** No incentive for us hard-working E-Nauts!!!
Like · Reply · 6y

**Stuart J Clifford** They do mention "BMW Financial Services is developing a product that can be used in conjunction with the Federal EV Income Tax Credit..." I guess that means they're looking at reducing the lease payment by the \$7,500 credit
Like · Reply · 6y

**Don Louv** I'd bet it's more like "here's a three year lease so we... uh, you, can qualify and BMW financial will take your \$7,500 up front, thanks."
Like · Reply · 6y


**Mary Demarest-Paraan** I think Ally has a similar product that factors in the rebate for the Volt.
Like · Reply · 6y


Figure A.2. Brand use practices, commoditizing.




Figure A.3. Community engagement practices, documenting.







Figure A.4. Community engagement practices, milestone.

**Chris Neff**August 20, 2013***


Group hug....we just passed 2 million miles
<http://wotnogas.com/>

 169 Comments



 Like Comment

**Maurice Turner** Sweet, I just updated my stats this afternoon so I'll take a small amount of credit for that. 2

Like · Reply · 6y

**Troy Scrapchansky** I could update mine, but all the new miles were put on by the fine folks at Woodcliff Lake. Doesn't seem right...



Like · Reply · 6y

**Chris Neff** Troy your East coast....do it!!! 🙄 1



Like · Reply · 6y

**Troy Scrapchansky** Sadly I actually put more miles on the loaner than they put on the ActiveE.

Like · Reply · 6y

**Chris Neff** Hmm...ok Troy, I'll create a distraction - hey everyone look over there, its a Fisker and it is not on fire - ok Troy no one is looking 😏 5

Like · Reply · 6y

**Jack Brown** ElectroNOT Effect says 7.1 million miles which must mean the 700 must have passed 8 million miles now. 5

Like · Reply · 6y

Figure A.5. Community engagement practices, milestoning.



Mariel Knoll


September 28, 2013



6

6 Comments

Figure A.6. Community engagement practices, milestoning.




Waidy Lee
August 2, 2013

...


GreenTown Los Altos (greentownlosaltos.org) is doing "EV of the week" at the Los Altos Farmer Market on every Thursday through the end of September. The time is 4pm-8pm on State Street in Los Altos. The objective is to promote EV deployment. I have had my EV shown twice (on two different Thursdays) and have success getting people to buy EVs. Some of people whom came did not even know EV exist, not to mention their knowledge of the existence of Federal and State EV incentives and the benefit of getting on HOA solo. This is a great opportunity for EV enthusiasts to promote EVs.


We have one EV driver signed up for the Aug 8 display. We are calling for volunteers who want to display their EVs and answer questions for the remaining 7 Thursdays.


Please email energy@greentownlosaltos.org of the type of EV you have and which Thursdays best fit your schedule.

 2


4 Comments

 Like


 Comment





John Higham email sent!
Like · Reply · 6y



Waidy Lee Great! Thank you so much.
Like · Reply · 6y



Joel Bartlett  Waidy, I've shown my ActiveE once, but am happy to do it again. Email on the way.
Like · Reply · 6y



Waidy Lee I am sure they are happy to have you. They need 6 more. Thank you so much for your participation.

Figure A.7. Impression management practices, evangelism.

51



Figure A4.8. Impression management practices, evangelism.



Tom Moloughney

Admin · August 17, 2013

...

Home from the hospital and resting now. Thanks for all the support everyone. It was very heartwarming reading your remarks while I was in the hospital. I'll give all the details soon. For now I wanted to show you this. BMW went to pick up the car as soon as it would be released, I assume they want to discharge the high voltage battery to make sure nobody gets hurt and check out how the car fared. So they removed all my personal belongings and dropped them off at Nauna's. I found one EF-OPEC in there too. Classy move BMW.



66

30 Comments

Like

Comment



Brad Horton Stay classy BMW. 😊

Like · Reply · 6y

2



Steve Thiele Glad your ok Tom!

Like · Reply · 6y

1



Chris Neff Very classy BMW - good show!

Like · Reply · 6y

2

Figure A.9. Social networking practices, empathizing.

Tables

Table A.1

Brand Practices Identified Within Facebook Sample Posts

Practice Category	Practice	Percent of Posts
Brand Use	Commoditizing	27.6%
	Customizing	2.5%
	Grooming	11.8%
Community Engagement	Badging	0.4%
	Documenting	15.1%
	Milestoning	7.5%
	Staking	3.6%
Impression Management	Evangelizing	14.3%
	Justifying	0%
Social Networking	Empathizing	10.4%
	Governing	0%
	Welcoming	0%

APPENDIX B

Codebooks and Glossary

Codebook for Interviews

Initial inspiration (“Spark”)

An experience in their life that caused them to realize electric cars are feasible, or that caused them to become interested in electric cars.

Community

Discussions of the Facebook group, meetups, etc.

Evangelism

Proselytizing, answering questions, displaying the car to others.

Push Limits

Seeing how far the car would go, how fast it would go, etc.

Environmentalism

Discussions of climate change, environmentalism.

Energy Independence

Discussions of independence from the oil/gas industry, solar panels enabling self-sustainability.

Grief

Expressions of sadness or difficulty accepting the end of the program, handing back the car, seeing the car destroyed, etc.

BMW Communications

Communications from BMW to the Electronauts: BMW events, emails, websites, dealers, salespeople, the car “calling home,” etc.

Codebook for Facebook Posts

Brand Use includes grooming, customizing, and commoditizing practices.

Commoditizing

Distancing/approaching the marketplace. A valenced behavior regarding marketplace. May be directed at other members (e.g., you should sell/should not sell that). May be directed at BMW through explicit link or through presumed monitoring of the site (e.g., you should fix this/do this/change this). References to “Idine” (this is the name of a BMW employee that was part of the group). This includes posts that discuss whether the BMW i3 should be purchased when the ActiveE lease ends, or that discuss the pros/cons evaluation of the BMW i3. Also, information about the electric car market in general (sales, manufacturers, infrastructure, etc.) or about other makes/models of EVs.

Customizing

Modifying the car to suit group-level or individual needs. This includes all efforts to change the factory specs of the product to enhance performance. Adding Sirius XM or HOV designation status. Also included in this category would be photos/discussion of the “Electronaut” physical badge/plate on car.

Grooming

Caring for the brand (charging, washing the car, tire care/replacement, etc.), or systematizing optimal use patterns (“precon” or preconditioning). Also included are references to “Combox.”

Community Engagement includes badging, documenting, milestoning, and staking practices.

Badging

Badging is the practice of translating milestones into symbols. For instance, the cartoonish character "Spliney."

Documenting

Detailing the brand relationship journey in a narrative way. (The narrative is often anchored by and peppered with milestones.) Documenting includes the birth stories of the car assembly and distribution, customization efforts, grooming practices, lifestyle photos/stories and so forth.

Milestoning

Milestoning refers to the practice of noting seminal events in brand ownership and consumption. For example, a photo of the dash display to commemorate and share a mileage goal, as well as "check-ups," and getting to your destination with 0 battery charge remaining. Also included in this category are the "competitions" for most mileage, most mileage in a day, etc.

Staking

Recognizing variance within the brand community membership. Marking intragroup distinction and similarity. Calling out a personalized ActiveE license plate seen "in the wild."

Impression Management includes evangelizing and justifying practices.

Evangelizing

Sharing the brand "good news," inspiring others to use, and preaching from the mountain top. It may involve negative comparisons with other competing brands (not BMW). Evangelizing can be negative (annoying, off-putting) if extreme. This category includes "meet-ups" and festivals and other in-person events. (This does not include i3 promotional events at dealerships, which are in the commoditization category.)

Justifying

Deploying rationales generally for devoting time and effort to the brand and collectively to outsiders and marginal members in the boundary. May include debate and jokes about obsessive-compulsive brand-directed behavior.

Social Networking includes empathizing, governing, and welcoming practices.

Empathizing

Lending emotional and/or physical support to other members, including troubleshooting and/or support for brand-related trials (e.g., product failure like "splining" or "KLE," or "Darth Maul," or the mobile App) and/or for non-brand-related life issues (e.g., illness, death, job). Empathizing can be divisive if the emotional support is in regard to intragroup conflict.

Governing

Articulating the behavioral expectations within the brand community.

Welcoming

Greeting new members, assisting their brand learning and community socialization. Welcoming occurs generally into the brand community and locally as members welcome one another to each practice. Welcoming can also be negative, as in discouraging participation in the brand community or a specific practice.

Glossary

ActiveE – the BMW electric car prototype field tested by the Electronauts
BMW i3 – first commercially available BMW electric car model; Electronauts were offered a special deal on these first production EVs
Combox – A device for controlling solar energy systems
Darth Maul – serious system failure (dash shows a symbol that looks like Darth Maul character)
EVSE – Electric vehicle supply equipment (usually a charger)
Frunk – storage area under the front hood (where an ICE car would have an engine)
ICE – internal combustion (gas) engine
Idine – BMW employee's name at Oxnard
KLE – serious system failure
MiniE – a previous BMW-made electric prototype
Oxnard – Major BMW corporate location in California
Precon – A driver can precondition the car, which climatizes the interior and the battery, resulting in better performance and comfort
Spline, splining, splined – serious drive train failure
“Spliney” – a cartoon caricature of a monster, symbolizing splining failure
Zero – Brand name of an electric motorcycle

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