

# Unity in diversity? Identity, Relationship and Cultural Context in the Classic Mini and BMW MINI Communities



Kok Hooi Beh B.Sc., M.Sc.

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## ABSTRACT

### Unity in diversity? Identity, relationship and cultural context in the classic Mini and BMW MINI communities

When brand objects attract a number of consumers who exhibit strong loyalty to that object, and who communicate such loyalties with each other, brand communities form. Studies of such communities have hitherto focused on the individual relationships between their members in order to explain the dynamics driving such groups. This study aims to explore the wider universe in which such groups operate, and to establish the interconnecting relationships between the various actors associated with the brand object, including marketer-consumer, consumer-society and community-subculture.

Positivist research methods are inappropriate to such a study, because of their basic assumption that people can be studied in the same manner as the physical world. Instead, the interpretivist paradigm has been used for this research, because the researcher believes that the meaning of brands can only be fully understood when the subjective experiences of those who use them are taken into consideration. A case study of the Mini brand community has been chosen as a vehicle for this study. The results are inductive rather than deductive, allowing theories of social phenomena to emerge from the data, thus ensuring that they are grounded in observation and experience. The case study method has also enabled the researcher to become fully involved in the phenomenon under investigation.

Analysis was conducted on data collected from a wide range of online and offline sources relating to this community. This data revealed that marketers abandoned the Mini when production of the car ceased, leaving the brand community to maintain the remaining vehicles and perpetuate the meanings that surround the brand. Community members became solely responsible for preserving the values of “small-is-beautiful”, “fun” and “Britishness” with which the Mini has come to be associated. They maintained the cultural

meanings of the Mini so successfully that the Mini's successor, the BMW MINI, was able to reclaim these meanings to maximize its launch and development. In this way, brand meaning can be shown to be the result of a complex process of interaction between all the actors concerned at every level, rather than being created and sustained only by marketers.

This study proposes a conceptual framework by which consumer behavior within brand communities can be studied, and which takes account of all those actors and levels concerned with creating the cultural meaning(s) attached to a given brand object.

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## CHAPTER 1 RESEARCH OVERVIEW

### 1.1 Overview of the Thesis

Since the 1980s, postmodernist literature on brand culture has focussed on the consumer's active role in shaping their choices and experiences of the brand object, whereas previously the marketer-consumer relationship had been seen as very much one-way. The present work locates the particular case study of the Mini and its rebirth as the BMW MINI in this context, briefly tracing the history of the car and the way that consumers took an autonomous part in shaping the object's image. The Mini/MINI community's reaction to the demise and re-launch of the car provides an opportunity to study and develop a new theoretical framework setting the relationship between consumer and marketer into the context of the wider society in which they exist.

Brands have assumed a prominent role in modern society. They embody values which are translated to the material object they represent. The concept of a brand has developed so far that it has impinged on ground formerly held exclusively by religious organisations (Jones, 2002). The role of branding is thus inextricably linked with the quasi-religious aspects of the communities engendered by this activity. Such communities are of a post-modern type, as explained by Cova (1997) their membership is composed of people who have been alienated by modern society and are seeking a return to some form of communal identity. This identity is not a result of any form of coercion, its expression is not highly formalised and it is not controlled by a centralised body that determines belief and practice, in the manner of a church or a religion. Rather, brand communities provide a strong attraction to individuals because, like religions, they create myths or religious traditions that are reflective of culture (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001) and that serve to explain or resolve contradictions in that culture (Holt, 2002). The subtle implications of such myths imply associations with consumers and their experiences. Religious metaphors and media images are present in such communities as

Macintosh (Belk and Tumbat, 2002), Saab (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2000), Star Trek (Kozinets, 2001) and X-Files (Kozinets, 1997).

Moreover, brand communities under threat comprise a particularly interesting field of study in that they highlight factors binding community members together and accounting for their sense of identity. The Apple Newton community was analysed by Muniz and Schau (2005), who found mechanisms by which the consumers of a brand product who were "abandoned" (as they saw it) by the manufacturer (which itself has an iconic status) remained loyal to the product and bound themselves into a community after production had been discontinued. The present case study of the Mini and its successor the MINI, provides fertile ground for further investigation of brand communities and their relationship to their environment.

In particular, the Mini community's continued espousal of the original car until the present day is partly expressed in opposition to the BMW MINI, launched a year after the Rover Mini ceased production in 2000. This serves to throw the community's sense of identity into sharper relief through its opposition to another "heretical" one, and to provide grounds for an examination of the dynamics which drive these communities and their members, and the relationships between such communities and the culture of which they are part. This in turn enables the construction of a theoretical framework which contextualises members, communities and the society of which they are a part and establishes their relationships to each other. Such a framework can thus be used as a vehicle with which to explore the meanings brand objects accrue and the ways in which they do so.

This research is firmly located in the discourse regarding the mechanisms by which brand identity is established and maintained, a discourse decisively influenced by Cova and Cova (2002) who, by adopting a distinctively southern European approach, have discovered a what they call a tribal rather than a communal basis for what are called "brand communities". The tribal nature of these communities resides in the fact that they can to a large extent be virtual,

and that the brand object is the main, or even the only, binding factor between their members. The scholars build on a range of work including that of Holt (2002, 2004) in which he examines the emergence of a counter-cultural movement and its prospective effects on the brand. He uses the Harley-Davidson community as a case study by which to explore the existence of a group whose values are seen as standing in opposition to those of a wider culture. It can be seen that this relationship could either be one in which a subculture splits from another after a clash of consciousness and identity, as is possibly the case with the Mini/MINI dichotomy, or its core values are opposed to those of its socio-cultural environment, as in the Harley-Davidson case. In the latter case, a true “counter-culture”, encompassing a whole lifestyle, emerges, while in the former a well-defined set of values are opposed to each other within that environment. As well as all of this, Holt discusses the resistance created by consumers.

Over the past decade the hunt for brand relationships has raised the need for an exploration of brand loyalty (Keller, 1994; Reicheld, 1996; Aaker, 1997; Dubois and Laurent, 1999; Chauduri and Holbrook, 2001). Such exploration is already taking place in marketing studies, as shown for example by Grootenboer (1990) and Sheth (1994). Moreover, there are already references in the literature concerning consumer behaviour to the relationship between consumers and brands (Fournier, 1991; Patterson and O'Malley, 2006; Ji, 2002). From the point of view of community studies, scholars have engaged with communities and investigated their structures (Muniz and O'Guinn, 1996, 2001; Arnould and Price, 1993; Holt, 1995; Fischer, Bristor and Gainer, 1996). Recently, Cova (2006), has explored communities using the approach of branding. This study takes these investigative directions further by examining a particular community in the light of the whole range of its national, historical and psychological elements, determining how each of these contributes to the fostering of brand loyalty.

It is necessary to take into account the nature of the relationships concerned, especially their ability to take on numerous forms. It is therefore essential in this research to recognise and examine the importance of different bases for

relationships within the brand community (Fournier, 1998). Relationships based on loyalty arise from consumers' creation of several initial relationships and interactions with the brand, a practice raised by Arnould and Price (1999). Participation in communities and exploitation of the same services leads to shared emotions and perceptions. The Mini community is in this study contrasted with others such as the Harley-Davison community in the US, whose communal makeup is different from that of the Mini.

A community's identity can be indicated by its consumption of brands and by discovering the activities in which its members indulge. The fundamental properties of a community can be determined through its effects on trade and industry, as detailed by Muniz and O'Guinn (1996), Schouten and McAlexander (1995). Those consumption communities whose brand relationships span a wider geographical area and are more distanced from traditional community interactions are better established.

Communities often contain subgroups; Schouten and McAlexander (1995) deduce the formation of these from gatherings of individuals holding similar beliefs, aspirations and value systems. Indeed, marketers have shown a growing interest in researching the development of such subcultures. This research is of particular relevance in this regard, studying as it does a community (the Mini community) with a distinct subgroup based on the BMW MINI.

## **1.2 Research Aims and Objectives**

This research intends to create a deeper channel into the understanding of the role of Brand Community in the contexts of consumption, relationships between members and the community as a whole. In the execution of the thesis objectives, there are central issues that can be derived from the topic:

1. To explore consumption at the communal level through the medium of a single case study, namely Mini car owners as a brand community.

2. To define and demonstrate the role of these communities in relation to consumption behaviours with particular reference not only to the Mini community in general, but also to those of the classic Mini as opposed to the new BMW MINI, and to examine the extent of the difference, if any, between the behaviours of these groups in order to determine to what extent they constitute separate identities.
3. To explore consumer-brand relationships, the process of imputing meaning to brands, negotiation among brand members and the characteristics of the different relationships that exist within the brand community.
4. To comprehend the impact of changing dynamics, i.e. marketer's actions on the central community relationship.

### **1.3 The Outline of the Thesis**

Figure 1.1 shows an overview of the thesis. The structure consists of two phases, Phase 1 being an analysis of earlier academic literature, supplemented by articles and magazines, and Phase 2 consisting of research derived from interviews, gatherings at Mini events and cross-studies from findings.

More precisely, Phase 1 consists of what was in effect desk-based research, examining relevant documentary material such as books, journal articles and subject-related magazines in order to gain background knowledge of the subject. The second phase involved “real-world” research in the form of interviews (individual and forum-based), and netnography. These two phases are linked by the methodology chapter (Chapter 4), which sets out the research paradigm used in this study and thereby details the relationship between the two phases.

In the first phase, Chapters 2 and 3 set out the theoretical background of the various facets of this research topic as it has been developed over the last few decades by various authors. Chapter 2 describes the postmodern revolution in

consumer studies, while the third chapter focuses on literature concerning brands, their communities and the behaviours to which they give rise. The second phase begins with the fifth and sixth chapters, which outline and analyse this phase's primary research findings regarding the history of the Mini brand and of its community respectively. Chapter 7 then follows with a discussion, examining the previous models, and proposing a new framework to obtain insights into the community. The last chapter concludes with the limitations of this research and suggestions for future investigation.



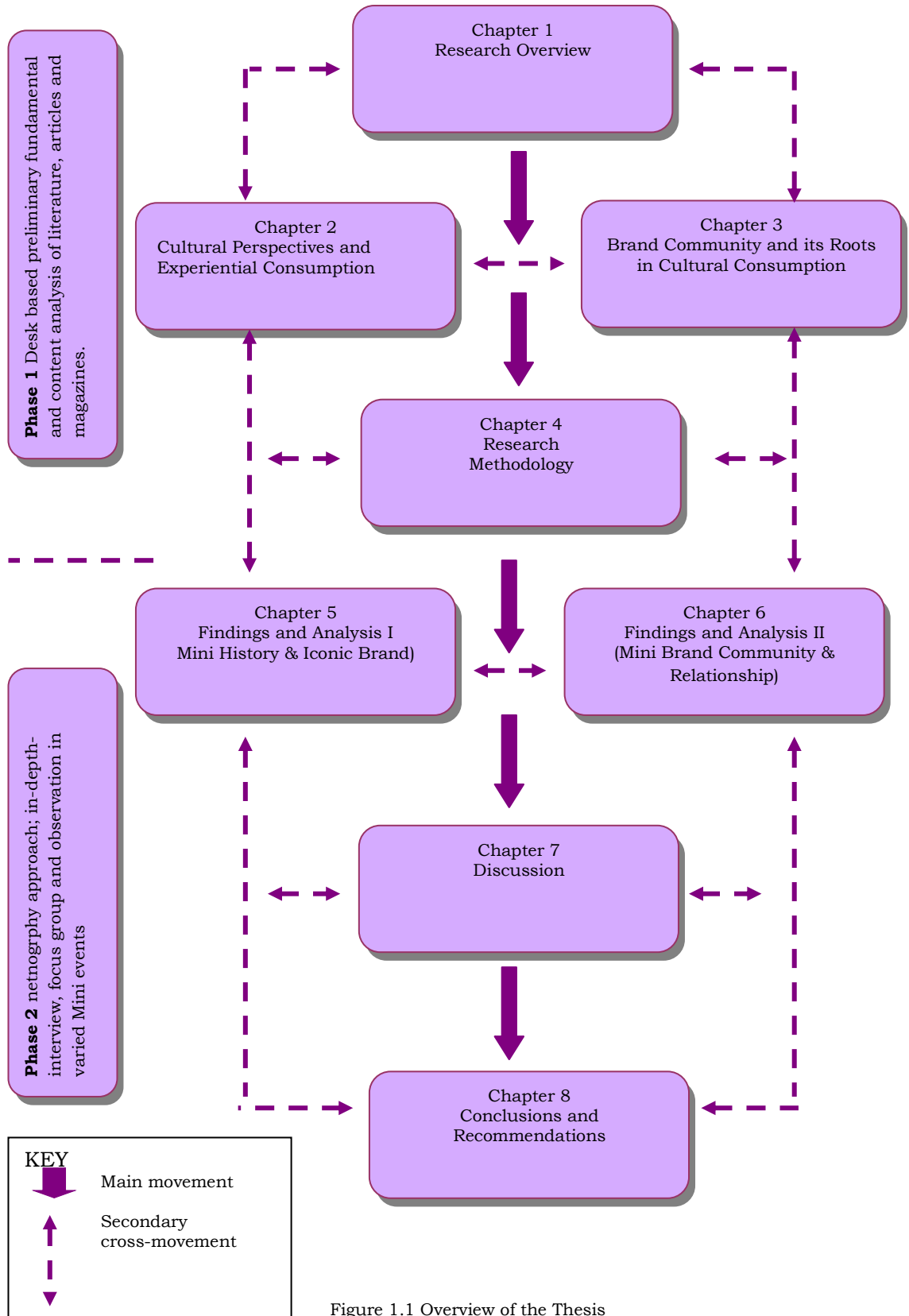


Figure 1.1 Overview of the Thesis

### Chapter 1: Research Overview

This chapter lays out the contents of the thesis, regarding the subject background, the iconic culture of the Mini and brand communities. It also establishes the research aims and objectives.

### Chapter 2: Cultural Perspectives and Experiential Consumption

The literature review is classified under two categories. The first focuses predominantly on Belk's New Consumer Behaviour and the second on Consumer Culture. The work concerning New Consumer Behaviour discusses how traditional methods of consumer behaviour research had been succeeded by the emergence of an alternative perspective in the early 1980s. The research paradigm adopted provides a broader perspective with which is more concerned with the consumer's insights, culture, emotions, social construction and consumption. The chapter then looks to explain how consumer culture can create powerful meanings around a brand, and how it is thus important to the creation of communities.

### Chapter 3: Brand and Community

The second part of the literature review focuses mainly on brands and brand communities. It draws upon a large scope of literature from the field of relationship research as well as examining the brand, the role it has, brand personality, loyalty and culture and how they are integrated. Moreover, it looks at communities formed around brands, and also draws upon the literature relating to tribes and virtual communities. The differences between communities and tribes are explored in depth, and analyses ranging from those of French scholars, who attempt a clear differentiation between the two concepts, to those of English-speaking ones who are less concerned with discriminating between the two, are presented. It is concluded that the main difference is one of degree rather than of kind: tribal membership is more transient, and there is more promiscuity of membership between tribes, than is the case with the longer-term commitment of community members.

Chapter 4: Research Methodology

Chapter 4 details the research methodology and expands on the definitive design and approach of the thesis, looking into the research paradigm itself. The two major theoretical research approaches: Positivism and Interpretivism are explained in greater detail in the figure (Figure 4.1).

Chapter 5: Findings and Analysis I

The findings and analysis consists of two chapters, The first chapter principally documents the history of the Mini placing the present research in its historical context as well as its renowned status. It draws on the reasons for the car's creation, iconic establishment and popularity, the rationale for BMC's decision to cease manufacturing the car, the continued loyalty and support of the Mini community, and the community's reaction to BMW's rebranding of the car.

Chapter 6: Findings and Analysis II

The second part of the findings and analysis consists of the exploration of the Mini brand community as well as an in-depth look at formation of relationships within a brand community. It shows the importance of the emergence of relationship themes and how mini members create meanings through their social activities and discussions.

Chapter 7: Discussion

This chapter broadens the results of the Mini case study into a discussion of consumer behaviour and communities of consumption. The chief contributions of this chapter are to propose new conceptual frameworks by which these behaviours and communities may be studied.

Chapter 8: Conclusion and recommendations

Chapter 8 draws the conclusions from the research and details the conceptual and theoretical contributions to the work. Limitations and future research are also outlined here.

## CHAPTER 2 CULTURAL PERSPECTIVES AND EXPERIENTIAL CONSUMPTION

### 2.1 Introduction

This chapter compares and contrasts the older school of consumer behaviour with the newer experiential one, and shows that the present research is firmly aligned with the latter. Symbolic Interactionism is examined and conceptualisations of the consumer's self-identity are explored, before the consumer is re-examined in the light of his or her relationship with the objects of consumption. Finally, consumers are seen as part of subcultures of consumption, the basis of the communities that are examined in the following chapter.

### 2.2 New Consumer Behaviour

Traditionally, consumer research within marketing concerned itself mainly with the "conception of rational economic man"; it perceived consumer needs as "innate rather than socially constructed" and it was assumed that contemporary marketers influenced consumers "by offering a product or service that met these needs better than competitors' offerings" (Belk, 1995, p.59). In other words, the emphasis was on improving mass marketing efficiency and effectiveness as well as training future marketing managers (Belk, 1995). In the late 1960s the cognitive theorist viewed consumers as information processors, or assistants in providing information regarding purchasing decisions such as which brand to acquire in a particular product or service category.

This 'old consumer behaviour' research in the 1950s was succeeded in the early 1980s by an alternative perspective. 'New consumer behaviour' now had to be distinguished from old by researchers in academic marketing departments, who had to align themselves with one or the other (Belk, 1995). Belk's (1995) *Studies in New Consumer Behaviour* found that the two schools differ in methodology, and that the new school rejects its predecessor's positivist approach in favour of a broader array of epistemologies, ontologies

and axiologies (Belk, 1995). New consumer researchers thus adopted a paradigm of non-positivist, broader perspectives, more concerned with the consumer’s insights, culture, emotions, social construction and consumption. As Belk (1995, p.62) correspondingly concludes, “consumers are not mere automatons, [but] are socially connected human beings participating in multiple interacting cultures.” Most importantly, a product does not serve its basic functions in order to satisfy consumers’ needs, but “for fantasy, fun, prestige, power...connection, alienation, aggression, achievement, and the host of cultural changes it brings in its wake” (Belk, 1995, p.62). This understanding therefore aims to understand and study how humans as socially constructed beings interpret and relate to each other in their own world.

Figure 2.1 shows the contrasting elements of the old and new perspectives in consumer behaviour research. However, Belk (1995, p. 61) suggested that, “the latest shift to the new consumer behaviour from the old is not yet complete” while the “conflicting objectives of the two sets of researchers are likely to foster a further split.”

Old Perspectives	New Perspectives
Positivist Experiment/ Surveys Quantitative A priori theory	Non-positivist Ethnographies Qualitative Emergent theory
Economic / Psychological	Sociological/ Anthropological
Micro/ Managerial Focus on buying Emphasis on cognition American	Macro/ Culture Focus on consuming Emphasis on emotions Multicultural

Figure 2.1: Old versus new perspectives in consumer behaviour research  
 (Source: Belk, 1995, p. 59)

However, this division between the two schools of thought is not as clear as it might seem. The implication of the later school is that consumers are nothing less than full and autonomous partners with marketers in deciding their choices of consumption. But marketing often depends on what is popularly known as “pushing people’s buttons” in order to achieve the desired response; every time that response is forthcoming is testimony to the fact that the earlier model of consumer behaviour still has some validity. Figures showing a rise in sales of a particular product immediately following an advertising campaign mean that at least some people have been manipulated into buying the product, perhaps despite their instincts or reasoning. Indeed, it is partly the premise of marketing to convince people of their need for a product or service. No one “needs” Coca Cola, for example, but it nevertheless remains the world’s best selling soft drink, largely because so many consumers believe they need – or like – it.

Another factor complicates the picture: the revolution of the 1980s had its precursors in the work of Ernest Dichter in the 1950s. Widely considered as the “father of motivational research”, he applied psychoanalytical techniques to the study of consumer behaviour and its irrational wellsprings, with obvious implications for the subject of the present study. It is still not widely recognised that his methodology bridged the old and the new schools outlined above, as indeed they would have to do in order to deal with a subject as subjective and unquantifiable as this. His work quite naturally fed into the emerging interpretivist paradigms of the 1980s.

Tadajewski (2006) teases out the finer implications of this in his historical study of motivation research. More recent commentators have distinguished between subconscious and unconscious motives for consumer behaviour, and the subtleties of consumer responses. Dichter’s (1963) work, Tadajewski (2006) maintains (following Hirschman and Holbrook, 1982) can be seen as an antecedent of Consumer Culture Theory. Other suggestions are that motivation research became qualitative research ((Levy, 2003, p. 104), or even that the two are in fact identical (Kernan 1992).

In fact, it would perhaps be more realistic to view the positivist and interpretivist approaches as opposite ends of a spectrum of motivational factors. Marketers sometimes do virtually “make” people buy products and services, or “buy into” concepts or ideas, but many people also make clear and rational choices about what to buy. When purchasing a new car, for example, many people would doubtless be swayed by an advertisement that has little to do with the car’s practical features, but much with style, which in terms of the expression used before would mean that the advertiser has “pushed their buttons”. Many others would make an autonomous choice on strictly utilitarian grounds, including colour (if the present researcher, for example, were to buy a new car, the fact of its being yellow would sway him towards it purely on the grounds of safety, yellow being the most highly visible colour); any marketing would only serve to draw a particular car to the purchaser’s attention, and when he or she arrived at the sales yard, they would be quite open to choosing a different model depending on the information they acquired. It is certainly conceivable that marketing could have a counterproductive effect on some people, making them at least suspicious of the need for intensive marketing of a product.

### 2.2.1 Hedonism and Experiential Consumption

One of the underlying aspects of the new consumer behaviour is the hedonic aspect of consumption introduced by Hirschman and Holbrook (1982). These sections discuss hedonic consumption in consumer research, consumption symbolism and in relation to self concept.

The change in emphasis that occurred in the 1980s has led to another insight of great relevance to this area. The role and importance of the consumption experience has recently been recognised as an important and neglected aspect of the “new consumer behaviour”, and has consequently been researched in depth (Hirschman and Holbrook, 1982). This concentration on the “non-essential”, experiential side of consumption inevitably shifts the focus from the rational and the necessary to the hedonic.

Hedonism has been defined as “A theory of (→) value and (→) motivation which holds that the ultimate values and motives of human action lie in the pleasure produced for the individual or the community, and in the avoidance of pain” (Dictionary of Marketing, 1995, p. 230); a hedonist is defined as “someone who believes that pleasure is the most important thing in life” (Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, 2003, p. 758). Correspondingly, hedonism is always associated with pleasure, arousal (Campbell, 1969), fantasies, feeling, and fun (Hirschman and Holbrook, 1982). To date, most studies in new consumer research have focused on the experiential aspect of consumption, an area pioneered by Hirschman and Holbrook (1982, p. 92). These authors define experiential consumption as, “those facets of consumer behaviour that relate to the multisensory, fantasy and emotive aspects of one’s experience with products.” The authors view the consumption experience in opposition to the traditional information-processing event as viewed from a phenomenological perspective; they argue that it is “a primarily subjective state of consciousness with a variety of symbolic meaning, hedonic responses and esthetic criteria” (Hirschman and Holbrook, 1982, p. 132). Subsequent research and studies show the influence of Hirschman and Holbrooks’ (1982) study (e.g. Belk, Wallendorf and Sherry, 1989; Holt, 1995; Friedmann and Lessig, 1986; Lofman, 1991; Hopkinson and Pujari, 1999; Lacher, 1989; Rook, 1988; Havlena and Holbrook, 1986; Holbrook, Chestnut, Oliva and Greenleaf, 1984; Mick, 1986). They support the sociological view from a phenomenological perspective of consumption as a hedonic, aesthetic and autotelic experience, which “emphasises the emotional states arising during consumption” (Holt, 1995, p. 2).

Referring to Hirschman and Holbrook’s (1982, p. 92) definition of hedonic consumption, the authors incorporate these concepts of multisensory, fantastic and emotive arousal. These abstract concepts evoke a variety of meanings and the authors attempt to use them as a basis for subsequent interpretation of consumer consumption.



The first aspect of experiential consumption enumerated above, is multisensory, being defined by the authors (Hirschman and Holbrook, 1982, p. 92) as “the receipt of experience in multiple sensory modalities including tastes, sounds, scents, tactile impressions and visual images.” From the hedonic perspective, Hirschman and Holbrook (1982) argue that consumer responses to multisensory stimuli involve afferent as well as efferent processes. Correspondingly, the authors propose that generating internal multisensory images is an important aspect of hedonic consumption, and can be categorised as historic or fantastic imagery. Historic imagery draws from prior experience of events, while fantastic imagery, a second type used to define hedonic consumption, is a kind of mental phenomena constituting a constructed response that never actually occurred. Finally, another hedonic aspect of consumption is the emotive arousal experienced both psychologically and physiologically by consumers, who experience “feelings such as joy, jealousy, fear, rage and rapture” (Freud, 1955, p. 93).

Drawing from the theoretical background to hedonic consumption, Hirschman and Holbrook (1982) propose four hedonic perspectives which are central to marketers: mental constructs, product classes, product usage and individual differences. As the authors maintain, “the hedonic perspective seeks not to replace traditional theories of consumption but rather to extend and enhance their applicability” (Hirschman and Holbrook, 1982, p. 93). One of these perspectives, which deserves more attention than it has hitherto received, is the role of emotion in hedonic consumption. An emotive reaction in consuming a particular product serves a function beyond the mere fulfilling of utilitarian functions.

Hirschman and Holbrook (1982) also propose an experiential perspective of consumer behaviour as an alternative to the information processing and purchase decision-making approach. They argue that one of the most important aspects of the consumption experience is fantasies, feelings and fun, a much neglected area. Fantasy, a concept derived from the Greek word “phantasia”, involves a human act of imagining (Eysenck, et al, 1972) which

creatively prepares individuals for some later action, and daydreaming for wishes that might not come true (Rook, 1988).

Previous studies such that of Levy and Zaltman (1975) criticised the approach to consumer behaviour which generally neglected motivation. Levy (1986) later observed the importance of consumer involvement with mental fantasy, an area which is rarely explored. Mick (1986) highlighted that the experiential aspects of consumption proposed by Hirschman and Holbrook (1982), and their focus on knowledge, emotion and consumption symbolism. He called for a semiotic concern with intrapersonal and interpersonal communication.

Hirschman and Holbrook (1982) developed a framework that includes value, cognition (Hirschman 1985a) and emotion and holistic-intuitive consciousness (Hirschman 1985b) regarding the consumption experience. Another model developed by Hirschman and Holbrook (1986), the model of Thought-Emotion-Activity-Value (TEAV), encompasses all forms of consumption, and serves as a complementary approach to the Cognition-Affect-Behaviour-Satisfaction (CABS) model of Engel, Kollat and Blackwell (1968) and that of Howard and Sheth (1969). The TEAV constructs are more representative than the CABS model, as it is broader in concept. "Thought" includes dreaming, imagining and fantasising; "emotions" encompass a diverse range of feelings and expressive behaviours; "activities" involves events of both action and reaction; and "value" means evaluative judgements in consumption. Using these concepts, the idea of contrasting the information processing paradigm with the experiential one can be further explored.

Following Hirschman and Holbrook's' (1982) experiential analysis, the contrast between such views and information processing ones can plainly be seen to fall into four basic categories: environmental inputs, consumer inputs, intervening responses and output consequences, criteria, and learning effects. The experiential view supports the idea of inputs given symbolic meaning enhanced with more subjective characteristics, rather than the purely tangible benefits of conventional goods and products. Consumer inputs such those of resources, task definition, type of involvement, search activity and individual

differences appear to differ significantly from the traditional information processing view. Specifically, the experiential view accentuates the hedonic responses of pleasure in accordance with consumers' primary thought processes, in which the primary purpose of consumption is for fun, amusement, fantasy and enjoyment. The intervening response systems of consumers, by contrast, have the full gamut of emotional responses such as, "diverse feelings [of] love, hate, fear, joy, boredom, anxiety, pride, anger, disgust, sadness, sympathy, lust, ecstasy, greed, guilt, elation, shame and awe" (Hirschman and Holbrook, 1982, p. 310); the information processing view only emphasised one of the hedonic responses, i.e. like or dislike of a brand name or product. Finally, the output consequences have contrasting views emerged from criteria that are "essentially aesthetic in nature and hinge on an appreciation of the product for its own sake, apart from any utilitarian function that it may or may not perform (MacGregor, 1974, p. 549).

Hirschman's (1983) further studies of hedonism identified four types of hedonic behaviour: problem projection, role projection, fantasy fulfilment and escapism. Problem projection refers to the case in which individuals involve themselves in activities in which they encounter unhappy realities in order to enable them to better cope with these situations. Secondly, role projection takes place when individuals can self-project themselves into a particular role or character in these activities. Thirdly, Hirschman (1983) argued that fantasy fulfilment is a type of activity in which individuals seek sensation in fantastic imagery during the product usage stage. Finally, escapism occurs when individuals seek to avoid unpleasant realities or events.

In a similar vein, Hirschman (1984b, p. 117) in an attempt to identify consumers seeking experiences, defines this activity "as an overall phenomenon that represents consumption as the generation of internal thoughts and/or sensations which constitute the content of experience." The study proposes that experience seeking is an amalgamation of three constructs: cognition seeking, sensation seeking and novelty seeking.

Many studies have emerged since the development of Hirschman and Holbrook's (1982) idea of hedonic consumption. Work in this area has increased, and since concern lies in the emotional aspects of hedonic consumption, Havlena and Holbrook (1986) conducted a study which seeks to compare two typologies of emotion, and aimed to develop some methodology by which such consumption could be tested. The results rely on the more favourable approach of the Mehrabian and Russell (1974) PAD (pleasure, arousal, dominance) paradigm, where an individual's pleasure is defined by good, joyous and happy emotions, Arousal being seen as the point where excitement, stimulation and alertness are present, and with dominance displaying the individuals unhindered control of a situation.

This is as opposed to Plutchik's (2000) emotional categories, in examining emotions in the context of a wide range of consumption. Another piece of anecdotal evidence of hedonic consumption in consumer research points to Holbrook's (1986) investigation of aesthetic responses to design features in the clothing industry, which recorded a positive response to the influence of aesthetic responses to clothes design. Other research and studies of hedonic consumption include Holt's (1995) research on the typology of consumption. The author attempts to examine the distinctive metaphors of consumption (consuming as experience, consuming as integration, consuming as classification) and added a fourth dimension to the typology: consumption as play, which demonstrates an alternative view of consumption. Play as a consumption experience had been initially studied by Holbrook et al (1984) when they measured the emotional responses, performance and personalities involved in playing and enjoying a video game. Various aspects of emotions, fantasy and experience-seeking have been the focus of hedonic consumption in consumer research to date (for example, Dube, 1994; Laverie et al, 1993; Hopkinson and Pujari, 1999; Ger, 1999) and will merit further application to more specialised areas such as sports participation, arts, leisure, entertainment, and education, demonstrating that consumption often spans several categories.

In their study of clubbing in the UK, Goulding et al (2009) adduce what they term “contained illegality” as a factor in the creation of pleasure, referring to the “temporary suspension of the rules and norms of everyday life”. This is part of a conceptualization that seeks to combine the biological and the social origins of pleasure, which they characterize as biosocial. Their work seeks to synthesize what had previously been treated as mutually exclusive hedonic and cognitive aspects of consumption. If this attempt is successful, they hold out the hope of an amalgamation between the approaches of those branches of science that study the former (the behavioural, cognitive and neuroscientific sciences) and those dealing with cognitive consumer reactions (social and historical research). They certainly highlight the same problem with a straightforward dichotomy as was revealed in the previous section: the complexity of consumer behaviour is greater than can be contained within a single paradigm. Just as the motivation for a consumption decision can originate with the marketer and the consumer to varying degrees, so the consumer’s own response can be both hedonic and rational. With regard to Goulding et al (2009) study of clubbing, the very decision to indulge in this hedonic activity might be a largely rational one of unwinding from a hard day at work.

Again, it might be more instructive to place hedonism and rationality at opposite ends of a scale and place any given response along it. Many, if not most, consumer purchases doubtless involve at least something of both factors. A car purchase, for instance, might be made mostly on pragmatic grounds, but the choice of colour and engine size might be made on hedonic grounds. A synthesis would appear to be the most fruitful way to approach this issue.

The illicit pleasure that is the focus of Goulding et al’s (2009) article can be applied to such countercultures as the Harley-Davidson community, which sets itself to some degree against prevailing social norms. Such illicit pleasures are complex structures that rely on a combination of factors. She classifies these as biological (actually biological/chemical) and social. The biological “rush”

that comes from an exciting activity acts in a mutually reinforcing fashion with other like-minded people in the same activity, whether at the same time or not.

Such a thrill is only increased when the activity is illegal. Thus, one might list three activities along a continuum of illegality or illicitness: Goulding et al's (2009) example of drug-taking in clubs, the riding of a Harley-Davidson, and the driving of a Mini or a BMW MINI. The first of these provides a thrill that is both physical (or at least physically felt) combined with the "buzz" provided by the activity's illegality, the expression of its disapproval by the society of which clubbing is a counterculture. The second is a reduced version of this thrill. H-Ds are not illegal, but they seen by the H-D community as well as by its parent society as representing values at odds with the prevailing culture. To this degree, the riding of a H-D is quasi-illicit", a gesture of defiance of established social norms. The Mini, of course, is not only not illegal, but its values are treasured by large sections of its parent society. The "thrill" associated with this brand comes from a "licit pleasure" that reinforces social mores rather than challenging them. The psychological implications of this are outside the scope of this study, but it may be worth suggesting that there are bound to be differences of origin between the responses of individual community members who indulge in activities because they are illicit and those who participate in socially sanctioned pursuits.

### **2.3 Symbolic Interactionism**

All of these responses have relied on a view of products which focuses on their effect on the definition of the self. Commentators have treated the relationship as very much one way: the consumer decides, whether consciously or subconsciously, on the image they wish to project, whether to themselves or to the world, and enact this image by means of passive products. However, Solomon (1983) describes a different approach in which there is interaction between product and consumer. This interaction occurs on the subconscious as well as the conscious level. Solomon (1983) bases his research on work by

Belk (1978, 1980), Holman (1981a, 1981b), who explore the degree to which products reveal information about their possessors and the social roles they assign themselves. Products thus take on symbolic significance, not just for the individual but in the cultural context. McCracken (1986) highlights the path to, rather than from, the individual by tracing the ways in which these culturally determined symbolic meanings are transferred from society to product and from product to individual. Solomon (1983) formalises this bilateral relationship into a series of propositions which he calls “symbolic interactionism” – i.e. the interaction between the individual, the product, and the society of which both are a part.

Symbolic interactionism has branched out from the study of social psychology, and since then various definitions have emerged, contributed by a wide-ranging group of sociologists and consumer researchers (Tucker and Stoeckel, 1969; Kuhn, 1964; Vaughan and Reynolds, 1968; Meltzer et al, 1975; Manis and Meltzer, 1967; Stryker, 1980; Charon, 1979; Lauer and Handel, 1977; O’Donnell and Sharpe, 2000; Solomon, 1983) who integrate the work of the earlier writers to form much of the theoretical background and empirical application of symbolic interactionism. This is concerned with “how society is constructed through the meaningful interaction of individuals” (O’Donnell and Sharpe, 2000, p. 47) and stems from the work of William James, James Mark Baldwin, Charles Horton Cooley, Robert E. Park, George Herbert Mead, John Dewey, Everett C. Hughes and other social psychologists. Among them, George Herbert Mead (1863-1931), the founder of symbolic interactionism, is the most renowned, although it was his colleague Herbert Blumer who initially coined the phrase. In his publications (“Mind, Self and Society” and collections of his lecture notes and essays assembled and edited by Morris (1934) after his death), Mead undertook to demonstrate the concept’s key issues, the “interrelationships among thought, action and social organisation” (Lauer and Handel, 1977, p. 11).

As Bryman (1992, p. 54) suggests, “Symbolic interactionists view social life as an unfolding process in which the individual interprets his or her environment



and acts on the basis of that interpretation.” From the symbolic interactionist perspective, Solomon (1983, p. 320) states that “symbolic interactionism focuses on the process by which people interpret the actions of others rather than simply reacting to them.” The recognition that Mead’s perception is behaviouristic is seen in Lauer and Handel’s (1977, p.14) suggestion that “we can, in some circumstances, conduct our trials in imagination, learning from the image of what would happen to us if we acted in a certain way rather than from actual experience.” Blumer (1962) concludes that, from these experiences and interpretations, a function of meanings attached to actions will be generated and “in turn, mediated largely by symbols” (Solomon, 1983, p.320). As indicated by Mick (1986), symbolic interactionism perceives human minds as fundamentally social, a perception dependent upon shared symbols where meaning is constructed and negotiated through interpersonal and intrapersonal communications. Thus, from this perspective, it is argued that individuals make sense of their world through social realities from which they form their identities, and that “actions and behaviours constitute ways of enacting their social reality and identities” (Hogg and Michell, 1995, p. 4). As Blumer (1978, p. 97) notes, the response to one another’s actions is not made explicitly but rather through the meanings which one attaches to those actions; one’s response is thus “mediated by the use of symbols, by interpretation, or by ascertaining the meaning of one another’s actions.” This bears the significant influence of Mead’s idea that mind, self and society is derived as individuals are engaged in the social process (Lee, 1990).

Emerging from this perception, one basic idea shared by symbolic interactionists is the attribute of human behaviour which “depends upon the existence of language behaviour and the creation and manipulation of signs and symbols” (Haas, 1987, p. 3). It is through language, by which culture is transmitted through symbolic behaviour down the generations, that individuals are able to align themselves according to mutual expectations (Haas, 1987). While communication through the use of symbols creates human groups which Mead termed societies, made up of several social selves, this creation of symbols facilitates the evolution and transmission of



“traditions, skills, goals, tactics, rules and procedures” (Haas, 1987, p. 3). Mead perceives society as a network comprising meaningful symbolic communication and purposeful actions, instead of a set of structures of social systems external to individuals (O’Donnell and Sharpe, 2000). Thus, the meaning and theory of Symbolic Interactionism are born from language and symbols.

Following the work of Mead, the word “pragmatism” is important in the symbolic interactionist approach; this is primarily concerned with practical consequences rather than theory. Mead considered everything about the human being as a dynamic process, rather than as being stable and fixed (Charon, 1979). From these views, Blumer (1969, p.2-6) summarises the basic propositions of symbolic interactionism in three premises. Firstly, human beings always act towards things on the basis of the meaning those things have for them. Blumer (1969) believed that individuals do not respond to stimuli explicitly but by interpretation, according to the meanings attached to the objects or stimuli. Secondly, these meanings are derived from the social activities the individuals are engaged in during the social process as they interact with one another – in short, from their social interaction. Finally, these meanings are modified and processed through an interpretative process used by the person in dealing with the objects or signs he or she encounters (Meltzer et al, 1975). From this perspective, symbolic interactionists concentrate on interaction rather than social structure or personality. As individuals may interact according to different or conflicting definitions and meanings of the social situations they encounter, some of these meanings may vary, and may merit further interaction. Thus, the individual may, “select, check ... transform the meaning in the light of the situation in which he or she is placed and the direction of his [or her] action” (Blumer, 1969, p. 105).

Grossman (1959) highlights a related reason people use symbolism: to convince others of the truth of the role they are acting out in order to convey a certain image of themselves. People are also adept at reading the significance of others’ performances. The result is a “social performance” whose

significance in reinforcing both self-image and social role is recognised by both parties. The symbolic meaning shown by scholar such as Solomon (1983) as being attached to certain acts and artefacts is an integral part of this interaction, and may thus be seen as implicit in Grossman's thesis.

The theoretical basis of symbolic interactionism provides many insights into that of the meanings of consumption symbolism and the derivation of the multi-faceted dimensions of self-concept. The following sections look into the meanings of consumption symbolism and self concept in relation to symbolic interactionism theory.

### 2.3.1 Product Symbolism in Symbolic Interactionism

As Friedmann and Lessig (1986) state, the two manifestations of experiential consumption are symbolic consumption (Hirschman, 1981) and aesthetics consumption (Holbrook, 1981). Consumption symbolism, as Belk (1995) observes, is regarded as the oldest of the new consumer behaviour topics; the early influential work dates back to Veblen's (1899) study on status symbols. The notion of symbolic consumption reflects how products can be evaluated, consumed, or purchased based upon the symbolic nature of the meanings the products can offer, beyond their utilitarian functions (Zaltman and Wallendorf, 1979). Other areas of research such as anthropology and sociology have introduced the idea of consumption symbolism, notably from the perspective of symbolic interactionist, and more recently these areas have also been studied in consumer research.

Mead's (1934) social psychology emphasised the ongoing interaction of the social process from which is derived the mind, self and society. According to Mead's (1934) basic axiom, human beings come to know each other through the interaction of significant "symbols" which are regarded as stimulating objects that define a set of meanings through the ongoing activity. As Blumer (1966, p. 537) indicates, the essence of symbolic interactionism

*“...involves interpretation, or ascertaining the meaning of the actions of remarks of the other person, and definition, or conveying indications to another person as to how he is to act. Human association consists of a process of such interpretation and definition. Through this process the participants fit their own acts to the ongoing acts of one another and guide others in doing so.”*

Thus, the symbolic meaning of actions, thoughts, and objects constitute the significance of symbolic interactionism. A person is regarded as a social object; likewise, “symbols are one class of social objects,” used to represent what they stand for and whatever people agree they should stand for (Charon, 1979, p. 39-40). Words are representations of symbols people use to communicate, as are many objects such as the symbol of a cross. However, according to Charon (1979), not all social objects are regarded as symbols if they do not represent significant meanings. In an attempt to distinguish social objects from symbols, Blumer (1969) argues that all social objects have symbolic meaning, as each of them stands for a line of action that we may take forward. In contrast, Charon (1979, p. 40) maintains that, “the distinction between a symbol and social objects, however, goes beyond just representation” and “symbols are social objects used for representation and communication.” For instance, a Mini is a social object when it is used for travelling, but it becomes a symbol when it is used to represent heritage, pride, and confidence to others. Therefore, an object can be, “a purely social object to some and a symbol to others (Charon, 1979, p. 40). And for others, some objects do not exist, as they are unnoticed and serve no function in their world (Charon, 1979).

Further, Charon (1979, p. 40-42) uses three means of defining symbols in social interaction: conventional, meaningful, and arbitrary. Firstly, symbols are conventional, as “they are representative of something else only because people have come to agree that they shall be. It is people in interaction that give meaning to them, create them and change them” (Charon, 1979, p. 40). Secondly, symbols are meaningful and have meanings to people. As Shibutani (1961, p. 121) argues, “whatever the symbol stands for constitutes its

meaning.” Further, Mead (1934) refers to symbols as “meaningful” or “significant gestures”, which essentially means that symbols are meaningful to the user and to the people with whom the user communicates. Mead (1934, p. 149) further proposed that “what is essential to communication is that the symbol should arouse in one’s self what it arouses in the other individual.” Hence, from this perspective, symbols purposefully convey meanings to others, as by their nature they are meaningful to more than one person. Finally, symbols are, “arbitrarily associated with what they represent” (Charon, 1979, p. 42). In essence, Charon (1979) argues that symbols are arbitrary, as they are not designated by nature, but rather by people. He offers an example: “the fact that two fingers in the air means peace is arbitrary – it could just as well be a thumb in the air, a hand closed above our head, a black mark on our forehead” (Charon, 1979, p.42).

As symbolic meaning is at the very core of the human world, without symbols we would not be able to express, communicate and interact with each other. Symbolic interactionists insist that “all that humans are can be traced to their symbolic nature” and therefore, “our world is a symbolic one: we see, we think, we hear, we share, we act symbolically” (Charon, 1979, p. 53). Hence, in our human social life, we depend on symbols to be able to communicate and interact with one another. Through socialisation, we come to know others’ culture and understand our roles in relation to others, in what Mead (1934. p. 254) termed “taking the role of the other.” A summary of the importance of symbolic meaning in the social interaction is depicted in Figure 2.2.

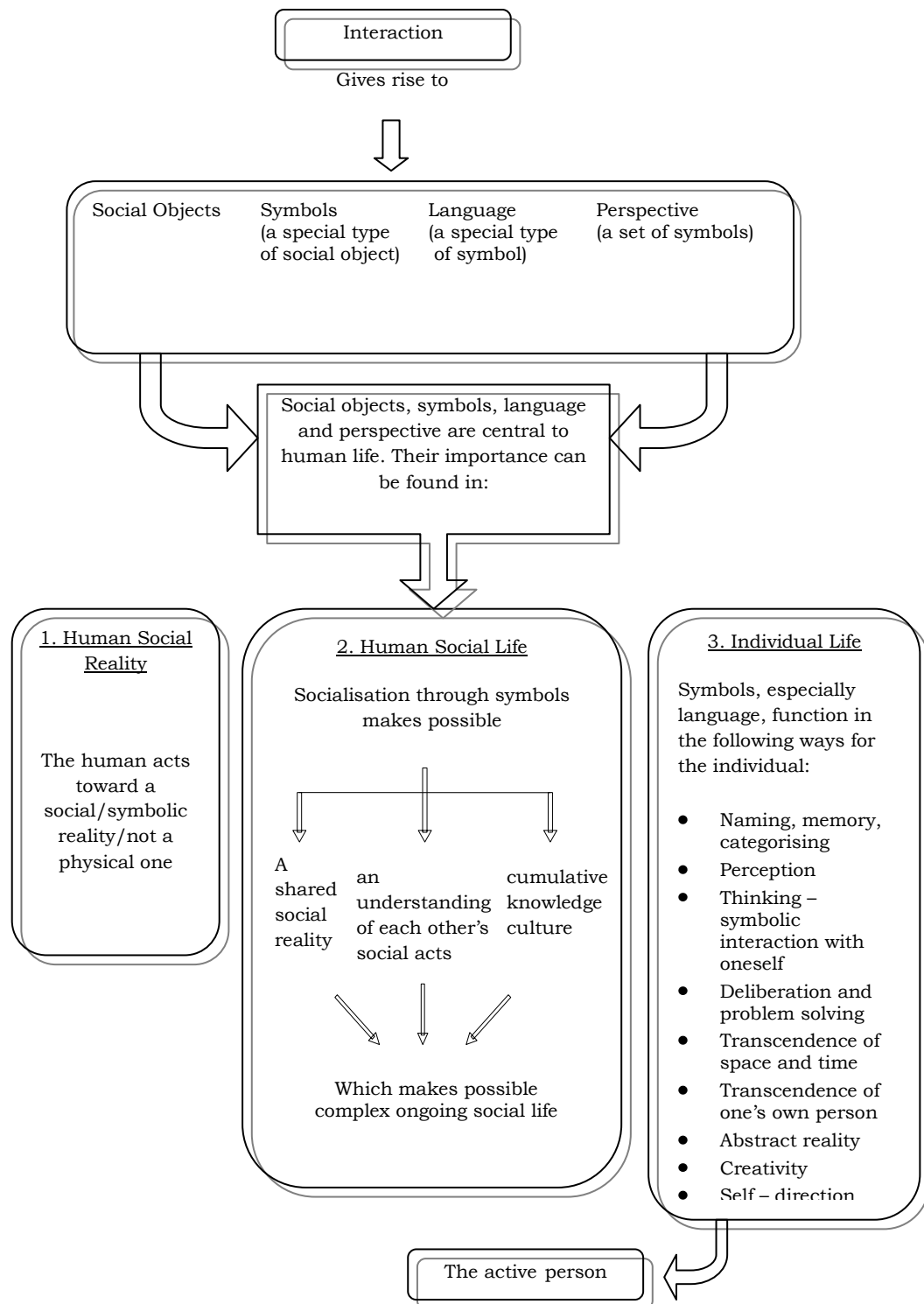


Figure 2.2: A summary of the importance of symbolic meaning in social interaction  
(Source: Charon, 1979)

Goffman (1959) explores an entirely different purpose to which interactions between people can be put). He investigates the process by which people project a persona, intentionally or otherwise, and how they read the projections of other people. He refers mostly to personal performances as the means by which they convey their desired image, but objects can obviously play their part in reinforcing this. A person's "front", for example, comprises the immobile "setting" they create (which largely equates to their house, but could also include their club and their place of work), and their "personal front", which consists of what the person carries with them. Goffman (1959) refers almost exclusively to inherent features such as looks, facial expressions and bodily gestures. He does, however, also mention clothing (which would doubtless include purely decorative items such as jewellery).

In this context, the car can be seen as a combination of mobile and immobile projections. On the one hand it travels with the person, to a degree as their clothing does. On the other hand, it serves as a kind of mobile setting, which can be furnished and decorated, to some extent the same way as a house is. Following Goffman's (1959) work, this combination can make a car one of the most powerful means of persona projection; most people certainly invest more in it than they do in any other single item except for their houses.

A front is but one of the means of such individual projection, which Goffman (1959) characterises as "performance". As implied, this performance can be a deliberate and even a contrived one, or it might be more or less involuntary. This partly coincides with Goffman's (1959) scale running from cynicism to belief in one's performance; the latter can also be thought of as "internalisation", whereby one chooses or is persuaded or coerced into accepting certain values as one's own. Dramatic realisation, in which a role reinforcing the desired self-image is played out, is also adduced by the author as a means of projection, as is idealisation, the maintenance of expressive control, misrepresentation and mystification, all of which have obvious significance for the present study. Misrepresentation is of particular interest. It involves acts that lead an observer to believe something false about the

performer. A car, for example, could be used (literally – as in driven) in such a way that might lead an observer to expect certain other behaviours from the performer than might in fact be the case.

As Rook (1985) points out, there is a decided overlap between this view and his own concerning ritual, especially as regards dramaturgical acts, whether they concerning image projection or the ritual reinforcement of shared beliefs.

### 2.3.2 Product Symbolism in Consumer Research

The essence of symbolic meaning in symbolic interactionism is essential in developing and generating social interaction with others, through role-taking and communicating with symbols to form the basis of society. However, the notion of this symbolic meaning is also viewed as an important means in examining and understanding consumer experience in consumer research. Deriving from the ideology of symbolic interactionism from a sociological perspective, there has been considerable further study and research regarding symbolic meaning of products.

The study of consumption symbolism in consumer research gained momentum in the late 1950s when Levy's (1959) article, "Symbols for Sales" was first published. Traditionally, the consumer was known as "economic man", as marketers concentrated on the essentials of consumer needs such as food, clothing, shelter and other practical matters (Levy, 1959). As Levy (1959, p. 24) observes, consumers were once known as "customers, not audiences." However, this perception has changed; Levy (1959) argues for the importance of aesthetic preferences in factors influencing consumers' choices. Levy (1959, p. 25) contended that "at the heart of all this is the fact that the consumer is not as functionally oriented as he used to be – if he ever really was."

His work has led to the recognition of product symbolism, which refers to the degree to which consumers are aware of the associations between symbols and their lifestyles. Since Levy's (1959) work, many studies have further developed

the importance of the symbolic meaning of products. Present research in consumption and product symbolism is extensive, but is still rooted in the writings of Levy, 1963, 1981, 1982. Such research includes Belk, 1988; Belk, Bahn and Mayer, 1982; McCracken, 1986; Rook, 1988; Mick, 1986; Hirschman and Holbrook, 1982; Hirschman and Holbrook, 1982; Solomon, 1983; Zaltman and Wallendorf, 1979; Munson and Spivey, 1980; Friedmann and Lessig, 1986; Grubb and Grathwohl, 1968; Hyatt, 1992; Elliott and Wattanasuwan, 1998; Grayson, 1996.

Levy (1959, p.25) observes that “people buy things not only for what they can do, but also for what they mean.” In a similar vein, Tucker (1957, p. 139) recognises that consumers’ personalities can be reflected in their product usage:

*“There has long been an implicit concept that consumers can be defined in terms of either the products they acquire or use, or in terms of the meanings products have for them or their attitudes towards products.”*

Products or objects not only have physical characteristics but also a host of others symbolic meanings which consumers associate with, as Levy (1959, p. 25) argues: “the things people buy are seen to have personal and social meanings in addition to their functions.” Thus, the essence of a product does not only serve its general functions, but rather becomes the relationship between the product, its owner and society (Hyatt, 1992). Adopting the same stance, Elliott and Wattanasuwan (1998, p. 17) argue that the

*“...consumer should be perceived as an individual who, in a cultural context, is meaning-centred, and central to this approach is the recognition that the consumer does not make consumption choices solely from products’ utilities but also from their symbolic meanings.”*

Grubb and Grathwohl (1967) undertook a study to review and examine the theoretical foundations of the relationship between the psychological



characteristics of consumers and their purchase behaviour. They contend that there is a need for a symbol to be socially recognised in order to convey a symbolic meaning. Prior to this, the product plays a crucial part in developing and communicating symbolic meaning, particularly as regards conspicuousness/visibility, personality and variability (Sirgy, 1982). They develop a consumer behaviour model based on their pertinent research of the individual's self-concept and the associated symbolic value of their products (See Figure 2.3)

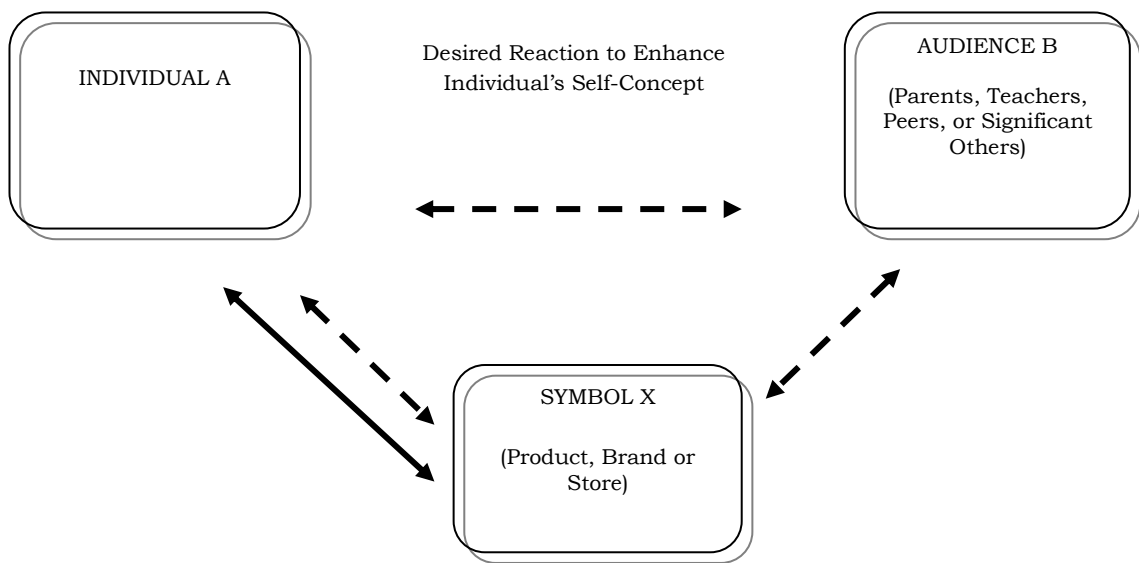


Figure 2.3: Relationship of the consumption of goods as symbols to the self-concept (Source: Grubb and Grathwohl, 1967, p. 25)

The above consumer behaviour model is a qualitative one which shows the systematic relationship between the self-theory and products as symbols. In this model, the authors view consumption symbolism as a means to self-enhancement. First, the authors believe that each individual has a self-concept and that this self-concept is of value to him/her. Secondly, the furtherance and self-enhancement of the individual's self-concept is directed by his/her behaviour, as the self-concept is of value to them. Then, through social interaction with others such as parents, peers and teachers, the individual's self-concept is developed. Finally, as goods serve as social objects, and therefore incorporate symbolic meanings for the individual, the

communication of these meanings will have an effect on the individual's self-concept during the interaction process. Thus, Grubb and Grathwohl (1967, p. 26) conclude that through the interpretation of this model, "the consuming behaviour of an individual will be directed toward the furthering and enhancing of his self-concept through the consumption of goods as symbols." Along similar lines, Solomon (1983, p.319) focuses on the role of products as social stimuli which will, "substantially contribute to the consumer's structuring of social reality, self-concept, and behaviour." Following from the integrative concepts in symbolic interactionism theory, the author argues that the subjective experience of consumption of products shares symbolic qualities which are often determinants of consumers' purchases and choices. Symbolic interactionism centres on the social nature of the self, and Solomon (1983, p. 321), a strong advocate of this position, proposes that "centrality of symbolism to the interpretation of social reality and the nature of symbol systems, as shared by members of a common culture, lead to a proposition that extends the symbolic interaction process into the product realm." In this sense, cultural symbols have meanings and symbolic properties that are shared across contemporary culture.

#### **2.4 The Cultural Meanings of Consumption**

According to McCracken (1986, p. 71), in his study of culture and consumption argues that "cultural meaning is drawn from a culturally constituted world and transferred to a consumer good...then the meaning is drawn from the object and transferred to an individual consumer." Further, McCracken (1986, p. 71) indicates that these cultural meanings are located in three places: "the culturally constituted world, the consumer good, and the individual consumer, and moves in a trajectory at two points of transfer – world to good and good to individual." According to McCracken (1988), with the mobile quality of cultural meanings, two important aspects of consumption in society can be elucidated. First, by focusing on the structural and dynamic properties of consumption, consumers and goods can be seen as the way-stations of meanings. Secondly, from the perspective of trajectory,

phenomena such as advertising, the fashion world and consumption rituals serve as the instruments by which meaning changes.

From these phenomena, McCracken (1988) views consumption rituals as an important means of transmission of symbolic meanings from the good to consumer. He defines ritual as “a kind of social action devoted to the manipulation of cultural meaning for purposes of collective and individual communication and categorisation” (McCracken, 1988, p. 78). Emerging from these concepts, he identifies four types of ritual behaviour: exchange, possession, grooming and divestment. Each of these types represents a different stage of the process from which cultural meanings of goods are transferred to consumers and incorporated into their lives.

Consumption also plays an important role when viewed through the lens of Gennep’s (1908) work on rites of passage, as developed by later writers such as Victor Turner and Joseph Campbell. These rites of passage mark changes in social status. The first stage involves separation from one’s previous self or persona, the second is a state of flux or indeterminacy between two stages, and the third is their full adoption into their new community. Artefacts play an important role in the rituals that reinforce these activities, especially in the first and third stages. In a related manner Durkheim (1912), in his examination of religion, describes the “sanctification” of profane objects such as wine, which in Christian communion services becomes or represents the blood of Christ. Such rituals are used both individually and communally, both of which uses have relevance to the present study. Personal ritual reinforces Goffman’s (1959) projection of self-image through behaviour – including the presentation of an image to oneself – while communal use involves rituals at many different levels, including acceptance into a community that itself bolsters the image one is seeking to portray.

The following figure (Figure 2.4) shows a summary of how cultural meaning is moved within society through consumption symbolism.

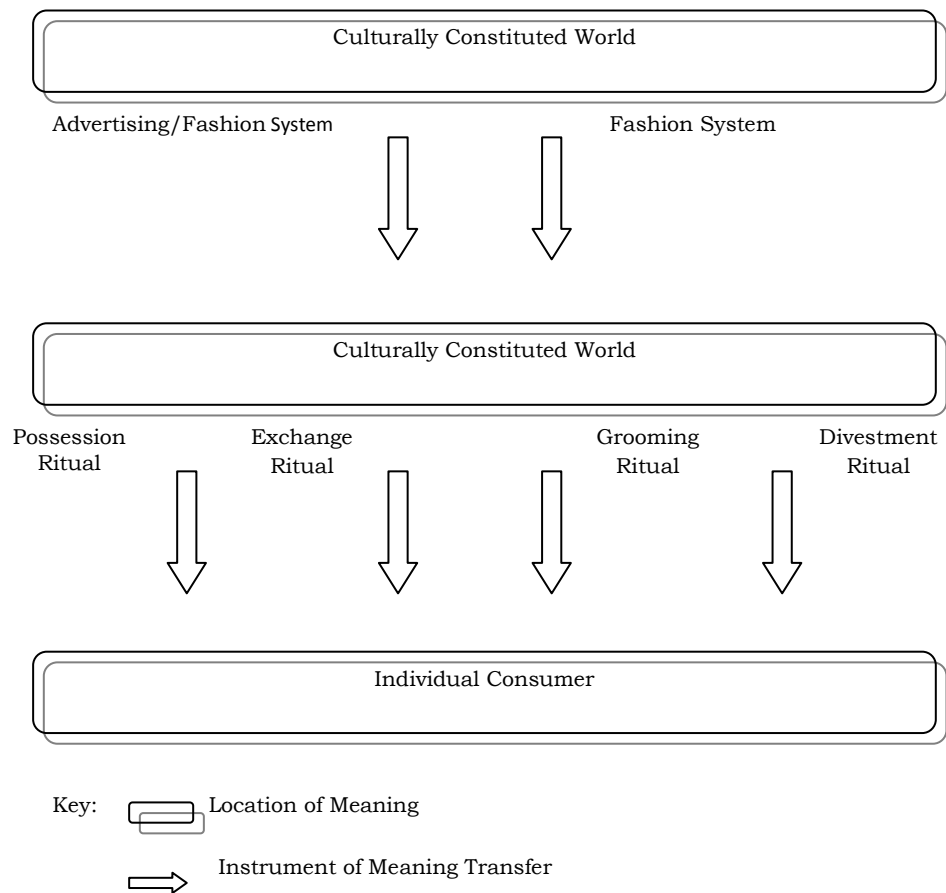


Figure 2.4 Movement of meaning  
 (Source: McCracken, 1986, p. 72)

Apart from the cultural meaning of consumption symbolism, the social meaning of consumption has also been studied and particularly applied in material culture. Dant (1999) offers his theory of consumption in the exchange of goods and the media representations on how these objects are used in everyday life. Dant (1999, p. 38) argues that “material objects are appropriated into social lives with a variety of non-economic effects; they are used and lived with,” which shapes material culture and reflects social forms and processes, which Dant (1999, p. 2) referred to as ‘quasi-social’ relationships. Therefore, individual members of this society express their social identity and experiences by living with objects and “consumption choices are made which rely on social customs and practices rather than rational economic decisions” (Dant, 1999, p. 23).

To the extent that consumption takes on a symbolic role, and to the degree to which objects become valued for their aura of symbolic meanings and values, other aspects of consumption can be viewed from Bocoock's (1993) idea of modern consumption. From a modern consumerism perspective, Bocoock (1993, p. 96) surmises that "consumer goods have become a crucial area for the construction of meanings, identities, gender roles, in post-modern capitalism." Another important aspect of Bocoock's (1993) modern consumption is the desire to which people are socialised even if they cannot afford to buy certain goods. This desire then leads to the social, cultural and psychological construction and maintenance of the various kinds of identity.

From these concepts, product symbolism in consumer research seems to encompass all aspects of consumption from psychology (Hirschman and Holbrook, 1982) and social interaction (Solomon, 1983) to cultural perspectives (McCracken, 1986; Dant, 1999). Integrating these perspectives, we acknowledge that 'product symbolic meaning' is at the very heart of consumer behaviour, in which people's subjective experiences and reactions to consumption are the key characteristics of consumption symbolism.

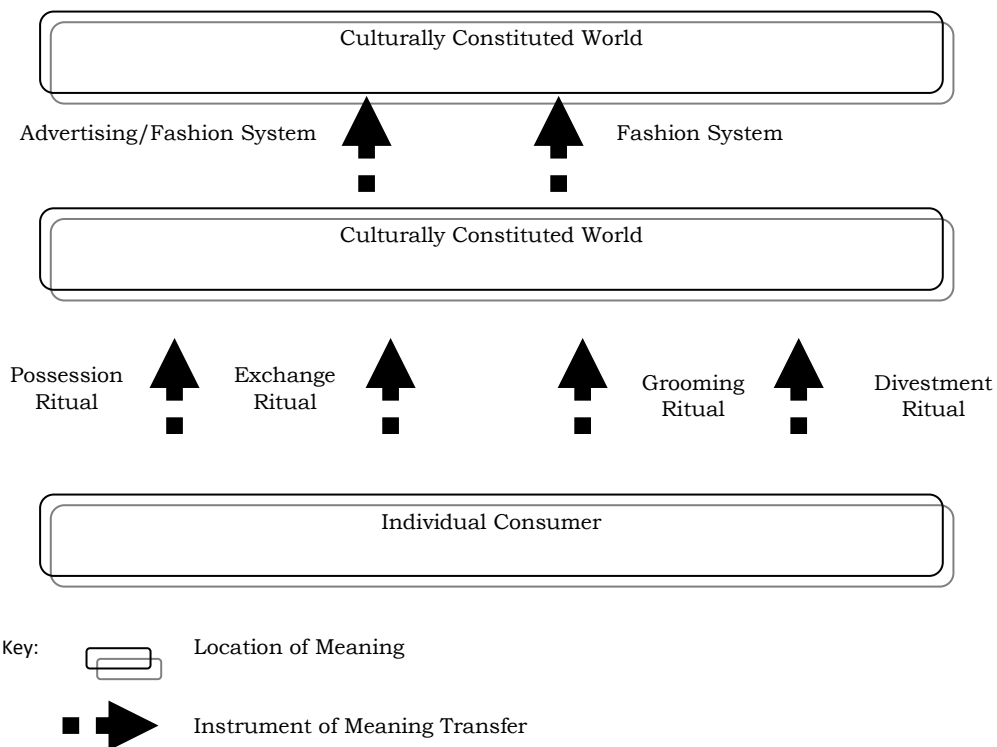


Figure 2.5 Movement of meaning from a different perspective  
(Source: adapted from McCracken, 1986, p. 72)

From other perspectives, consumer goods are considered to have no particular meaning unless they have an association with culture. Alongside their physical being, they carry and communicate cultural meaning. The presence of these meanings allows consumers to make value judgements on products and/or services.

Cultural meaning is drawn from a culturally constituted world and transferred to a consumer good. The meaning is then drawn from the object and transferred to an individual consumer (McCracken, 1986), as shown in the diagram. Culture can be defined in this context as being the way in which individuals view situations and perceptions of goods.

*"... consumer should be perceived as an individual who, in a cultural context, is meaning-centred, and central to this approach is the recognition*

*that the consumer does not make consumption choices solely from products' utilities but also from their symbolic meanings" (Elliott and Wattanasuwan, 1998, p.17)*

This demonstrates that individuals not only choose a product or service just for its function, but because it holds a personal association for them which they can relate to, over and above the brand's reputation. However, in the past decade there have been an increasing number of anti-branding occurrences that reverse the Movement of Meaning, placing the consumer in a position where "consumers often are able to outflank marketers" (Holt, 2002, p.71) and cause individual consumption patterns. Consumers who are able to resist marketing ploys will be able to gain ultimate independence from and control of in the goods they buy, in turn affecting the brands forming part of the culturally constituted world.

## **2.5 The self-concept**

The idea of self-concept has stemmed from the study of sociology, and has latterly been studied in various disciplines such as psychology, anthropology and consumer research. The following section will review the concepts of self in terms of symbolic interactionism and in consumer research. Belk's concept of the extended self will also be discussed in a later section.

The nature and concept of the "self" is expanded in symbolic interactionism perspectives. It is no longer construed as ephemeral, as the existence of interaction between the social (individual) and the symbolic in the today's buying environment is being recognised.

Sociology (1998, p. 294) defines the self as, "a distinctively human capacity which enables people to reflect on their nature and the social world through communication and language." From the perspective of symbolic interactionism, the most important aspect of the nature of the self is believed to be the social object, which is shared with other interactions (Charon, 1979). To further examine the meaning of social self, James (1890a cited in Belk,

1988) has also commented that, as humans have various kinds of characteristics and “social selves”, the various aspects of self-concept therefore emerge from our heterogeneous segmented society. Social self is often applied to explain complex relationships, which the self encounters with others during the process of social interaction. Other famous key Figures in this area such as Cooley (1902) and Mead (1934) have contributed meaningful insights. Cooley describes symbolic interactionism as a “looking-glass self”, which refers to how individuals perceive themselves as well as how others perceive them. Furthermore, Mead (1934) develops these concepts in what he termed as “role-taking.” The strength of his influence here lies particularly in the enunciation of the concepts of I, Me and Generalised Other (O’Donnell and Sharpe, 2000). According to Mead (1934), the ‘I’ is the creative acting ego, the ‘Me’ is the socialised self and the ‘Generalised Other’ is the whole society in which various social roles are performed in dynamic relationships.

Symbolic interactionism’s revelation of the meanings of self-concept has led to an acknowledgement that we know others by interacting with them through the “symbols” which enable us to predict our own and others’ behaviour in future interactions (Lee, 1990). From the symbolic interactionism paradigm, O’Donnell and Sharpe (2000, p. 104) concludes that “the self can to some extent construct individual identity and, for that matter, contribute to the construction of the social world.”

### 2.5.1 The nature of “Self” in Consumer Research

Deriving from the paradigm of symbolic interactionism, the issue of self-concept has attracted the attention of consumer researchers for more than forty years. Walker (1992) discovers that the study of self-concept in consumer research began with motivation research during the 1950s’ and became of interest to researchers in anthropology and sociology, all of whom emphasised the role of symbolic consumer behaviour in the maintenance and construction of the self (Belk, 1988; Mehta and Belk, 1991; as well as Schouten, 1991). This field of research has been elaborated by many new formulations and ideas of self-concept. Most significant is the work of Levy (1959), who



examined the ways in which images associated with products influence and interact with the consumers' self-image. Drawing on this work, Grubb and Grathwohl (1967) elaborated the first formal model of this relationship. Later investigations by sociologists and consumer researchers (Sirgy, 1982; Birdwell, 1968; Green et al, 1969; Grubb and Hupp, 1968; Munson and Spivey, 1980; Dolich, 1969) revealed the existence of a plethora of selves ("actual self", "real self", "ideal self", "desired self", "ideal social self", "expressive self", "product expressive self", "imperial self", "possible selves" and the "situational self"). Consumer researchers use self-theory to explain people's behaviour. Britt (1996, p. 186), for example, says:

*"A consumer may buy a product because, among other factors, he feels that the product enhances his own self-image. Similarly, a consumer may decide not to buy a product or not to shop at the particular store if he feels that these actions are not consistent with his own perceptions of himself."*

According to Rosenberg (1979, p. 287), there are nine dimensions in the structure of self-concept: content, direction, intensity, salience, consistency, stability, clarity, verifiability, and accuracy. These dimensions play differing roles in self-concept. Correspondingly, Walker (1992, p.664) also identifies new research issues including "understanding the core or authentic self, the relationship between self, affect and emotions, motivations, and decision making, the representation self in memory, and finally how self is constructed and measured."

Similarly, Evans (1959) and Westfall (1962) attempt to relate self-concept to specific brands. In their research, they examine the different personality variables between the consumers of different cars, and focus on the self-expression of the consumer's inner nature. They conclude that the image of the particular brand purchased "interacting" with the consumer's self-concept determines the notion of consumer buyer behaviour. On the other hand, Grubb and Grathwohl (1967) further suggest that the purchase and consumption of goods can be self-enhancing in two ways. An individual's

goods are publicly recognised and classified in such a manner that they support and match self-concept, and goods as symbols serve the individual, going on to become something desired by others. He adds:

1. Self-concept is of value to the individual, and behaviour will be directed toward the protection and enhancement of self-concept.
2. The purchase, display and use of goods communicates symbolic meaning to the individual and to others.
3. The consumption behaviour of an individual will be directed toward enhancing self concept through the consumption of goods as symbols.

(Rosenberg, 1979, p. 289)

Reflecting this concern, Rosenberg (1979) discusses the development of self-concept and the motives behind it, and postulates four principles underlying the formation self-concept – reflecting appraisals, social comparisons, self-attributions and psychological centrality, all of which are used to guide the individual's self.

Much of the study of consumers' selves is based on seeking and predicting buyer behaviour as it relates to product- and self-image. However, Belk (1995) described a change in research priorities from this paradigm to a more encompassing perspective of consumer behaviour based on non-utilitarian values of consumption. Recognising this change, Belk's (1988) extended self has emerged.

### 2.5.2 Belk's Extended Self

In formulating this idea, Belk's (1988) extended self addresses individuals' relationships with their possessions; he contends that possessions contribute to and reflect individual identities. He declares that:

*"A key to understanding what possessions mean is recognising that, knowingly or unknowingly, intentionally or unintentionally, we regard our possessions as parts of ourselves." (Belk, 1988, p. 139)*

James (1890a, p. 139) laid the foundation of consumer research into the concept of self by asserting that “a man’s self is the sum total of all that he CAN call his...”; based on this definition, Tuan (1980, p. 472) argues that “we are what we have is perhaps the most basic and powerful fact of consumer behaviour”. This statement has been criticised for lacking meaning, empirical identification and explanatory power (Cohen, 1989). Solomon (1990) is concerned with the construct’s limitations, as the extended self conceptualisation has not been able completely to overcome the limitations of previous work. Despite this, Belk’s study has inevitably provided a valuable impetus for the discipline of consumer research. Belk (1990) also presents the conceptualisation of the extended self in terms of time, as the self is not only viewed in the eternal present, but also temporally.

Belk’s (1988) notion of the extended self is not only limited to personal possessions or external objects, but also encompasses people, places, group possessions and possessions such as body parts and vital organs. Furthermore, this notion is also “superficially masculine” recognising not only “me” (the self) but also what is seen as “mine.” For this reason, the perspective of the extended self advocated by Belk differs substantially from previous consumer self-concept research.

In a study by Rochberg-Halton (1984, p.141), the author suggests that “as we age the possessions that people cite as ‘special’ tend increasingly to be those that symbolise other people.” In other words, possessions are not only regarded as part of the self, but act as instrumental in the development of that self. McCracken’s (1987) study supports this point of view, finding that possessions can be instrumental in the maintenance of self-concept because they play a role in easing life transitions.

In Belk’s (1988, p. 145) attempt to relate the meanings of possessions to the sense of self, he contends that “objects in our possession literally can extend self, as when a tool or weapon allows us to do things of which we would otherwise be incapable.” In this context, Belk (1988) suggests that possessions

can contribute to our extended self by the role of doing, having and being. Citing the work of Sartre (1943), the famous existential psychologist and philosopher, “doing” is only a transitional desire to have or to be. This is because we want something in order to enlarge our sense of self and to the only way of knowing who we are is to observe what we have. In essence, possessions are an important means for us to know who we are because the self and the non-self are synthesised when an object becomes our possession; thus, ‘having’ and ‘being’ are also merged.

To further discuss the role of self-extension in possessions, Belk (1988) incorporates Sartre’s (1943) ideas in order to explain how we learn to regard an object as part of the self. There are three primary ways in which we incorporate possessions to this effect. One of them is to appropriate and control the object for our own personal use. Sartre (1943) further suggests that we can appropriate intangible objects such as experiences by overcoming, conquering and mastering them. Sartre describes this controlling aspect from the viewpoint of gift-giving, in which the owner has control in choosing gifts. A second way of incorporating objects into the self is by creating them. This creation can be a material object or a thought in which the creator retains his/her identity, and it can be associated with people who brought it into existence. Another form of creating the object is buying, where money enlarges the sense of self by giving the opportunity to selectively acquire or purchase certain products. The third method of incorporation is to know the object, so that it becomes part of the self. Knowing objects involves the passion and desire to make them ours; the object thus becomes a subject.

Consumer research has identified several ways in which objects can become part of the extended self. One of these is through collection Belk et al (1988) maintain that “collections represent[ing] one’s extended self account for many of the self-enhancing motives given for collecting, such as seeking power, knowledge, reminders of one’s childhood, prestige, mastery and control.” Moreover, “collections are used not only to express aspects of one’s direct experiences; they are also used to express fantasies about the self” (Belk et al,

1988). Further, collectors support their mutual identity by showing their collections to others in order to gain an improved sense of self and purpose. In such ways the self-definition of collectors can be developed. In order for collection to be part of the extended self, collectors may also seek to close or complete their collections or to fill in gaps, a process seen as self-enhancement in that it fulfils the sense of self (Belk et al, 1988). Lost or damaged collections may also be seen as damaged to the self. Belk's (1988) *Possession and the Extended Self* originally proposed that damaged possessions destroy part of the self.

Money has also been considered as part of the extended self. Belk (1988, p.155) suggests that it "becomes an end rather than a means to doing or having other things" as "the desire is to extend self through having, then using the money to buy more tangible, visible would-be extensions of self..." Money is often associated with "magical powers" (Wiseman, 1974, p. 10), is seen as profane but able to be transformed into sacred material goods (Belk et al, 1988), and is thought to bring love, fame and respect as a symbol of success and power (Ruberstein, 1981). Belk (1988) concludes that as consumers treat money as extensions of their selves, thus the well-being of their selves is linked to the "well-being" of their money.

Another object of incorporation is that of pets, which can also become part of the extended self as they attract significant investment of money, love, care, food and protection. Many authors including Secord (1968) and Veevers (1985) find that people's attitudes towards other's pets parallel their attitudes to their owners. Many have also observed that pets are often regarded as part of the family (Cain, 1985; Friedmann and Thomas, 1985; Rochberg-Halton, 1985; Wallendorf, Belk and Heisley, 1988); certainly, their deaths are often mourned as if they were. Just as age is influential in the development of self, Robin and Bensel (1985) and Levinson (1972) find that pets are also instrumental to self-identity, being used as transition objects such as surrogate parents for the children and vice versa. However, some researchers (to say nothing of activists) see pet ownership, with its attendant necessary functions of

command and control, as cruel (Tuan, 1984; Horn and Meer, 1984; Cameron and Matson, 1972). This suggests that pet ownership as part of the extended self does not always benefit that self, but may be a projection of harmful fetishes.

The incorporation of others into the extended self can be seen as another way of improving one's sense of self. According to Belk (1988), researchers who use this example do not refer to slavery with its overt ownership of human beings, but rather to children, wives, family members and friends. As Bateson (1982, p. 3) says:

*“People these days are fond of pointing out that you are what you eat. That proposition is true enough, but there is another which I think is a good deal more profound, namely, that you are the company you keep. Your identity, your self, depends upon the people and things that compose your associations. And perhaps even more important, your knowledge of yourself and your development as a person are both predicated on those same associations.”*

Further, some researchers (Tournier, 1957; Dworkin, 1981) say that such associations can sometimes be demeaning to the object, as the inability to relate to others causes them to be treated like things rather than people. The self may also suffer a sense of loss when mourning the death of a spouse, child or friends (the previously mentioned mourning of pets as part of a family should be recalled here). Unhealthy emotions such as jealousy and sexual infidelity also reflect a fear of total loss of the self. Finally, a sense of personal injury may damage the self when relatives or friends suffer injury or illness.

A final example of self-extension is that of body parts. Drawing upon the earlier definition of the extended self, Belk (1988) draws attention to the fact that these can be included along with “external” objects and people. In psychoanalytic terms this self-extension is known as “cathexis”, which

involves “the charging of an object, activity or idea with emotional energy by the individual” (Belk, 1988, p. 157). Several authors such as Rook (1985) and Secord and Jourard (1953) find that women are generally prone to cathect body parts to a greater extent than men in order to reinforce self-acceptance. Similarly, losing a part of the body is like losing a possession or a family member; it affects the loss of one’s identity and well being.

The preceding sections have discussed how we incorporate objects into our selves and in the process become extended selves. As Belk (1988, p. 159) contends, “possessions in our extended self also give us a personal archive or museum that allows us to reflect on our histories and how we have changed.” Moreover, it allows individuals in family members, communities, nation, and other groups to “gain a sense of permanence and place in the world that extends beyond their own lives and accomplishments” (Belk, 1988, p. 159).

## **2.6 Consumer Culture**

The main thrust of this type of analysis has been on the individual’s interaction with the product. The social component of any such interaction is seen in the context of individual psychology. There is a different school of thought which focuses on the social context of such individual interactions, and on the meaning systems developed by sociological and anthropological studies. It examines “consumer culture”, which is unique to a particular culture, and in the specific context of western history is the dominant mode of cultural reproduction (Slater, 1997, p.8). In the case of the American Coca-Cola brand the consumer culture that has emerged has branched out to become a powerful image to a worldwide audience (Slater, 2000), due to the firm consumer-brand relationship and culture surrounding the brand it possesses.

Consumption is always and everywhere a cultural process; however, “consumer culture” or a culture of consumption is unique and specific, being the dominant mode of cultural reproduction developed in the west during the modern era (Slater, 1997, p. 8). Holt (2002) also asserts that the consumption

of market-made commodities and desire-inducing marketing symbols is central to consumer culture, and yet the perpetuation and reproduction of the system is largely dependent upon the exercise of free personal choice.

Consumer culture is considered an important aspect of the culture of the modern west, and is certainly central to the meaning of everyday life in the modern world. It is generally bound up with those central values, practices and institutions which define western modernity, such as choice, individualism and market relations (Slater, 1997). In other words, consumer culture denotes a social arrangement in which the relation between lived culture and social resources, between a meaningful way of life and the symbolic and material resources on which that life depends, is mediated through markets (Slater, 1997, p.8). In the light of community research or consumer group research, the term “consumer culture” also conceptualises an interconnected system of commercially produced images, texts, and objects that groups use through the construction of overlapping and even conflicting practices, identities and meanings to make collective sense of their environments and to orient their member’s experience and lives (Kozinets, 2001).

According to Arnould and Thomson (2005), consumer research has started to produce a wealth of research addressing the sociocultural, experiential, symbolic, and ideological aspect of consumption in the last 20 years. Many nebulous epithets such as relativist, post-positivist, interpretivist, humanistic, naturalistic and postmodern, all characterising this research tradition, have come into being. Each, however, fails to encapsulate its theoretical commonalities and linkages. In the research, Arnould and Thompson (2005) identified some examples of consumer culture theory research and their corresponding theoretical interests (Appendix 1). Such that this research draws upon the work on Belk (1995), “Studies in the New Consumer Behaviour”, of which intends to conceive a more experimental and less restrained consumer as opposed to the more cognitively based consumer.



Reflecting this concern, they also argue that these studies place too much emphasis on methodological distinction, or evoke overly coarse and increasingly irrelevant contrasts with a presumed dominant consumer research paradigm. Correspondingly, Arnould and Thompson (2005) offer the term “consumer culture theory”, which is more appropriate to an academic focus on the core theoretical interests and questions that define this research tradition. Just as crucially, consumer culture theory has emphasised knowledge of consumer behaviour by illuminating sociocultural processes and structures related to the following:

- (1) **Consumer identity projects** – consumer culture theory concerns the coconstitutive coproductive ways in which consumers working with marketer generate materials forging a coherent if diversified and often fragmented sense of self (Belk, 1988; McCracken, 1986). The present research is closest to this work, in that it is concerned with the consumer’s self-image. In particular, it argues that Mini owners see the perceived qualities of the car, such as “fun”, as reflecting and/or reinforcing elements of their own personalities, a perception which is reinforced by belonging to a brand community which highlights those qualities.
- (2) **Marketplace cultures** – how does the emergence of consumption as a dominant human practice reconfigure cultural blueprints for action and interpretation, and vice versa? The present study is positioned across these two areas, exploring the interaction between consumers, both singly and as communities, and the resulting cultures.
- (3) **The sociohistoric patterning of consumption** – investigating the processes by which consumption choices and behaviours are shaped by social class hierarchies (Holt 1997, 1998; Wallendorf 2001); gender (Bristor and Fisher 1993; Dobscha and Ozanne 2001; Fisher and Arnould 1990; Thompson 1996; Thompson and Haytko 1997; Thompson, Locander and Pollio 1990); ethnicity (Belk 1992; Mehta and Belk 1991; Reilly and Wallendorf 1987; Wallendorf and Reilly 1983) and families, households and other formal groups (Moore-Shay, Wilkie and Luts 2002; Wallendorf and Arnould 1991; Ward and Reingen 1990).

(4) **Mass-mediated marketplace ideologies and consumer interpretive strategies** – Consumer culture theory examines consumer ideology where the system of meanings tend to channel and reproduce consumer's thoughts and actions in such way as to defend the dominant interest in society (Hirschman 1993).

Cited in Arnould and Thompson (2005, p. 871)

Consumer culture theory research also emphasises that the proverbial world for any given consumer is neither unified, monolithic, nor transparently rational (Belk et al 2003; Curasi, Price and Arnould 2004; Hirschman 1985; Mick and Fournier 1998; Price et al 2000; Rook 1985; Thompson 1996). Nevertheless, this research demonstrates that many consumers' lives are constructed around multiple realities, and they use consumption to experience realities (linked to fantasies, invocative desires, aesthetics, and identity play) that differ dramatically from the quotidian (Arnould and Thompson 2005) (see Belk and Costa 1998; Deighton and Grayson 1995; Firat and Vankatesh 1995; Holt 2002; Holt and Thompson 2004; Joy and Sherry 2003; Kozinets 2001, 2002; Martin 2004; Schau and Gilly 2003; Schouten and McAlexander 1995).

When these multiple realities are common among enough consumers who feel strongly enough about them, they can reach a "critical mass" and create subcultures. McCracken (1986) enumerates some of these in the North American context: teenagers and adults, the working and middle classes, the old and the young. He points out the fluidity, and consequently the indeterminacy and changeability, of such subcultures. These are in contrast to brand cultures, which can be seen both as subsets of these subcultures (in the case, say, of a brand of fashionware directed specifically at that subculture) and as crossing subcultural boundaries (as in the case of the present research, in which owners of many different subcultures declare their fondness for Minis and BMW MINIs).

Class based subcultures have been recognised for a long time, especially where fashion subcultural styles dug its way through to mainstream working class

and middle-class youth culture (Willis, 1990), consumption was a priority for all classes, regardless of the amount of savings they held, thus, consumption and brand cultures often but not always transcend class subcultures. Springboards for creating new styles of subcultures emerged, creating subcultures of new meanings and purpose.

### 2.6.1 Subcultures

On the broadest possible level, the world's human population could be seen as a community. The focus can then be narrowed by interest. For example, within the world community there is an "English" community which perceives a shared interest in those elements its members feel define its unique identity, both on its own terms and in opposition to other communities. In the current political climate of devolution, members of some groups such as northerners are identifying themselves more consciously with a community within the overarching English one.

According to my reading, subcultures are part of a parent culture, and can relate to some aspect of that culture. One example is the Harley Davison community studied by Holt (2004), which relates to the "American Dream" of freedom and a frontier mentality. The examples of Serbia and northern England, on the other hand, are examples of subcultures which define themselves predominantly in opposition to or as distinct from the surrounding culture. Their effect is therefore centrifugal, because they threaten to break away from the surrounding culture rather than being seated within it.

The breakup of the former Yugoslavia is an obvious case in point. Those members of what was then the province of Serbia might formerly have described themselves as "Yugoslav", whereas now they would describe themselves as "Serb".

In terms of consumer behaviour approaches, subcultures can be defined as a group of members within a society who share similar beliefs and experiences; these subcultures can consist of people who are similar in age, race,

background and activities, following belief systems which cause them to have different consumer lifestyles (Solomon, 2004).

Communities posing no threat to their parent communities can justly be called “subcultures”. When the common interest that binds members of a community together to a degree sufficient to make it distinct is based on consumption, that group constitutes a “consumption community”. Consumption can be defined as loosely as desired; the commodity can literally be consumed, as in a food, or “partaken of”, as in the Mini. Even this is not necessary. A community has formed around a Vulcan bomber which at the time of writing is being restored at an airfield near Leicester. “Partaking” in this case would, for most of the community’s members, consist of irregular and scarce meetings to see the aeroplane, which does not necessarily involve seeing it fly or even run its engines. Sharing the experience of the object is what binds community members.

While there are diverse definitions of community and different types of community, Gusfield (1978) has revealed three core components of community:

1. Consciousness of kind
2. Moral responsibility
3. Shared rituals and traditions

Cited in Muniz and O’Guinn (2001, p. 5-6).

Consciousness of kind refers to the inherent and intrinsic connection that members feel towards one another, and a collective difference with others not in the community. It can be viewed as a way of thinking about things which transcends shared attitudes or perceived similarities. Such consciousness is the first of these three components chronologically. It is a necessary initial step, from which the next two proceed. The second component, moral responsibility, refers to the community’s sense of duty; it is what produces, in times of threat to the community, a sense of collective action. Finally, shared rituals and traditions represent an important way of perpetuating the

community's history, culture, consciousness and social solidarity (Durkheim, 1965).

In the discussion so far, communities and tribes have been seen as distinguishing themselves partly in opposition to other groups or traits. Sirsi, Ward and Reingen (1996, p. 346) draw attention to the *intracultural* as opposed to *intercultural* behaviours that strengthen communities. In their examination of intracultural variation, they "analyze the interrelation of the constituent aspects of culture in local groups of participants". Berkowitz and TerKeurst (1999), in their work on a local journalistic community, examine how interactions within members of a community lead to shared meanings in a reciprocal process involving subconscious assumptions and a conscious learning of the "rules" of the community. These rules must be internalised, especially in such a community, in order for them to be effective.

## **2.6 Consumer Culture**

The main thrust of this type of analysis has been on the individual's interaction with the product. The social component of any such interaction is seen in the context of individual psychology. There is a different school of thought which focuses on the social context of such individual interactions, and on the meaning systems developed by sociological and anthropological studies. It examines "consumer culture", which is unique to a particular culture, and in the specific context of western history is the dominant mode of cultural reproduction (Slater, 1997, p.8). In the case of the American Coca-Cola brand the consumer culture that has emerged has branched out to become a powerful image to a worldwide audience (Slater, 2000), due to the firm consumer-brand relationship and culture surrounding the brand it possesses.

Consumption is always and everywhere a cultural process; however, "consumer culture" or a culture of consumption is unique and specific, being the dominant mode of cultural reproduction developed in the west during the modern era (Slater, 1997, p. 8). Holt (2002) also asserts that the consumption

of market-made commodities and desire-inducing marketing symbols is central to consumer culture, and yet the perpetuation and reproduction of the system is largely dependent upon the exercise of free personal choice.

Consumer culture is considered an important aspect of the culture of the modern west, and is certainly central to the meaning of everyday life in the modern world. It is generally bound up with those central values, practices and institutions which define western modernity, such as choice, individualism and market relations (Slater, 1997). In other words, consumer culture denotes a social arrangement in which the relation between lived culture and social resources, between a meaningful way of life and the symbolic and material resources on which that life depends, is mediated through markets (Slater, 1997, p.8). In the light of community research or consumer group research, the term “consumer culture” also conceptualises an interconnected system of commercially produced images, texts, and objects that groups use through the construction of overlapping and even conflicting practices, identities and meanings to make collective sense of their environments and to orient their member’s experience and lives (Kozinets, 2001).

According to Arnould and Thomson (2005), consumer research has started to produce a wealth of research addressing the sociocultural, experiential, symbolic, and ideological aspect of consumption in the last 20 years. Many nebulous epithets such as relativist, post-positivist, interpretivist, humanistic, naturalistic and postmodern, all characterising this research tradition, have come into being. Each, however, fails to encapsulate its theoretical commonalities and linkages. In the research, Arnould and Thompson (2005) identified some examples of consumer culture theory research and their corresponding theoretical interests (Appendix 1). Such that this research draws upon the work on Belk (1995), “Studies in the New Consumer Behaviour”, of which intends to conceive a more experimental and less restrained consumer as opposed to the more cognitively based consumer.

Reflecting this concern, they also argue that these studies place too much emphasis on methodological distinction, or evoke overly coarse and increasingly irrelevant contrasts with a presumed dominant consumer research paradigm. Correspondingly, Arnould and Thompson (2005) offer the term “consumer culture theory”, which is more appropriate to an academic focus on the core theoretical interests and questions that define this research tradition. Just as crucially, consumer culture theory has emphasised knowledge of consumer behaviour by illuminating sociocultural processes and structures related to the following:

- (5) **Consumer identity projects** – consumer culture theory concerns the coconstitutive coproductive ways in which consumers working with marketer generate materials forging a coherent if diversified and often fragmented sense of self (Belk, 1988; McCracken, 1986). The present research is closest to this work, in that it is concerned with the consumer’s self-image. In particular, it argues that Mini owners see the perceived qualities of the car, such as “fun”, as reflecting and/or reinforcing elements of their own personalities, a perception which is reinforced by belonging to a brand community which highlights those qualities.
- (6) **Marketplace cultures** – how does the emergence of consumption as a dominant human practice reconfigure cultural blueprints for action and interpretation, and vice versa? The present study is positioned across these two areas, exploring the interaction between consumers, both singly and as communities, and the resulting cultures.
- (7) **The sociohistoric patterning of consumption** – investigating the processes by which consumption choices and behaviours are shaped by social class hierarchies (Holt 1997, 1998; Wallendorf 2001); gender (Bristor and Fisher 1993; Dobscha and Ozanne 2001; Fisher and Arnould 1990; Thompson 1996; Thompson and Haytko 1997; Thompson, Locander and Pollio 1990); ethnicity (Belk 1992; Mehta and Belk 1991; Reilly and Wallendorf 1987; Wallendorf and Reilly 1983) and families, households and other formal groups (Moore-Shay, Wilkie and Luts 2002; Wallendorf and Arnould 1991; Ward and Reingen 1990).

(8) **Mass-mediated marketplace ideologies and consumer interpretive strategies** – Consumer culture theory examines consumer ideology where the system of meanings tend to channel and reproduce consumer's thoughts and actions in such way as to defend the dominant interest in society (Hirschman 1993).

Cited in Arnould and Thompson (2005, p. 871)

Consumer culture theory research also emphasises that the proverbial world for any given consumer is neither unified, monolithic, nor transparently rational (Belk et al 2003; Curasi, Price and Arnould 2004; Hirschman 1985; Mick and Fournier 1998; Price et al 2000; Rook 1985; Thompson 1996). Nevertheless, this research demonstrates that many consumers' lives are constructed around multiple realities, and they use consumption to experience realities (linked to fantasies, invocative desires, aesthetics, and identity play) that differ dramatically from the quotidian (Arnould and Thompson 2005) (see Belk and Costa 1998; Deighton and Grayson 1995; Firat and Vankatesh 1995; Holt 2002; Holt and Thompson 2004; Joy and Sherry 2003; Kozinets 2001, 2002; Martin 2004; Schau and Gilly 2003; Schouten and McAlexander 1995).

When these multiple realities are common among enough consumers who feel strongly enough about them, they can reach a "critical mass" and create subcultures. McCracken (1986) enumerates some of these in the North American context: teenagers and adults, the working and middle classes, the old and the young. He points out the fluidity, and consequently the indeterminacy and changeability, of such subcultures. These are in contrast to brand cultures, which can be seen both as subsets of these subcultures (in the case, say, of a brand of fashionware directed specifically at that subculture) and as crossing subcultural boundaries (as in the case of the present research, in which owners of many different subcultures declare their fondness for Minis and BMW MINIs).

Class based subcultures have been recognised for a long time, especially where fashion subcultural styles dug its way through to mainstream working class



and middle-class youth culture (Willis, 1990), consumption was a priority for all classes, regardless of the amount of savings they held, thus, consumption and brand cultures often but not always transcend class subcultures. Springboards for creating new styles of subcultures emerged, creating subcultures of new meanings and purpose.

### 2.6.1 Subcultures

On the broadest possible level, the world's human population could be seen as a community. The focus can then be narrowed by interest. For example, within the world community there is an "English" community which perceives a shared interest in those elements its members feel define its unique identity, both on its own terms and in opposition to other communities. In the current political climate of devolution, members of some groups such as northerners are identifying themselves more consciously with a community within the overarching English one.

According to my reading, subcultures are part of a parent culture, and can relate to some aspect of that culture. One example is the Harley-Davidson community studied by Holt (2004), which relates to the "American Dream" of freedom and a frontier mentality. Interestingly, because the American Dream relates largely to a long-lost frontier, the "Wild West", it now functions in opposition to the prevailing American culture, which has become sedentary and urban. The effect of the Harley-Davidson subculture is thus that of a counter-culture. The examples of Serbia and northern England, on the other hand, are examples of subcultures which define themselves predominantly in opposition to or as distinct from the surrounding culture. Their effect is therefore centrifugal, because they threaten to break away from the surrounding culture rather than being seated within it.

The breakup of the former Yugoslavia is an obvious case in point. Those members of what was then the province of Serbia might formerly have described themselves as "Yugoslav", whereas now they would describe themselves as "Serb".

All of these examples concern firmly established, long-term groupings, both in terms of the groups themselves and of their members. Membership, whether the result of choice as in the Harley-Davidson community or predetermined by some kind of ethnicity or race as in the nations comprising the former Yugoslavia, tends to be long-lasting and loyal. However, one train of thought sees subcultures as such to have been at least partly supplanted. This train is explored by Hall and Jefferson (2006) in their anthology of postmodern writings on youth subcultures in Britain during the last thirty years. They trace a line of thought that sees subcultures having “morphed into club cultures” that arise from the process of social fragmentation that occurred during the Thatcherist era in the 1980s. The memberships of such cultures is more transient and fluid than are those of more traditional subcultures, being characterised by Bennett (1999) as “neo-tribes”, echoing Cova’s exploration of the difference between the relative fluidity of tribes and stasis of communities.

If one continues to refer to traditional subcultures in terms of approaches to consumer behaviour, they can be defined as groups of members within a society who share similar beliefs and experiences; these subcultures can consist of people who are similar in age, race, background and activities, following belief systems which cause them to have different consumer lifestyles (Solomon, 2004). However, in the light of the postmodern debate just outlined, the conditional “can” should be stressed. There is no necessity for homogenous membership. This is particularly the case for the present study, in which the Mini has existed for half a century and has engendered varying degrees of loyalty from a wide range of people, from those who were caught up as youths in the social movement in which the classic Mini played such a prominent role, to enthusiasts for the BMW MINI. The factor that unifies the membership is something extrinsic to them: it is not age, class or race. Rather, it is the three notions that are inherent in the brand object: small-is-beautiful, fun and Britishness. This is what would be expected in a post-modern scenario in which a “tribal” community is loose formed within a society

characterised by loose social bonds of people of diverse background seeking an identity.

Confining the discussion to groups sharing cultural elements with their parent communities and posing them no threat, they can justly be called “subcultures”. When the common interest that binds members of a community together to a degree sufficient to make it distinct is based on consumption, that group constitutes a “consumption community”. Consumption can be defined as loosely as desired; the commodity can literally be consumed, as in a food, or “partaken of”, as in the Mini. Even this is not necessary. A community has formed around a Vulcan bomber which at the time of writing is being restored at an airfield near Leicester. “Partaking” in this case would, for most of the community’s members, consist of irregular and infrequent meetings to see the aeroplane, which does not necessarily involve seeing it fly or even run its engines. Sharing the experience of the object is what binds community members.

While there are diverse definitions of community and different types of community, Gusfield (1978) has revealed three core components of community:

4. Consciousness of kind
5. Moral responsibility
6. Shared rituals and traditions

Cited in Muniz and O’Guinn (2001, p. 5-6).

Consciousness of kind refers to the inherent and intrinsic connection that members feel towards one another, and a collective difference with others not in the community. It can be viewed as a way of thinking about things which transcends shared attitudes or perceived similarities. Such consciousness is the first of these three components chronologically. It is a necessary initial step, from which the next two proceed. The second component, moral responsibility, refers to the community’s sense of duty; it is what produces, in times of threat to the community, a sense of collective action. Finally, shared

rituals and traditions represent an important way of perpetuating the community's history, culture, consciousness and social solidarity (Durkheim, 1965).

In the discussion so far, communities and tribes have been seen as distinguishing themselves partly in opposition to other groups or traits. Sirsi, Ward and Reingen (1996, p. 346) draw attention to the *intracultural* as opposed to *intercultural* behaviours that strengthen communities. In their examination of intracultural variation, they "analyze the interrelation of the constituent aspects of culture in local groups of participants". Berkowitz and TerKeurst (1999), in their work on a local journalistic community, examine how interactions within members of a community lead to shared meanings in a reciprocal process involving subconscious assumptions and a conscious learning of the "rules" of the community. These rules must be internalised, especially in such a community, in order for them to be effective.

### 2.6.2 Subcultures of consumption

Schouten and McAlexander (1995, p. 43) define this term as a distinctive subgroup of consumers that self-select "on the basis of a shared commitment to a particular product class, brand or consumption activity". Gusfield's (1978) three markers discussed above are highly appropriate means by which to distinguish the existence of such communities and to explore them in detail. With regard to the first marker, consciousness of kind, McAlexander and Schouten (1993, 1995) use the case study of Harley-Davidson (HD) motorcycle owners to examine the maintenance of a subculture of consumption. In this case, the ethos of the motorcycle, which includes a sense of freedom from restraint, is an important factor in creating this "consciousness of kind". A three-stage process by which identification is narrowed to the subject community is implicit in the authors' study: an individual empathises with a general set of values (identified by the authors in this case as personal freedom, patriotism and American heritage, and machismo) which the subject community sees itself as adhering to; he or she narrows their interest to the specific brand object which is seen by the community (and to some extent at

least by wider society) as exemplifying these values (in this case the HD), and finally he or she seeks active participation in the community which has formed around the brand object. Algesheimer et al (2005) dissect the individual's relationship with the brand, the brand object in general, a specific form of the brand object (e.g. the Ford Explorer rather than just the Ford) and the brand community.

The consumption phenomena of such subgroups include such rituals and traditions as when Mini drivers flash headlights on meeting other group members, and an unspoken ban on touching another member's Harley-Davidson motorbike without their permission. Group meetings are rituals common to both communities. The moral responsibility of community members can be redefined as a commitment to the group and its members.

In both these cases, communities are expected to provide their members with a self-identity that is similar to that in Belk's (1988) notion of the "community level of self." Lantz and Leob (1998) further suggest that a greater level of community identity leads to a greater community consumer ethnocentrism.

Communities can develop from the least significant of individual practices. Microgroups can form from shared emotions, beliefs, lifestyles and consumption choices. Interpretations of aspects of culture are specific to the group. The way the members of a microgroup interact with each other develops over time and may change according to sociological developments. Fan clubs are examples of such microgroups.

Fans in significantly large numbers are a creation of mass media. The television drama "The X-Files", first broadcast in 1993, has gathered a whole new "fan culture" (Kozinets, 1997) which has spawned its own subcultures, some of them still growing. The viewers of "X-Files" commit themselves to the extent that the series and the culture which surrounds it become part of their lifestyles and personalities. Some may as go as far as to develop what they would see as a relationship with the series, treating it as one of the highlights

of their lives. Within these communities, religious metaphors and media images are deployed and draw associations to the brand for the consumer. Narrative ploys are used in many cases of communities as it unites relations to the consumer, allowing for a greater understanding, connect with the brand and sharing experiences through consumption (Arnould and Price, 1993).

Another popular television series is “Star Trek”, the original series of which was broadcast between 1966 and 1969. Being a science fiction series, there has been opportunity to create a new “religion” and develop a loyal and devoted following around this series (Kozinets, 2001). The “subculture of consumption” (McAlexander, 1995) present in society is made up of individual groups such as these fan clubs. Fans of “Star Trek” invest their time and money buying into its culture, displaying their love and dedication in such ways as participating in events, using “Star Trek”-dedicated chatrooms and purchasing merchandise. When enough of these actions occur closely enough together in time, they bring consumers together, causing individuals to unite and subcultures to emerge. Consumers then begin to feel a sense of belonging and trust within a recognisable community.

In the tattoo industry, there is a need for major commitment due to the permanence and pain involved. As it is a form of body modification it requires considerably more forethought than decision making concerning such mundane matters as grocery shopping. Consumers of tattoos can be grouped into the three categories of those who acquire their tattoos to make fashion or aesthetic statements, those who are committed to this form of body modification but who do not wish to reveal their devotion, and those who are unreservedly committed collectors (Goulding et al, 2004). Both tattooist and consumer must have confidence and dedication in the process and in each other, in some cases amounting to a sense of intimacy. The tattoo acts both as a permanent statement regarding the individual and as an addition to the tattooist’s portfolio. From a tattooist’s perspective, the creation of the tattoo is a form of expression through their artwork and equally with that of the

consumer. Tattooists experience feelings of accomplishment and euphoria when they are satisfied with the skill and artistry of their execution.

The “subculture of consumption” (McAlexander, 1995) present in society is made up of individual groups such as these fan clubs and communities, the study of whose cultures enables a greater insight into consumer behaviour and consumption. A fruitful area for such study would be the wide range of creative responses from companies, and consequently choice for consumers, resulting from such subcultures’ freedom of expression and lack of restraint. Products as simple as bumper stickers have become a cheap and versatile way of displaying consumers “self-proclamations, affiliation with kinship groups, directives to others, epithets, boasts” (Solomon, 1992, p. 167).

The consumption factor has set about to recognise the concept of community aspects. There are many varied communities of which include subcultures, tribes and microcultures. The brand community, as the main focus of the present study, will be explored in greater depth in the next chapter of this thesis.

## **2.7 Summary**

This chapter has in general shown that the older, positivist model has not been completely supplanted by the postmodern one, but rather that the facets of consumer behaviour revealed by later research are of equal validity with those of the older model. One result of such research is a discovery of the role of hedonism as well as of rationality in consumer decision making. This has led to attempts both to more deeply explore the constituents of the hedonic response and to reintegrate cognitive and behavioural understandings of consumer responses. One result of the former has been the development of the symbolic interactionist school, which seeks to explore the interactions between a trinity of actors: individual, product and society. These interactions are mediated by the symbolic properties assigned the product by the other two actors. The chief means by which this happens, especially as regards the

individual as consumer, is ritual. The chief of these means has been identified as ritual, which is used to mutually reinforce socially assigned concepts. When a segment of the consumer population feels enough of a strong common interest in a particular product (in the widest possible sense), a subculture is created.



## CHAPTER 3 Brand Community and its Roots in Cultural Consumption

### 3.1 Introduction

This chapter concentrates on the two concepts of brand and community, and examines the relationship between the two. It begins by exploring the ways in which brands can acquire quasi-human characteristics and thereby the capacity to inspire loyalty. The way in which cultures accumulate around certain brands is then examined, and this provides a bridge to the following section that deals with the communities that arise from these cultures. Consumption and brand communities are set in the context of communities generally, a discussion that takes in various views of their natures and what constitutes them. Finally, the impact of the development of cyberspace on such communities is explored.

### 3.2 The Role of Branding

Brands undoubtedly play an important role in consumer consumption behaviour. The word is derived from the Old Norse *brandr*, which means to burn, referring to the “marks” used to provide or ensure the correct product has been chosen (Stobart, 1994). Brand names and trademarks usually guarantee that the product will be of a certain standard. More specifically, Murphy (1990) argues that the notion of “brand” is a complex phenomenon rather than just an actual product, comprising tangible and intangible values as well as other associate attributes.

Branding a product has the purpose of distinguishing that product from similar ones offered by other companies, as well as allowing companies to attach value to it. A brand name also allows consumers to differentiate between goods and to make their choices easier. It not only facilitates consumers’ decision making, but also benefits the trader of the products by aiding the processing of information. The use of brands and trademarks also allow for brand categories, providing the company to expand their audience and reach a wider scope of consumers.

To date, most brand research shows that “brand” is an important element in people’ lives; it has been argued that brands are noticeably tied to and embraced by the consumer, sometimes representing the personality of the individual, because of the values and perceptions associated with those brands. These choices demonstrate consumer’s interests.

Consumer research has traditionally viewed the question of brand preference in terms of brand attributes, product benefits, and the actual decision process (e.g. Keller 1993). Not until recently has this notion changed, and the consumer is now integrated with the marketer, developing different forms of relationship based on individual experiences. Brand communities or sub cultures may also form (Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001). Drawing on these studies, consumers appropriate brand meanings in ways that make the brand valuable to them. Some – but not all - brands can lead to the formation of brand communities. Some branded products remain necessities, but do not generate strong personal conceptions.

Brand value is an element in companies that can depreciate easily. This can be dealt with in one or both of two ways. Over time the product or service needs to be consistent, and the brand may introduce new ideas, concepts or sub-brands to enhance the attraction of the company and the value consumers place on it. Consumers tend to value some brands less than others due to their individual tastes and their interactions with them.

One greatly important function of brands is to increase familiarity and reduce consumers’ uncertainty of choice. This is particularly relevant when a new product is purchased (DeVecchio, 3000). When companies introduce new categories or extensions into their brand range, consumers may refer to their past experiences of the brand and make a decision based on this. With the introduction of new products into the brand, there will no doubt be many effects. When the brand is expanded, the consumer will face more decisions

and their attention will be divided between several products, decreasing the value they place on the initial one.

Brands, however, function in more ways than purely utilitarian ones. They assume some anthropomorphic qualities which enable a pseudo-relationship between the brand, the individual consumer and the brand community to be established, or at least discerned. It is this “human” quality of the brand that enables such relationships, and the brand’s “personality” is therefore fundamental to an examination of the whole topic of brand communities.

### 3.2.1 Brand Personality

A brand name conveys many meanings to a consumer: associations with the brand, society's views of the brand's reputation, and past experiences of the consumer and brand. Building a brand 'personality' allows for a more individual brand and an increased organisational ability in the consumer market. A brand's set of characteristics help establish the form and function of a company.

From a sociological perspective, Muniz (1997) comments that brands attach meaning to a good in the sense of property; this is an important function of branding, as it allows the marketer to differentiate products which would otherwise be the same as each other. According to Motameni and Shahrokhi (1998), brand names and trademarks most often guarantee that those products bearing the “marks” are of a certain quality. The brand explicitly helps the customer make their decision before purchasing is involved.

Research has discovered that some successful brands were purchased on account of their brand value and other non-utilitarian considerations rather than factors to do with the actual product. Levy (1959) supports this by noting that consumers purchase goods according to the value the brand offers, rather than in terms of product usage. In advocating this idea, some other practitioners and consumer researchers (Gainer & Fisher, 1994; Belk 1988; Lantz & Leob, 1998; Mick, 1986; Muniz, 1997; Solomon 1983) have drawn

attention to the symbolic and experiential aspects which are seen as benefits of the brand.

As a brand has a symbolic function and is associated with human values, consumers consider them to be an extension of themselves. These traits bear a further similarity to human personality, as they change and develop over time (Goodyear, 1993). Lambkin et al. (1998) clarifies brands' function as a representation of consumer's personalities, behaviours, status and trends. Additionally, Aaker (1991) strongly argues that the symbolic use of the brands is eminently possible as consumers often imagine and associate the brand they are using with special events or fantasy imagery. In the case of the Mini, a personality has been created that exudes the feeling of fun, cheekiness, youth and adventure. With the launch of the BMW MINI, a slightly different personality was developed to appeal to the modern-day consumer, demonstrating that brand personalities can alter according to the social and cultural context. A company which has introduced new products into the brand family in this manner risks consumers spreading their attention to more than one product/service, thereby weakening their attraction to the initial brand product. The expansion of the brand family furthermore presents the consumer with a wider choice of brand offerings, resulting in another decision-making process. Consumers who have had past experience of the brand's products or services may find that their decision is made easier by this experience. A consumer without such knowledge may struggle to decide among the various brands on offer.

Building a brand personality enables companies to develop consumer trust and loyalty (Fournier, 1998). It helps brands strengthen persuasive power and plant the brand's meaning into the consumers minds, cementing their allegiance. The meaning attached to the brand will be individual and personal to each consumer. (The issue of loyalty is discussed in greater depth below.)

The emergence of a brand personality may derive both from the consumer and from the brand's marketing sector (Lehmann, 1993). In both cases, the brand is dependant on elements such as visual imagery and text that form an

integrated interpretation of the brand. From the marketers' point of view, the symbolic use of brands allows them to construct brand characteristics which enable consumers to see their brand as a distinct form with anthropological qualities such as desirability, fashionableness, comicality, dominance and power. These traits are used by the marketer in a two-part interaction: consumers make the association with the product and brand, and then relate it to themselves. They must buy into the brand product or service in order to acquire the desirable traits exemplified by that brand (Keller, 1998).

### 3.2.2 Brand Loyalty

In order for a brand to be successful and gain competitive advantage against others, there is a need to be able to interest consumers in the product or service that will benefit the customer. As well as appealing to potential consumers, it must retain the faith and trust of existing customers. A company which has loyal followers will have a greater chance of survival against competitors, and profits will therefore increase over time:

*“Brands are at the heart of marketing and business strategy. Successful brands create wealth by attracting and retaining customers.” (Doyle, 1998, p. 165)*

As the number of loyal customers increases, the company becomes more stable and more resistant to new brands emerging into the consumer market. One of the signs of successful brand loyalty is where the number of brand product/service increases while maintaining a large and loyal customer base seeking to buy into the brand's attributes. Additionally, brands compete against each other in order to acquire as many new customers as possible while maintaining the loyalty of existing ones. In the case of this study, the Mini car community has maintained a large group of consumers that have remained loyal to the original design and function of the car.

A consumer commits to a brand in order to gain a sense of fulfillment and assume a certain standard of quality in the brand product. Keller (1994, p. 10) states that “satisfaction level is a function of the difference between perceived performance and expectation”. If customers sense that the product does not meet their individual requirements and perceptions of what the branded product is thought to deliver, they may lose faith in the brand and shift their focus elsewhere in the marketplace. As a result, the company would have lost a loyal customer. This can happen before or after purchase; in the former case, the brand will have lost a potential customer. However, if the customer’s purchase satisfies or even exceeds their expectations, they will be more likely to choose that brand again. In this case, if a company has a sufficient number of brand-loyal customers, the marketing costs of the brand will be reduced (Reichheld, 1996) and profits will rise. Another benefit is that the brand will become more widely recognised.

A common strategy with company marketers to attract and increase customer loyalty is to introduce promotion periods. Not only does this device attract and influence new customers, but it also aims to maintain the loyalty of existing ones. Nonetheless, there is a risk with sales promotion that is it may devalue the brand, as well causing a great number of consumers to purchase only during promotions. As a result, the company may experience irregular customer loyalty Figures as well as an air of uncertainty in company loyalty schemes.

The previous discussion has assumed an automatic mechanism whereby appropriate marketing leads inevitably to the creation of a brand. The consumer’s response is seen as largely a conditioned one, whereby he or she will respond to stimuli provided by marketers. As has been pointed out earlier this chapter, however, many scholars have noted that the range of relationships between the actors in the world of brand relationships is much greater than simply from marketer to consumer. Muniz and O’Guinn (2001), for example, argue that brand loyalty is a function of relationships between consumers. Thus, in order for customers to commit to a brand, they must first

have the ability to connect with other consumers, imprinting the expressional or functional value of the product into their minds. Loyal customers would relate the brand to anthropological qualities, resulting in the consumer-brand relationship becoming more personal.

Fournier (1998) points out the reciprocal nature of the relationship between marketer and consumer. She sees the relationship as much more of a symbiotic one, in which the creation of the brand object is a partnership between the consumer and the marketer, or even in which the consumer decides the nature of that object, especially through the mechanism of word-of-mouth (or, by extension, “virtual” word-of-mouth in electronic formats) sales, uncontrolled by the marketer or advertiser: the informal, transient community created in this way can develop an image of the object completely unintended by its originators. Fournier’s (1998) work is also typical of more recent studies in another respect: it serves to locate the subject in its sociological context, in this case by studying the nature of relationships generically in order to find the ways in which they work in the particular instance of the brand relationship.

### 3.2.3 Brand Culture

Brand culture takes into account consumers’ ideologies and philosophies. Brand culture is a vital part of branding, as it integrates consumers’ interests and lifestyles into the brand, resulting in the consumer developing an association with it. It is important to understand a consumer’s background and belief systems in order for a brand to succeed. Taking into account the diversity of cultures within a society is valuable in many ways. This shows that consumers have expectations that a company’s offering will meet their individual needs and preconceptions in order for them to commit to the brand. In order for companies to attract business, they must first understand the minds of their target consumers. Likewise, consumers are able to understand and absorb brands within the knowledge of their surrounding culture. “Culture can help us to comprehend brands whereas brands can provide a

powerful lens by which to comprehend organizational-related culture” (Balmer, 2006, p. 4).

Incorporating factors of a culture into a product or service can act as a springboard for a brand’s image and draw the consumer into the brand. For example, an airline such as Singapore Airlines allows its travellers to “experience the culture of Singapore before they actually arrive in the city.” (Engeseth, 2006) In this case, the brand has made an impact on consumers with hospitality and by indirectly introducing them to a culture. Consumers will feel comfortable on the plane journey, resulting in a pleasant impression of Singaporean people and an insight into their community.

Brand culture is necessary in order to communicate the brand’s values, purpose and position in society to the consumer. Such a culture provides a company with an identity within the brand community as well as a benefit for the company’s ongoing success. For example the ‘Marks and Spencer’ organisation is successful because it has such a strong brand culture which not only manifests itself in terms of loyalty from consumers and staff but also results in considerable savings in terms of marketing and corporate communications. (Balmer, 2006, p. 34) Through the brand culture, the products have created a social identity, as well as acting as carriers of interpersonal persuasion and the movability or conversion of their meanings. Modern consumption society is not merely about products, but it also concerns play with meaning and that culture is “the very element of consumer society itself” (Jameson, 1991, p. 131) This demonstrates that consumers do not always consume for the physical product, but do so for its culture which is the collective of shared meanings, rituals, norms and traditions among the members in the community of in the society.

Many companies create a brand culture so that their consumers become an entity and feel involved in the brand:

*“These brands beat the competition not just by delivering unique benefits, services or technologies but also by forging a firm connection with buyers*



*and creating a brand culture. Vespa SA says that it endeavours to instil in every owner the knowledge that he/she is part of the Vespa culture.” (Arvidsson, 2001, p.52)*

This demonstrates how Vespa’s intentions are to succeed against rival competitors by presenting consumers with a brand that fulfils consumers’ needs and lifestyles. Consumers make associations with the brand according to their own experiences.

Fashion businesses such as Benetton have created globally successful brands that take into account the views and lifestyles of its consumers. “Benetton’s ‘Colors’ campaign, indecipherable to many, has at its core a deep understanding and respect for its audience.” (Bowen, 1998, p. 111) Because the consumer is more confident with and knowledgeable about the brand, Benetton is able to indulge in more stimulating marketing tactics. Consumers would then relate the brand to social issues or aspects of their own lives.

“In cultural branding, communications are the center of customer value. Customers buy the product to experience these stories. The product is simply a conduit through which customers can experience the stories that the brand tells.” (Holt, 2004, p. 36) Thus the brand may suggest to the consumer a new approach in lifestyle or experience that in turn relates them back to the brand. Brand culture changes according to society; therefore brands need to be aware of consumers’ thoughts and lifestyle habits. Such awareness is used to create identities with which consumers can relate, and to provide a set of principles for them to adhere to.

Myths are in used in cultural branding in order to create a narrative to which consumers can relate and with which they can associate. They become conscious of information relating to the brand, and either believe or reject the myth, which is created from elements that “represent the shared emotions and ideals of a culture” (Solomon, 2004, p. 530).

Brands transform into icons by means of suggestive and valued cherished positioning in society's culture. The creation of myths enables brands to manage and subsist contradictory cultural ways, taking into account the emotions generated by the myth (Holt, 2004). Media messages, conveying these myths help consumers to become content with their identities by bridging the cultural contradictions in society.

It has been noted by Featherstone (1991) that there is no longer an anchored way of living style, as well as the possession of material objects status groups. Brand culture has given rise to the eruption of a numerous spectrum of consumers, each with varied consumer patterns, however, to some degree they hold similar acts. To elaborate, Lunt and Livingstone (1992, p. 12), obtained from their studies that consumers have five categories of consumption identities. There are consumers who:

1. Who gain negligible pleasure in shopping
2. Are routine shoppers
3. Find enjoyment in shopping, window-shopping and status shopping.
4. Are economy aware shoppers
5. Seek to alternative markets

These categories of consumers are present in the culture of all brand consumption and contribute to the culture of the brand.

When consumers are drawn to a product or service, they decide whether that product or service will help them attain their personal aspirations. The dialogue and images which are an integral part of films are a powerful agent which bond a culture together (Markman, 2005) and leave a lasting impression in consumers' minds. This can result in them being vulnerable to having their rational judgment bypassed by emotional, or even subliminal, processes, to the extent that they believe facts or statements that they can relate to rather than that they judge objectively to be correct.

When people with one or more common interests are part of a group, this effect is likely to be reinforced. In the case of the subcultures discussed

earlier, for example, various psychological factors would come into play which would strengthen individual members' commitment to those interests. Such factors would operate by buttressing those interests' inherent qualities with a group consensus from which it would be more difficult to withdraw than would be the case if the only consideration were the individual's inclinations. These issues would come into play regardless of the type of community, although the manner in which they do so would naturally vary tremendously. In order to bring these factors to the fore, a discussion of community is necessary.

### 3.3 Communities

In the past, the study of community was a prominent topic in sociology. There are many and various definitions of "community", some of which are culturally determined: for example, in Latin countries the word "communaute" in French or "communita" in Italian refers to the existence of blood-related bonds, while in English-speaking countries the definition of "community" is "a group of people who have the same interest, religion, race etc" (Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, 2003, p. 308). Cova (2002) noted that this English concept of "community" suffers from an excessive modernist bent, as opposed to Latin countries, where it characterises a body of people with something in common such as district of residence or occupational interest, without implying the existence of non-rational and rather archaic bonds. Bounds (1997) also looked at the variety of uses of the concept of community, and she commented:

*"... community serves a metaphor for those bonds among individuals that the market is eroding and is a reaction to globalisation... they are reactions to a sense of uprootedness which is countered by seeking/roots connections through forms of associations which preserve particular memories of the past, a measure of stability in the present and particular expectations for the future."*

*(Bounds, 1997, p.2-3)*

Anderson (1983, p. 419) asserts that it is, “imagined communities” that allow modern nations to transcend vast geographic boundaries and remain reasonably cohesive.” He suggested that communities are to some degree sustained by notions of imagination and understood by individuals.

### 3.3.1 Tribes in relation to communities

According to Sahlins (1976) it has been indicated that in modern societies, manufactured objects acting as a “totem” have been replaced by species and natural objects; and where consumer groups act as tribes in olden times. Furthermore, he also views the clothing system as a symbolic representation in which members mediate their membership through social groups rather than plainly a set of material objects, where the clothing show the distinction between gender and status.

Looking at another perspective, Cova (1997) has been argued that the beginning of the postmodern era “ends with the emergence of a reverse movement of a desperate search for community.” Technological advances in communication have encouraged information exchange among community members. Cova’s (1997) article uses the case of French in-line roller skaters to pursue an alternative vision of “community”. He uses the paradigm of the tribe to show that it is the link between members that is more important than the ostensible reason for that link. Brands, according to this view, serve as enablers of social connections rather than as providing goods or services. The community has been seen in a northern European light, as a group of like-minded individuals. Cova (1997) points out that, according to a southern European view, “community” necessarily involves ties of kin and/or proximity. In other words, geography is a necessary constituent of community; where this element is not present (as in an internet or virtual community or a group of people across a region, nation or even the world with an interest in an object such as the Mini), the tribe offers a more useful paradigm. He also demonstrates that modern society consists of individuals belonging to several

tribes simultaneously. In this way, the modern “community” can be seen as being replaced by the postmodern “tribe”, whose members can be drawn from different traditional communities.

To summarise, tribes differ from communities in that their membership is more ephemeral and is not geographically defined. Blood ties remain for life, whereas allegiance to an ideology or a brand object can be withdrawn (although such withdrawal can be inhibited by some form of sanction imposed by the tribe). Tribes can be virtual, or their membership can be drawn from a geographically diverse area to meet physically, at regular or irregular intervals. The main feature distinguishing tribes from communities, according to Cova’s (2002) reading, is their respective reason for existence: the former’s is internal (the links between the members), the latter’s external (the focus on an exterior “object”, however widely defined).

Both paradigms, tribes and communities, offer much to the present study. The Mini/BMW MINI community, whether virtual or real, is an example of one particular type whose reason for existence is the devotion to a brand object. It thus has elements of “community” as defined by Cova (1997). On the other hand, insofar as this devotion reinforces links between the members (respondents’ quotes relating to social activities as being the primary reason for their membership of their local Mini club are of obvious relevance here), the “community” also partakes of some characteristics of the “tribe”. Such social bonds exist in virtual communities as well as real ones. For the purposes of this study, then, a discussion is needed of that particular type of community which comes into existence as the result of a critical mass of consumers expressing more than a certain strength of preference for a specific object, something that happens within a culture of consumption.

### 3.3.2 Consumption Communities

In Celsi et.al’s (1993) exploration of the community centred on the extreme sport of skydiving, they discovered an increased sense of unity. The gathering

of a community in these circumstances allows for a wider scope of relationships and intimate bonds to form. Arnould and Price (1993) Moreover, the participation of members in a high risk activity brings with it numerous individual emotions in each individual which are likely to result in a phatic communion. The authors see the motivation for such activities as progressing from the simple thrill (of survival, as well as of the activity itself), through the pleasure of achievement, to the phatic communion achieved when this activity is carried out as part of a group. (There is an interesting contrast with bungee-jumping to be noted here: both activities are similar, but the latter is necessarily more individual. The sense of community here would be felt not as part of the activity itself, but as being a member of a community of people with similar interests. A likeness could be drawn with the Mini community, the subject of this case study, insofar as only one person at a time can drive a car – it is by nature not a corporate activity, although unlike bungee-jumping it can be carried out in close proximity to supportive members of the community).

Consumer research has traditionally neglected the whole subject of community, as individual levels of consumption were often its main focus. However, in order to gain a better grasp of the emotional and communal phenomena of consumption, some researchers such as Goodwin (1994) and Arnould and Price (1993) introduced the concept of “communality”, the latter in their study of river rafting as an extraordinary experience. They used the idea of “communitas”, i.e. “an evolving feeling of communion with friends, family, and stranger”. Their research examines variations in consumption activities and its social processes between communities, specifically as regards the formation of community (Gainer and Fisher, 1994). Recently, research into the relationship between community and consumer behaviour has been extended into such fields as shared consumption, in which the perception of a common interest in the brand object is felt by a critical mass of consumers who exchange their views, to the extent that a consumption community can be identified. The study of community is a prominent topic in sociology. However, recently there has been some attention given to the area of consumer research

(Cova, 1997; Gainer and Fischer 1994; Lantz and Loeb, 1998) and Goodwin (1994) introduced “Communality” as well as Arnould and Price (1993) who introduced the concept of “Communitas”. Fischer et al (1996) noted that it is extremely important to understand the community formed through consumption; she argued that community is a vital human phenomena that must be consciously preserved, protected or promoted in the contemporary world. In a similar vein, Lasch (1994) have also focused on the area of social relationships.

Wright-Isake (1996) indicates that these implications are extremely important in the area of consumer research. She also states that the concept of community is more than a metaphor, where the identity of community is its ethos, “a complex [of] values, attitudes and beliefs along with the social behaviour expected to enact them” (Wright-Isake, 1996, p.265). In other words, the social intercourse of community members within the broader community consists of shared interests and activities forming a complex social interaction.

Wellman (1982) argue that communities must be perceived as sets of relationships to other people, where a relationship exists within or beyond specified geographic or institutional boundaries. Fisher et al (1996), in her study of the communities resulting from the “consumption” of the internet, elaborates on this: according to her, relationships are viewed as sources of emotional support, social companionship and supportive resources that are believed to exist among the members of a community. Granovetter (1985) also suggests that the relationships in a community could be categorised into strong and weak ties, where the former may provide greater emotional and material support, and weak ties may act as a “bridge” to transmit the information or ideas from one group to another.

### 3.3.3 Brand communities

The term “brand community” can be defined as a community which is specialised, non-geographically bound and based on a structured set of social

relations among admirers of a brand. Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) also regarded that a brand community as a group of consumers that have become attached to a particular brand and have similar interests in and admiration for a product. There is a recognisable connection between product identity and culture. The members of a brand community all adhere to a set of values, standards and representations (a culture), and each of them recognises the relationship between members and the whole community.

Most brand communities are lifestyle communities, in that the object that unites them is not necessary to sustain life, but is instead gratuitously felt to aid their self-definition in some way. Mini owners can do without their Minis, but they feel that the car exemplifies certain features of their self-image, features with which they identify, and they feel a bond to other like-minded people who form the community.

The idea of brand community is introduced by Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) in their research into the Saab car community. The study of brand community has attracted significant research attention due to the increasing number of branded product in today's market. (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001, p. 2) assert that the "emerging consumer culture was one in which branded goods replaced unmarked commodities, where the mass advertising replaced the old personal selling, and where the individual consumer replaced the communal citizen." Muniz and Schau (2005) refer to Muniz and O'Guinn's (2001) groundbreaking work, but expand their perception of the rituals and traditions involved in communal practice through the observation that these are essential components of religious practices. They use the Apple Newton community as a case study with which to examine the behaviour of a group under real or perceived threat (the Newton community is centred on the first personal digital assistant (PDA) which was "abandoned" by the manufacturer). The authors found that the community mirrored religious behaviour in that they used story-telling to reinforce their sense of community. Specifically, they tell "tales" of persecution, faith being rewarded, survival, miraculous recovery



and resurrection, all centred on the seemingly supernatural qualities of their chosen brand object.

Muniz and O'Guinn (2001, p. 1) define a brand community as "a structured set of social relationships, among users of a brand, whose affinity, history and culture are derived from the consumption of that brand". Following that perspective, the authors (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001) further see it as "a specialised, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relationships among admirers of a brand", which echoes Cova's (2002) classification of the modern brand community as not a community at all, but a tribe which has no necessary geographical location. For Cova (2002, p. 595), "the citizen of 2002 is less interested in the objects of consumption than in the social links and identities that come with them." The difference can be crudely summed up as the different degrees of foci on ends and means: the focus of brand communities is on the brand object, and social bonds are secondary, which explains why virtual brand communities can form. (The word "secondary" here does not necessarily imply of less ultimate importance, but more a chronological progression from brand object to social contact). The focus of tribes, on the other hand, is primarily on what Cova (1997) calls the link between members. He examines the linking value of objects of consumption more closely. The link is thus relatively more important vis-à-vis the brand in tribes as opposed to brand communities.

Furthermore, postmodern communities (Maffesoli, 1996) or tribes are held together by shared emotions, lifestyles, moral beliefs, a sense of injustice and consumption practices. The author adds that the community forms with the purpose of exploring the symbol of the brand, and the commitment of their members is manifested ritually. The ethos of the community is often referred to as "sociality" instead of "social", as the former stresses the symbolic and emotional role of persons within ephemeral tribes. Conversely, the term "social" refers to the mechanical and instrumental function of an individual member of an aggregation. In consumer socialisation, Ward (1974) notes that consumers may concentrate on building skills, knowledge and attitudes

directly relevant either to behaviour associated with a consumer role (for instance, purchase preferences) or to “social motivation” arising from non-consumer roles which influence consumer attitudes toward buying decisions. In the light of Muniz and O’Guinn’s (2001) research in brand community, the three commonalities of community (consciousness of kind, rituals and traditions, and moral responsibility) are all manifest in the Saab car community. According to Muniz and O’Guinn (2001), members of that community have a feeling of “we-ness” and “sort of know each other” at certain levels. This supports Cova’s (1997, p.307) assertion that “the link is more important than the thing.” Members of the community are also found to recognise a critical demarcation between SAAB users and those of other brands, such recognition including that of difference and exclusivity.

To be more critical, there are two mechanisms engendering such consciousness of kind, which would be able to transcend geographical boundaries. There is legitimacy, a social process whereby community members differentiate between those who are true adherents and those who are not. “False members” are those who are revealed by failing to completely appreciate the culture, history, rituals, traditions, and symbols of the community. Oppositional brand loyalty is the other social process involved in perpetuating consciousness of kind; here, brand members perceive their community in opposition to other brands (Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001). Englis and Solomon (1997) and Hogg and Savolainee (1997) (cited in Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001), indicate that consumers use a particular brand product to mark their inclusion into and exclusion from various lifestyles. This also can be illustrated by some members of the Mini community, who find a strength of communal experience through exclusion of other brand members, especially the BMW MINI.

Schouten and McAlexander (1995) studied the Harley-Davidson (HD) motorcycle community and found several different subcultures within it. They found that the HD was such a powerful brand that it served as the focus for an entire “ideology of consumption”. Each subculture relates the core HD

values of personal freedom, patriotism and American heritage, and machismo to their own circumstances according to such factors as age, occupation and family structure. This takes consciousness of kind to a deeper level of hierarchy within the community.

There is an interesting application to the Mini community. The question can be raised as to whether this is two separate communities, one centred on the classic Mini and one on the BMW MINI, or one community consisting of two subcultures centred on the two closely related vehicles. The classification would depend much on gauging the strength of oppositional brand loyalty between the two groups as a whole.

Secondly, rituals and traditions are an obvious feature the social process, in which the meaning of the community is typically centred on the shared brand consumption experience. In broader terms, Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) see rituals and traditions as celebrating the history of the brand, the community and the individual's own experience within the latter. A common rituals within a brand community is the sharing of brand stories. This is especially crucial in the creation of a new community. Storytelling regarding community members' experiences regarding the brand is common; this strengthens the relationship among the members and widens knowledge of the brand and increases its value. This is reinforced by Muniz and Schau's (2005) work on the Apple Newton community mentioned above, when they highlight the place of storytelling in a community's formation, evolution and (in this case) decay. They find that Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) are correct when they see consumers as endeavouring to "create meaningful connections and affiliations with one another" through recapturing the mysticism that is felt to have been undermined or even lost in an increasingly secular world. A community in decay, with its attendant "persecution complex", is a very useful vehicle for this endeavour. These religious aspects are also referred to by Schouten and McAlexander (1995) in their study of the Harley-Davidson motorcycle community mentioned earlier.

Communities are also marked by moral responsibility, in which each community member has a sense of duty and responsibility to the whole which contributes to collective action. In Jannowitz's (1952) research of urban neighbourhoods, communities are intentional and characterised by partial and differential involvement. Moral responsibility, according to Muniz and O'Guinn (2001), is evident in two critical and traditional communal missions: integrating and retaining members and assisting in the use of the brand. In this context, brand community plays an important role in disseminating information to its members.

While Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) relate the non-individual level of consumption from the perspective of brand community, Cova (1997) attempts to relate it to the postmodern notion of neo-tribalism or tribal marketing. In tribal marketing the emphasis is on using value, where brand functions and symbols are valued for their linking capacity (Cova, 1997). His (Cova, 1995, p. 307) assertion that "the links are more important than the thing" sees things as only the societal support for links and means of tribal symbiosis. In other words, in postmodern communities, communal commitment is symbolically manifested among its members. Consequently, according to Cova (1997) the core component of tribal marketing emphasises the "linking value" of products or services; these play a societal role by supporting communities and contribute to the establishment of bonds among the community's members. Thus, Cova's (1997) concept of tribal marketing is similar to that of Muniz and O'Guinn's (2001) proposal of brand community. The latter concept can be extended into virtual communities because they both share elements of devotion and shared values.

In recent studies (Cova, 2006) The "Nutella" product from the "ferrero group", has also strengthened its development of the brand community with the aid of the launch of the "my Nutella The community" website which opened in 2004. The website is based on loosely regulated grounds, allowing for a greater range of expression from consumers. Participants in face-to-face consumer interaction has emerged from such brand communities, such as social events

called “Nutella Parties”. These events encourage the development of the brand and unite individuals together as well as the creation of brand communities.

#### 3.3.4 Virtual Community

By tradition, communities have frequently been seen as restrained by location. For example Tonnies (1912), a pioneer in community research, views communities (Gemeinschafts) as intimate and private geographical and social enclaves based on the enactment of an ideal social order, as opposed to the surrounding society (Gesellschafts), where order is based on positive law (Andersen, 1983). Tonnies (1912) also asserts that communities are groups of mutually reliant actors interrelated in space and time, fostering the development of specific interaction patterns guided by socially constructed rules and norms.

In turn, the development of the Internet has become a forum for people to interact and communicate with each other without those temporal and spatial constraints. Furthermore, with the increasing number of people interacting in cyberspace, there is the potential for social influence and the creation of characteristics similar to those of traditional communities. These groups have been called “virtual communities”. They are crucial to a study of branding, because marketers use them to approach potential and existing customers in a more personal, targeted way than is possible by traditional means, and also (and more importantly to the present study) because communities uncontrolled by the brand but with that brand as their *raison d’être* can form across the globe, taking control of the product’s image out of the hands of the marketer and putting it into those of the consumer. This is, of course, a concrete example, and perhaps the pre-eminent one, of the postmodernist view of marketing mentioned earlier, in which control of the brand’s image shifts from the marketer to the (very active, rather than passive) consumer. For this reason, virtual communities as a separate entity are essential to a study of branding.

A virtual community, also referred to as online communities, can be defined as a group of people who interact and share common interests, ideas, and feelings with each other through the Internet. With virtual communities, face-to-face interaction is not required to enable members to develop a sense of belonging or shared identity, and communal events often occur at a faster pace than with traditional groups. In the early stages of virtual community research, Rheingold (1993, p. 1) defined virtual community in his work - THE WELL (Whole Earth 'Electronic Link) as “social aggregations that emerge from the net when people carry on public discussions enough”. (Incidentally, the last word in this quote again highlights the importance of a critical mass which must be reached before a community can be formed. Communities cannot be numbered in the ones or tens; they must at least number hundreds before a recognisable culture emerges.) The definition by Hagel and Armstrong (1997), authors of the best seller “Net Gain”, identifies five criteria of virtual community:

- distinctive membership focus
- integration of content and communication
- emphasis of member-generated content
- choice among competing vendors
- commercially motivated community organisers.

Cited in Thomas Wolkinger, 2002, p. 2-3)

Kozinets (1998), the “Guru of Cyberspace”, reinforces the notion that virtual communities have a large impact in influencing consumer behaviour and marketing interests. The simultaneous use of computers and the Internet has led to an exponential growth in the number of consumers, allowing for a “shared focus to aggregate customers together who have similar concerns and requirements” (Hagel and Armstrong, 1997, p57). A new idea of online community has emerged, replacing the traditional concept of a community based on face-to-face interaction, allowing development regardless of time and space.

The variety of virtual communities is dependant on factors such as purpose, the supporting software environment, duration and size of the community, and the culture of the members. One of the most commonly used services that consumers use via the Internet is electronic mail (e-mail). Individuals who have created an e-mail account can communicate with each other by sending and receiving messages on a computer with internet access. A message from one user can be sent to one or more recipients, thus allowing the sender to have control of privacy and freedom. Individuals who have internet access can also expand their modes of communication by involvement in discussion boards and groups. These discussion boards are usually based on specific topics, and welcome all internet users to contribute their opinion and share their interests through the board. The messages that are sent to the discussion board are displayed so that all members of the group can see them. A more immediate mechanism for communication is the real-time one of chat-rooms, which are the virtual equivalent of a face-to-face conversation.

In this scenario, the Internet acts as a ground on which individuals can build their relationships. Virtual communities allow freedom of expression and speech for consumers, displaying these thoughts and opinions by means of messages on Internet message boards. Consumers have “the ability of the internet to both expand user’s social contacts and bind them more closely to the place where they live” (Wellman, 2002, p. 29)

Marketers look towards virtual communities as a means of becoming more attractive to consumers’ needs. By introducing new ideas and concepts to a virtual community, members may become more involved with each other as well as developing a greater interest in the topic introduced by the marketer, as stated by McKinsey (2001, p. 286): “the development of a virtual community is positively associated with market performance”. Hagel and Armstrong (1997) reinforce the view that the Internet can be regarded as pivotal in the development of communities.

### 3.3.5 Virtual Community of Consumption

Among the myriad virtual communities are those with a common interest in communicating information and sharing experiences regarding the consumption of a particular product or service. Feelings of belonging, trust and obligation, as well as group symbols, culture, and rules can be developed in what Clerc (1996) describes as a social climate. The development of the virtual consumption community or group is implicitly and explicitly structured around consumption and positively associated with market interest - for example, in the BMW MINI website a car manufacturer involves customers through email and chat room facilities, providing information regarding new events and parts. According to Kozinets (1999, p. 254), the “virtual community of consumption is a specific subgroup of virtual communities that explicitly center upon consumption related interest”; in other words, they are groups whose online interactions are based upon shared enthusiasm for, and knowledge of, a particular consumption activity or related group of activities. Virtual communities of consumption can be categorised as having four types of social sites, defined by Kozinets (1998, p.2), as “dungeons”, “rooms”, “circles” and “boards”.

Figure 3.1 depicts the relationship between virtual communities of consumption and the amount of information that consumers are presented with in these communities.



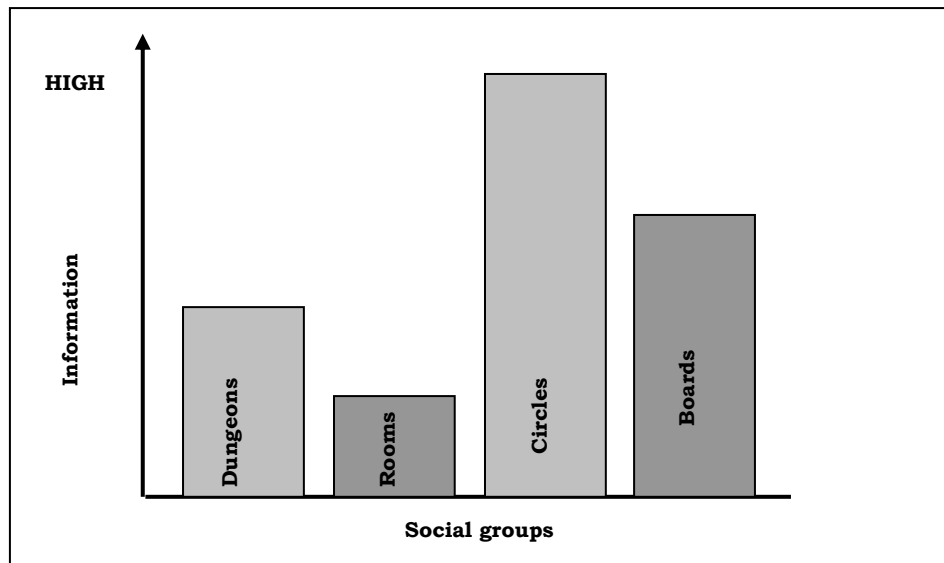


Figure 3.1 The amount of information available to consumers in relation to the virtual communities of consumption

(Source: Kozinets, 1998, p. 2)

A “multi-user dungeon” (Mud) or “dungeon”, as referred to by Kozinets (1998), is any computer-generated environment where individuals interact through a structured format of game playing. The consumers of this social site are individuals who concentrate on the aspect of technology that aids fantasy and play. There are dungeons based on “brand” virtual communities, and the other being simply virtual communities. The “Brand” virtual community dungeon exists where members of the group share similar interests on a certain topic. This may be for instance, a sport, hobby or activity. Whereas with the sole virtual community, members have the absence of similarities and interests in a particular subject, but are merely participating in the community, for social and leisurely purposes.

“Rooms” are places where consumers gather together and interact, a process called IRC (Internet relay chat) without the disruption of fantasy game play. “Circles” refers to links to homepages associated with the interests of consumers. The fourth type of site, “Boards”, has the most relevance to virtual online consumption communities. They are specifically organised around a particular subject or topic, with messages from members being displayed on electronic bulletin boards. Although there are discussion boards that are not

directly related to consumption, they have an association with products and services in that subject. The purpose of these bulletin boards is to share thoughts and interests as well as providing marketers with an insight into the brand's consumer needs.

In Walther's (1995) "Relational Aspects of Computer-mediated Communication: Experimental Observations over time", he notes that cyberspace users develop from initially asocial information gathering to increasingly affiliative community activities. Such users begin from a level of interest characterised by browsing, and gradually become more experienced in using the Internet; they may as a result be led to visit board sites containing third party information. They may then proceed to participate in group discussions about their consumption interests; at this point a relationship may emerge. The following diagram (Figure 3.2) illustrates the pattern of relationship development in virtual communities of consumption. It shows that consumption knowledge is developed in conjunction with community relationships. The diagram also demonstrates that consumption knowledge is acquired alongside the online communities' cultural norms language, practices and identity information. As time progresses cultural elements merge and grow through discussions within the community.

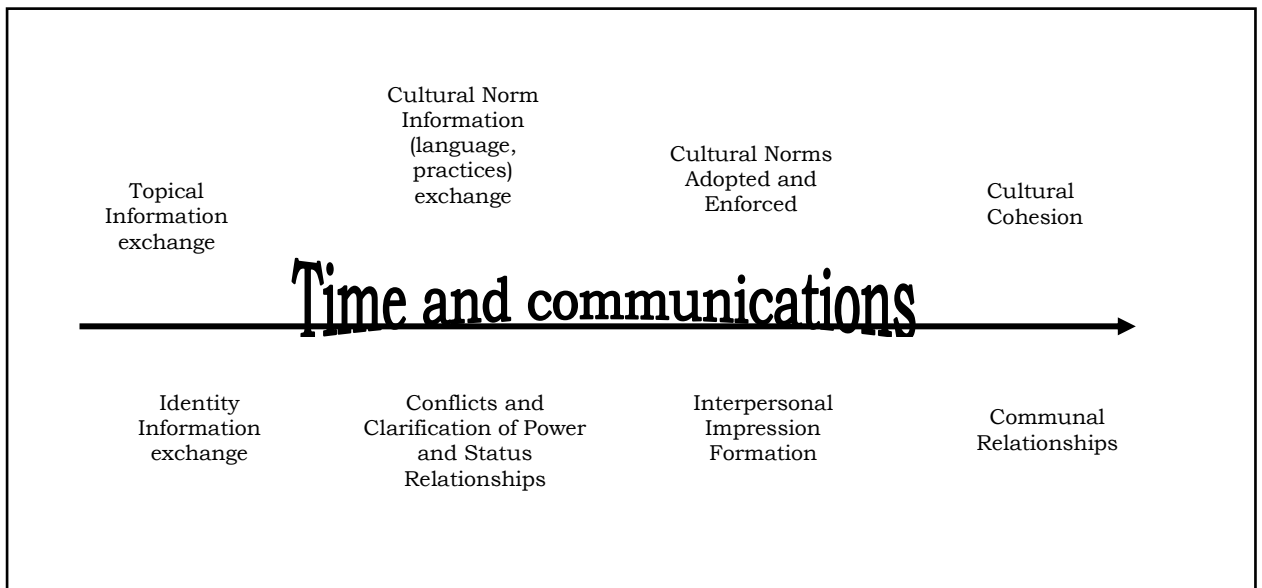


Figure 3.2 Developmental Progression of Individual Member Participation in Online Communities of Consumption

(Source: Kozinets, 1999, p. 254)

As well as the benefits and advances of virtual communities outlined previously, there are inevitably conflicts that occur within groups which mirror human characteristics. However, Kadi (1995) suggests that virtual communities are in a sense not communities, due to their formation from choice rather than necessity and the homogeneity of their membership. Their members also have the choice of withdrawing from the group, another difference Kadi (1995) sees with “real” communities. Stoll (1995) parallels these observations with those that the real qualities of a community may not be present in a virtual one because of the limited human-to-human interaction due to physical isolation. There have also been rising concerns about the limits to the freedom of expression through the use of Internet (Seabrook, 1994). Freedom of expression can go so far that it becomes a threat to individuals who take advantage of it. Factors such as misleading information and criminal activity can erupt from here as described by Godwin (1995).

### 3.4 Summary

This chapter has explored in detail the nature of the relationships between individual consumers, and the nature of the resultant communities. Cova's (1997) work in this area is highlighted, especially his novel observation that the link between members is more important than the ostensible reason for that link. It can be concluded that consumption studies are about people, not only about the objects that they consume. This has had an important effect on marketing. The term "consumption" itself is also interpreted as an activity more akin to "partaking" – that is to say, the brand object can be consumed or preserved (as in the present case study), but the key element is the involvement by community members in activities which have the brand object as their focus. The three mechanisms by which such links are made are highlighted: consciousness of kind, ritual and tradition, and moral responsibility. Communities of consumption were then explored in relation to the psychologies of their members, and the means by which marketing intentionally or unintentionally uses branding to create such communities. Virtual communities were given special attention in this regard. The next chapter goes on to detail the methodology which the researcher has used in his own investigation into the nature of the relationships between brand object, brand community and the environment in which both operate.

## CHAPTER 4 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### 4.1 Introduction

This chapter compares and contrasts positivist with interpretive methodologies before justifying the latter as the appropriate vehicle for this study. This justification hinges on the differing purposes of the two methodologies: it is the latter which is shown as being suitable for an investigation into a social phenomenon such as a consumption community. Then the chapter chronologically presents the methods by which the data for this study were collected, showing how each method is suitable for a particular purpose within the overall framework of the complex methodology involved in interpretive research.

The methodological issues pertaining to the research are also discussed in detail, showing how the aims and objectives of the study were fulfilled. The discussion proceeds from the general to the specific: the paradigmatic presuppositions and the methodological approach used to implement that paradigm are investigated and justified, and this is followed by an examination of the issues more specific to the strategy used in this case study. Finally there is a description of the data collection process and methods employed for this research. The chapter concludes by considering the analysis of the findings, a discussion detailing the means by which the pre understanding gained from the documentary study prepared the researcher for the active phase of the research, allowing him to extract meaning from the data and thus demonstrating the suitability of the methodology for its purpose of gaining insight into the relationships obtaining between all the elements constituting the brand community and its universe.

### 4.2 Research Paradigm

The positivist and interpretivist paradigms are the major theoretical research perspectives which have dominated social science research (Bruyn, 1996). Szmigin and Foxall's (2000) studies have shown that, since the 1980s, the

view that the hitherto dominant scientific method should have predominance over other approaches has been increasingly challenged (Belk, 1995) in areas of research where the irrational and unpredictable aspects of consumer behaviour are increasingly being acknowledged (Goulding, 1999). This is because positivist approaches to the subject as a knowable, quantifiable “other”, susceptible to rational analysis, became increasingly viewed as inadequate to deal with the complexities of “the social, complex, often irrational and sometimes unpredictable nature of consumer behaviour” (Goulding 1999, p. 859). Methods appropriated from the natural sciences were found to be inappropriate to the humanities and social sciences.

This has not resulted in any kind of victory for the “new” school of interpretivism, however, but in a vigorous and ongoing scholarly debate. This argument is as much between proponents of the various methodologies which have emerged from the postmodernist ethos as between that ethos and positivism. One example is the development of grounded theory by Glaser and Strauss in 1967 and the subsequent heated divergence between these two authors with the publication in 1990 of Strauss and Corbin’s *Basics of Qualitative Research* and Glaser’s heated rejoinder.

Out of the interpretivist approach has come symbolic interactionism, a school of thought that acknowledges that human interrelationships, including those with the self, are mediated through the social meanings attributed to objects. Despite the findings of research initiated by this school, it would appear, however, that as of 2000 the volume of interpretivist literature was still markedly less than that of positivist research, if the breakdown of articles submitted to the *Journal of Consumer Research* (the primary outlet for the publication of interpretivist studies) provides a general indication. Smigin and Foxall (2000) report that during 1989 only some 10 per cent of the articles submitted to this journal were post-modern. It might be reasonable to assume that this figure has increased in the meantime, but the writer is not aware of any more recent quantification. Figure 4.1 summarises the main differences

between the positivist and interpretivist approaches adapted from Ozanne and Hudson (1989) and Lamb et al (2004).

<b>Basic Assumptions</b>	<b>Positivist</b>	<b>Interpretivist</b>
<b>Ontological:</b> Natural of Reality  Nature of Social Beings	Objective, tangible Single Fragmentable Divisible  Deterministic Reactive	Socially-constructed Multiple Holistic Contextual  Voluntaristic Proactive
<b>Axiological:</b> Overriding Goal	"Explanation" via subsumption under general laws, prediction	"understanding"
<b>Epistemological:</b> Knowledge Generated  View of Casuality  Research Relationship	Nomothetic Time-free Context-independent  Real causes exist  Dualism, separation Privileged point of observation	Idiographic Time-bound Context dependent  Multiple, simultaneous shaping  Interactive, cooperative No privileged point of observation
<b>Method</b>	Statistics, content analysis.	Hermeneutics, phenomenology, etc.
<b>Theory of Truth</b>	Correspondence theory of truth: one-to-one mapping between research statements and reality.	Truth as intentional fulfilment: interpretations of research object match lived experience of object.
<b>Validity</b>	Certainty: data truly measures reality.	Defensible knowledge claims.

<b>Reliability</b>	Replicability: research results can be reproduced.	Interpretive awareness: researchers recognize and address implications of their subjectivity.
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Figure 4.1 Summary of positivist and interpretivist approaches  
 Source: adapted from Ozanne and Hudson (1989) and Lamb et al (2004).

Ozanne’s and Hudson’s (1989) table summarises the dichotomy between the two approaches: in order to find out about natural phenomena, they are best studied from a point of view which sees them as divisible and independent of their context, and as reactive to stimuli. This implies that they be studied as an “other” by a researcher who is independent of and outside them using a predetermined methodology (the scientific method), which involves experimentation. This approach is called quantitative because it assumes that the results of such research can be quantified or tabulated in numerical form. In order to find out how an atom works, one must isolate it from its context in order to study it, a study which may involve subjecting it to some form of stimuli, its reaction to which is taken as a standard which ought to be replicable if the results of the study are to have validity. All of this implies what we call positivist research.

Interpretive researchers maintain that none of this applies to the human world. Their understanding of the nature of reality is not that it is objective, but that it is socially constructed – that the subjects of the study play a proactive role in shaping that reality. Because of its reciprocal relationship with its environment, the object of study cannot be divorced from its context. To remove the object from its surroundings would inevitably distort any findings as to the nature of its “reality”, because this reality only exists in its context. With specific regard to consumer research, this meant (among other things) that marketers could not simply assume, as they previously did, that a certain stimulus would produce a certain response in the target audience



irrespective of that audience's socio-cultural environment. Their targets, and the subjects of academic research, had to be treated holistically. Obviously, the opportunities for "scientific" experimentation would usually be limited if not non-existent in this type of research.

In fact, the very purpose of interpretivist research differs from its positivist counterpart. Whereas the latter seeks to explain and to predict on the basis of generally applicable laws, interpretive research aims at an (NB: an, not the) understanding, or "verstehen", of the subject in its context, often temporally and spatially localised, as opposed to the universal aim of positivist research. Another reason for the perceived inadequacy of positivist methodology, according to Szmigin and Foxall (2000), is its static nature. Such methods are unable to deal with a fluid, dynamic subject, but can only take "snapshots" of a situation at one point in time. Therefore, qualitative and inductive methods are the most appropriate ones for this research: consumption is a continuous process of subjectively experience in consumers' minds. Thompson et al (1989) support this by describing a method of existential-phenomenology in which they present consumer experience as "being-in the world" and describe this experience as it merges or "lives".

But the argument between the two schools is seen as fruitless by Szmigin and Foxall (2000). Rather, they argue for a symbiosis between them, applying such methodologies as are appropriate to the phenomenon under study. It would appear that this approach is much more productive, recognising as it does that most phenomena have facets amenable to investigation by one or the other methodology.

#### 4.2.1 Research Strategy

A paradigm encompasses three concepts: axiology, ontology and epistemology (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000). Axiologically, interpretivists try to identify the consumer's patterns of behaviour and shared meanings; their central goal is to grasp these individual meanings (Ozanne and Hudson, 1989). Ontologically,

interpretivists find that reality is perceptual, and that many realities therefore exist for the sum total of individual and group perceptions. Thus, humans actively create and shape their environment, rather than merely reacting to that environment and their internal psychological states (Ozanne and Hudson, 1989). Epistemologically, interpretivists believe that the world is a complex place that is being constantly shaped by entities; this is consistent with their belief that reality should be viewed holistically (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Overall, interpretivism is described by historians of philosophy and sociology as the phenomenological paradigm (Berger and Luckman 1967; Schutz 1962; Bruyn 1966; Psathas 1973; Husserl 1962), which is committed to understanding social phenomena from the actor's own perspectives and to an examination of how the world is experienced (Taylor and Bodgan, 1998).

The history and role of symbolic interactionism is explained by Radnor (2002) in terms which strongly reinforce the interpretivist bent towards a holistic view of the subject. Mead's (1934) philosophy was centred on self-awareness as the key constituent of a process of dialogue with oneself, as conditioned by one's social environment. This environment is likewise the subject of a dialogue. An oversimplification would see this as a trinity of oneself as subject, oneself as one's own object and one's social context, all in communication with each other in a process of mutual influence. Mead's work as a social psychologist has been taken up by researchers into consumer behaviour as an ideal vehicle for investigating a highly complex and interrelated phenomenon.

Interpretivists use all of this theoretical underpinning to produce research that is not experimentally-based. Experimentation implies control over all the conditions related to the research subject; but such control is not possible in the social sciences. Even if it were, the results would be a snapshot of one moment in the subject's reality, not a complete capture in time of that reality itself. Instead, interpretive researchers carry out their investigations by methods which evolve along with the accumulation of information. "Ideas, meanings, questions, and data-collection techniques are cooperatively developed" (Hudson and Ozanne, 1988, p.513). In interpretive research, the data and the methods used to process them are closely identified. As Jun et al

(1993) states, “Data are a social construct of the research process itself...[they] are a product of the skills and imagination of the researcher and of the interface between the researcher and the researched” (Jun et al, 1993, p.45).

As has been suggested, it should not be thought that interpretivism is a monolithic opposite to positivism. As befits its emphasis on relativism, many investigative approaches towards consumer behaviour have been prompted by the onset of interpretivism, including hermeneutics and critical theory (Shankar and Goulding 2001). Sherry (1990) relates interpretive methodology to the “interpretive turn” in consumer research which has generated a number of terms in current use, and has been used to identify types of consumer research which have also been described as “naturalistic” (Belk et al, 1988) or “humanistic” (Hirschman, 1989).

The various stages of interpretive investigative procedure are far more interrelated than their positivist counterpart. The formulation of research aims and objectives and the chosen method of data capture are both not fixed entities, but are rather open to modification in the light of new data. Data analysis is done by means of coding selected quotes from the interviews into categories determined by the researcher on the basis of the data collected. The final stage is interpretation, which is based on the researcher’s “verstehen” of the research topic, gained before and during data capture.

It should be noted that in none of these stages is the method involved capable of being completely prescribed. The significance of this is in the observation that perhaps the key area of difference between positivism and interpretivism is replicability: in order for it to be valid, positivist research must be able to be repeated by another researcher under the same conditions. Each piece of interpretivist research is, however, unique. A different researcher carrying out the same research on the same subjects would produce a different result, because their assumptions and understanding would be different, producing distinct emphases in the analysis and interpretation stages. The two researchers would necessarily be carrying out their studies at different times,

and this, too, would affect the result. In other words, there is as much art as science in interpretivist research.

The chief method of data capture in the latter is inevitably the interview. There are various interview styles used; Radnor (2002) quotes five, including her own “semi-structured” interview. Whichever one is chosen, it must allow for an appropriate level of response from the interviewee, as well as for the sensitivity of the method to the data. Method must be shaped by the information as well as extracting meaning from it.

#### 4.2.2 Interpretivism in the present research

The main objective of this research is to discover the changing dynamic of the new BMW MINI on the classic Mini community. It does so by studying the relationships between the community on the one hand and the brand, product and marketer on the other, as well as intra-community relationships. The community’s insights, thoughts, opinions and experiences regarding the Mini also included.

A qualitative approach is more appropriate in order to interpret and describe the phenomena encompassed by the aim of this research, which is to discover the relationships between the community and its various components and contexts, and to explore the impact on these relationships of the relaunched BMW MINI, as well as the meanings, concepts and understandings this involves, and to draw out insights regarding the perceptions of Mini and how the brand is consumed and negotiated by the community, Van (1983) defined this approach as:

*“An array of interpretive techniques which seek to describe, decode, translate and otherwise come to terms with the meaning, not the frequency, of certain more or less naturally occurring phenomena in the social world”*

(Van, 1983, p. 9)

Qualitative rather than quantitative data is used because the latter can only provide the frequency or “hard figure” showing the number of people consuming the product or the amount of money they spent on it, rather than revealing the experiences and emotions involved in possessing it. If a subject is asked how they view their participation in an organised event, their evaluation will refer to communal feeling, which means that its intrinsic nature will be assessed and a measurement of relative value used, rather than a quantifying approach. Padgett (1998) states that qualitative methods, where the researcher seeks to discover the insights and meanings in consumers’ minds rather than testing or experimenting and generating explanatory theories from statistical procedures, are inherently inductive. Researchers have also recognised that the results of qualitative research are based on social factors. Because this research obtains its data mainly from consumer research, use of a qualitative approach will help develop conceptualisations, insights and understandings of consumer characteristics and patterns. Qualitative data will thus generate a holistic view of people and their settings, making it easier for the researcher to answer the research questions and meet the set objectives. Glaser (1994) also argue that qualitative methods are still the only way to obtain information on many areas of social life not amenable to the techniques for collecting quantitative data.

The following figure (Figure 4.2) illustrates the research design adopted for the thesis.

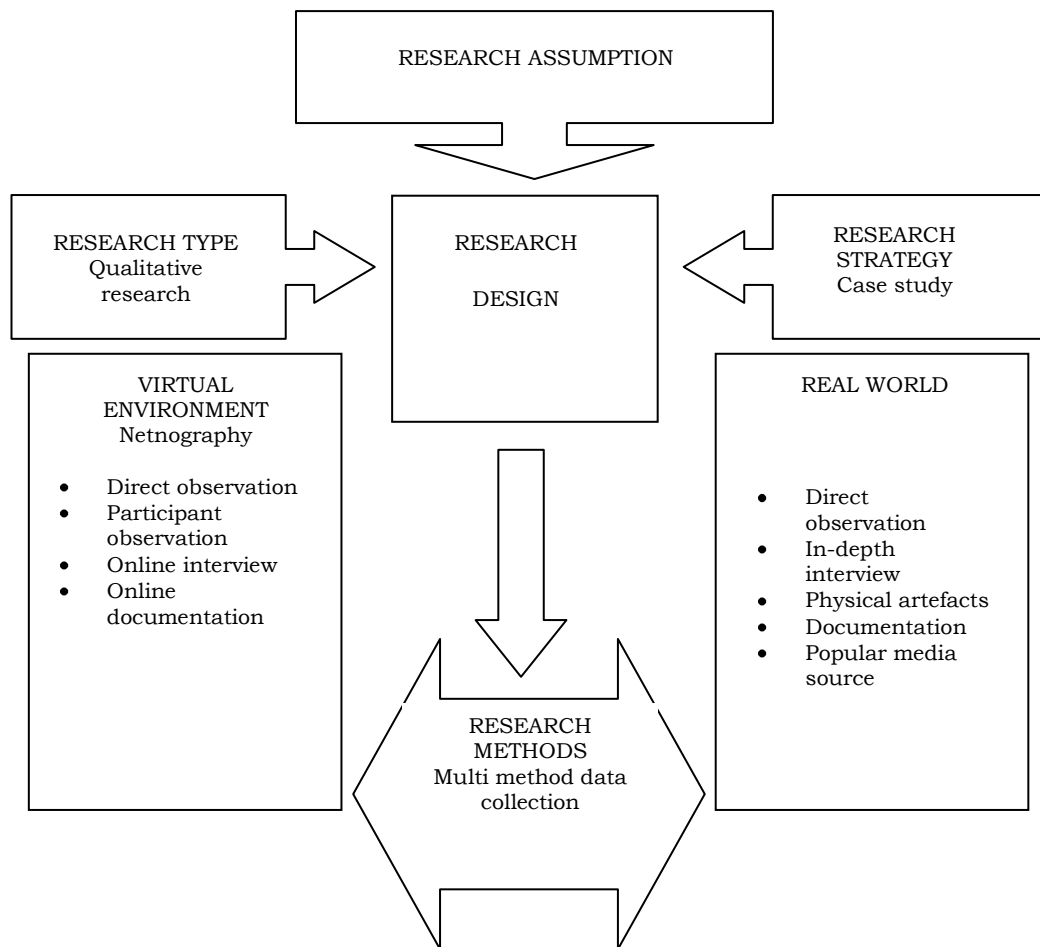


Figure 4.2 Research Design

### 4.3 Case study approach

The present researcher has decided that the most appropriate data collection vehicle for this research is the case study, because it is the most fitting instrument in a piece of interpretivist research. The case study has been described as the means for exploring an entity or phenomenon (in this case “a collective of Mini brand community relationships”), whereby the researcher collects detailed information by using diverse data collection procedures over a sustained period of time (Creswell, 1994; Yin 1994). Lincoln and Guba (1985) list the various advantages that the case study holds for the researcher working within a naturalistic paradigm. With regard to the present study, the authors describe it as being the primary vehicle for emic enquiry – that is, a

study of a particular culture or language, as opposed to an etic enquiry, where researchers bring a prior construction to bear on the subject.

The case study encourages the formulation of a real-world scenario, rather than the abstracted one typical of positivist enquiry, because it explores a small number of real instances in depth. In doing so, it deliberately exploits the interaction between the investigator and the subject, something eschewed by positivist research. As long as the final report lays this process bare, the reader has the opportunity to judge the extent of any possible bias on the part of the researcher. In the present case, the researcher chose to identify himself with the Mini/BMW MINI community as closely as possible in order to gain the understanding required in order properly to interpret the data.

This obviously raises the spectre of bias, which was counteracted by various methods of triangulation, during the data gathering as well as the analysis stages. This is something that Lincoln and Guba (1985) point out as a particular advantage of the case study method: the probing for internal consistency during data gathering. They mention that Campbell (1963), while initially being antipathetic to the method as a viable inquiry mode, subsequently revised his opinion on the grounds that one item of information can provide grounds on which to test its predecessor, thus providing for internal consistency. The present researcher found this to be the case constantly: interviewees would either repeat or contradict what others had said, allowing the researcher to build up a composite – and increasingly accurate – picture of the Mini/BMW MINI community and its relationships with its environment.

This contextual relationship is the final (and perhaps most crucial) advantage listed by Lincoln and Guba (1985) for the case study method. Information without context runs the risk of being either meaningless or distorted. The present researcher gained a rich knowledge of the several contexts and layers of context in which the subjects operated, enabling to find meaning in actions as diverse as annual national Mini gatherings and the giving of Mini-related

gifts, and building the whole into a coherent picture of the Mini/BMW MINI community, which provided the basis for a systematic study and the drawing of generalisations applicable to consumer society.

Mention of drawing of generalisations is a reminder that case study research is deductive, working from the local (emic) to the general (etic), a process described by Thompson and Haytko (1997) in their study of consumer fashion discourse. They recount how, during the course of their investigations, they began to experience a “circular interplay between the interview texts, the thematic interpretations, and research on the sociocultural aspects...” (Thompson and Haytko, 1997, p.20), an interplay which, through broadening the scope of the enquiry in a reciprocal fashion, leads to the building of theory from interpretive research through a clear and coherent structure (Cepeda and Martin, 2005). These last authors add that case study also enables high-quality research through this inductive process.

It thus follows that it is imperative for this research to adopt case study strategy, which focuses on one or a few instances in order to allow the researcher to deal with the subtleties and intricacies of a complex social situation. Furthermore, the research obtains a holistic view of a process. At the very least, case study can provide a richly detailed picture of a particular social phenomenon.

It must be stressed that the present researcher is not advocating the applicability of case study to every situation, even in the social sciences. Other methods such as experiments, surveys and histories can all be valid; this validity always depends on the nature of the subject. The question is of appropriateness of method, which is the only way of deciding its superiority in a given situation.

That said, there is a diversity of case study designs. Typical case studies are based on two or more methods of collection. According to Hakim (2000), whether the case study is descriptive or explanatory, or whether or not it is



concerned with the rigorous testing of received ideas, the use of multiple sources of evidence makes the case study one of the most powerful designs. This was certainly a powerful argument for its adoption in the present research. Yin (2003) further shows that the view of case study as only providing the raw data for subsequent analysis and conclusions using other methods is false. The method is flexible, and can be used for exploration, description and explanation. Furthermore, it can be used in conjunction with other methods, as this same author shows in his research on urban neighbourhoods (Yin, 1982) when he integrates case study research with a set of telephone interviews. Neither do case studies have to be conducted from primary evidence collected at first hand by the researcher. In 1971, Allison conducted a famous case study of the Cuban missile crisis. Yin (2003) goes on to give criteria for deciding on whether to use a case study strategy. The present research fulfils all of these. Yin (2003) states that this method is especially suited to answering questions of a “how” or “why” nature, exploring the development of non-individual level of consumption and in this particular context, Mini car owners as a brand community.

Furthermore, the researcher had little or no control over participants and events – a further factor in favour of this research method. Stake (1995) states that “sometimes we may get insight into the question by studying a particular case”. Again, this matches the present research, which studies the Mini/BMW MINI community in order to draw conclusions regarding the particular role of Brand Community in the contexts of consumption, relationships between members and the community as a whole.

#### 4.3.1 The present study

In the present study, the Mini and the BMW MINI communities<sup>1</sup> were used to study the question of the role of brand community in relation to non-

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<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that throughout this chapter, no conclusion is drawn as to whether the Mini and MINI constitute separate communities or are subcultures of the same community. References to “community” and “communities”, when used in this context, are thus interchangeable.

individual level of consumption behaviours, collective consumer-brand relationships, the process of brand meaning, negotiation among brand members and the characteristics of the different relationships that exist within the brand community. The history of the Mini plays a particularly significant role for Mini community members, as well as for many BMW MINI owners. The car was originally designed by Issigonis as a response to the fuel crisis brought on by the Suez crisis of 1956, and more specifically as a counter to the “bubble cars” which were also designed for fuel economy. Issigonis’ design rejected the hitherto axiomatic connection between status and size, which equated prestige with largeness. Canny marketing and the car’s enthusiastic adoption by social elites, including royalty, ensured that from now on small size (at least for an automobile) no longer meant second class. This was reinforced by marketing seeking to persuade consumers that “small is beautiful” and that driving the Mini was a “fun” experience, worth indulging in for its own sake. These are all features that are still treasured by Mini and BMW MINI owners today, although the size element of the latter is disputed by some adherents of the former.

The car took off in the context of the youth revolution of the 1960s, which also saw Mary Quant’s equally innovational miniskirt. For the first time, wartime restrictions were positively rejected in favour of an unbridled social approach in which people under 25 years of age played a far more prominent role than before. The decade closed with *The Italian Job*, the film ostensibly starring Michael Caine, but which (at least for Mini enthusiasts) really starred the car itself. The nationalism implicit in Minis outmanoeuvring Italian Alfa Romeo police cars is the third major strand of Mini consciousness in the community. The Mini was made by the British Motor Corporation, and its modern reincarnation by BMW is resented by many Mini owners.

It is this element of antagonism between the two camps of those who remain “loyal” to the classic Mini and those who espouse the BMW MINI as a faithful reincarnation of the original that makes this community an especially interesting object of study. While this is a single case study, it could be

possible to argue that the Mini/BMW MINI dichotomy forms two separate communities. The present researcher has, however, not found enough evidence to back this claim. There is not enough activity centred exclusively on the BMW MINI to warrant it, and certainly no separate organisation to rival the proliferation of Mini communities. The evidence points to the BMW MINI community remaining a subculture of the Mini one.

In Slater's (2000) study of collection, he notes that this activity is not common in today's society, and also that brands are usually are thought of as consumable. Therefore, brands such as the Mini lead to a rather unique form of consumer behaviour, because the primary focus on its acquisition and possession seldom if ever has a counterpart in its disposal. This provides the groundwork for a unique case study in which to gather data for this thesis. The Mini community's behavioural traits centre on the continuance of the brand, and necessarily of the brand object itself.

To sum up, there are two major reasons why this case study is of value:

1. The additional factor of the preservation of the brand object as an integral feature of the brand community's activities; and
2. The existence of a major BMW MINI subculture within the community, a subculture containing all the features of its parent, but seen from a different perspective. This adds richness to observations regarding that parent.

#### **4.4 Data Collection Methods**

The data collection methods chosen reflect the qualitative methodology used, which in turn is intended to investigate and reach conclusions regarding the relationship of the Mini community and its members to their wider context. The first point to note is that several collection methods are used. This multi-method technique is fundamental to interpretive research (Belk et al 1989, Lincoln and Guba 1985), helping among other things to validate data (especially interview data, the most subjective kind) by triangulation where appropriate.

#### 4.4.1 The Exploratory Phase

This research began with a three-year data collection period during which documentary data was collected from books (primarily motoring books and guides), articles from periodicals, magazines and newspapers, audio-visual recordings such as documentaries and relevant movies – especially, of course, “The Italian Job” and its remake – popular media and relevant community websites, not just those of the Mini community but also from Jaguar, Harley-Davidson and Inno-Mini, as well as from other relevant Internet sources. The purpose of this activity is to gain what Gummesson (2000) calls “preunderstanding”. The advantage of gaining such an understanding, as opposed to coming to the subject “cold”, is that the researcher becomes responsive to the facts as they are, as a counterweight to being subconsciously biased by existing theory (Glaser 1992). The preunderstanding involved in this exploratory phase is of the “secondary” type, which allows us to become familiar with things beyond the limits of our personal experience.

Saunders et al (2000) list one of the advantages of such research as the provision of comparative and contextual data. This provides a knowledge base from which the researcher can judge data gathered in the collection phase of the research, providing a context for this primary research and a base for triangulation of data.

The collection and absorption of this generalised body of data was followed by the assembly of a more specialised body consisting of published web questionnaires (see Appendix 3), which helped shape the content of the researcher’s own interviews and questionnaire, chat rooms and community forums and fan club websites, which provided a rich source of human interest, and organisational websites such as the official Mini Club.

At this point, another issue raised by Gummesson (1991) becomes pertinent: the fact that preunderstanding consists of more than simply knowledge, but “also implies a certain *attitude* and a *commitment* on the part of the

researchers/consultants” (emphasis in the original). Elsewhere in this study, the extent of this commitment on the part of the present researcher was shown by his purchase of a Mini. It should be noted here that such commitment raises the possibility of bias. Gummesson’s, (1991, p.71) “hermeneutic spiral” helps to counteract this tendency, as well as illustrating the iterative nature of interpretive research. Each preunderstanding becomes an understanding, which then becomes part of the preunderstanding of the next stage of research. He further states that “the best opportunity for researchers/consultants to develop their preunderstanding is to operate as *active* participants in a process rather than as interviewers or detached observers” (Gummesson, 1991, p.80). Obviously, interviewing is an essential means of data collection for this study; in fact, the information it provides constitutes a contribution to the hermeneutic spiral which, by the addition of additional information to an understanding, prevents the stagnation which would result without the input of that new material. Each preunderstanding, in other words, consists of the previous understanding, but seen in the light of new knowledge.

#### 4.4.2 The Interviewing Phase

This was the data collection phase, in which the researcher became personally involved with the sources of information and exercised an influence on them to some degree. It consisted of two primary types of interview: online and offline. The first of these, known as “netnography”, can be thought of as an electronic development of ethnography. Kozinets (2002) singles out for special approbation the elimination of researcher effect and the cost-effectiveness of this method, which also reaches communities untouched by traditional techniques. Gummesson’s (1991) preunderstanding was particularly relevant for the present research, in which so many of the respondents communicated solely online. It was vital to use every documentary means possible in order to understand that segment of the community whose sole or primary means of contact was electronic, and consequently to construct a questionnaire (see Appendix 2) best tailored to members of those groups.

As a result of careful preparation, the researcher was able to target specific groups: 70 per cent of the 85 respondents came from the UK, as representing the heartland of Mini culture, with the remainder consisting of 20 per cent from Italy (where there is a strong culture derivative of the Mini, the “Inno Mini”), five per cent from Japan and five per cent from the rest of the world. The questionnaires were posted through a variety of Internet forums, e-mails and chatrooms. The researcher adhered to common ethnographic procedures that help shape participant observations, including making a cultural entrée (which involves identifying the most suitable groups and learning as much about them as possible (Kozinets, 2002)), gathering and analysing data, ensuring trustworthy interpretations, conducting ethical research and providing opportunities for culture member feedback. Thorough accounts of these procedures exist for ethnographies conducted in face-to-face situations (these accounts include Fetterman 1989; Hammersley and Atkinson 1995; Jorgensen 1989; Lincoln and Guba 1985).

In depth interviews proved beneficial for this qualitative research, as Mini possession is more likely to be a personal statement of fashion or style. Furthermore, “it also allows the closeness of one-to-one relationship which allows the interviewer to become more sensitive to non-verbal feedback” (McDaniel and Gates, 1998). The role of in-depth interviews also allows probing and using answers to ask further questions.

The offline interview also functions as a valuable substitute for the time-consuming and often impracticable “living with” the subject community and its members which would be the ideal medium for interpretive research (McCracken, 1988). The long, semi-structured interviews used in the present research allowed an in-depth and an extensive representation of the views of the 15 respondents, who were interviewed at three Mini events. This was broken down into the British Mini Day, at which five people aged 30-45 took part, the British Mini Showdown with eight participants aged 25-35, the Mini Fair with two participants aged around 35-40, and focus groups consisting of four discussions supported by photographic and video recording.

Unstructured interviews were arranged and conducted at the homes of the respondents, which allowed the researcher to obtain insights into and first hand knowledge of what interviewees say and do in their everyday lives (Taylor and Bogdan, 1998). The following figure (Figure 4.3) shows the record of data collection.

Community	Events	Age Group	Gender	Methods	Number of Interviews
Classic Mini & BMW MINI	British Mini Day	30-45	4 Male 1 Female	In depth interview	5 In depth interviews
BMW MINI	British Mini Showdown	25-35	5 Male 3 Female	In depth interview	8 In depth interviews
Classic Mini	Mini Fair	35-40	4 Male 2 Female	Focus group In depth interview	4 Discussions 2 In depth interviews

Figure 4.3 Record of Data Collection

The researcher carried out this part of the investigation in stages, the first of which was in 2002, after which he reflected on and improved the questionnaire before carrying out more long interviews, focus groups and observations. This reiteration exemplifies interpretive research practice, in which steps are repeated after being infused with new material. The following figure (Figure 4.4) depicts all the sources from which data was collected for this research.

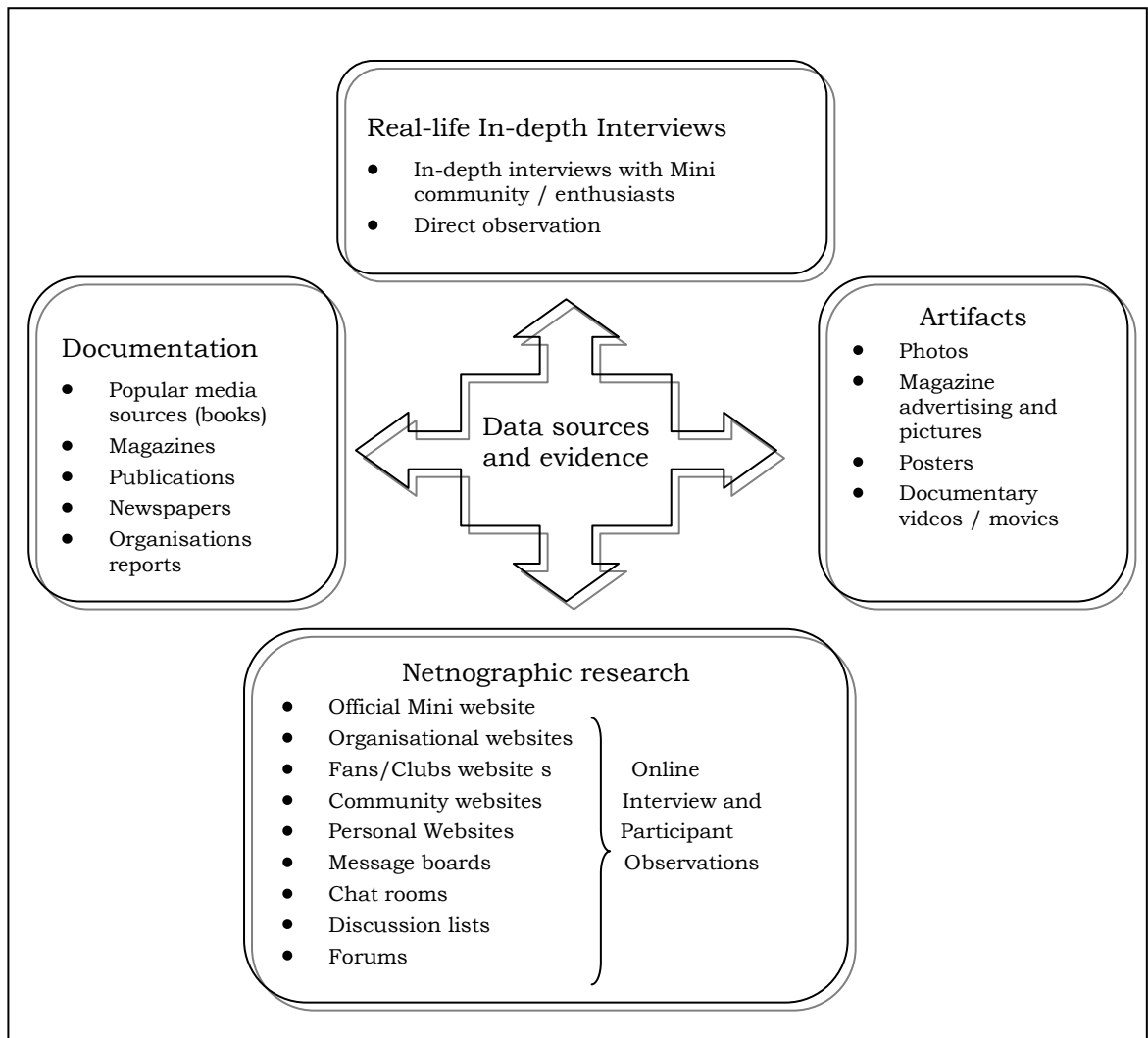


Figure 4.4 Multiple Data Source

The process of data collection involves both online and offline in-depth interviews, real life direct observation, and participant observation through message boards and textual analysis of website contents in the virtual environment. The following figure (Figure 4.5) illustrates the whole data collection process.



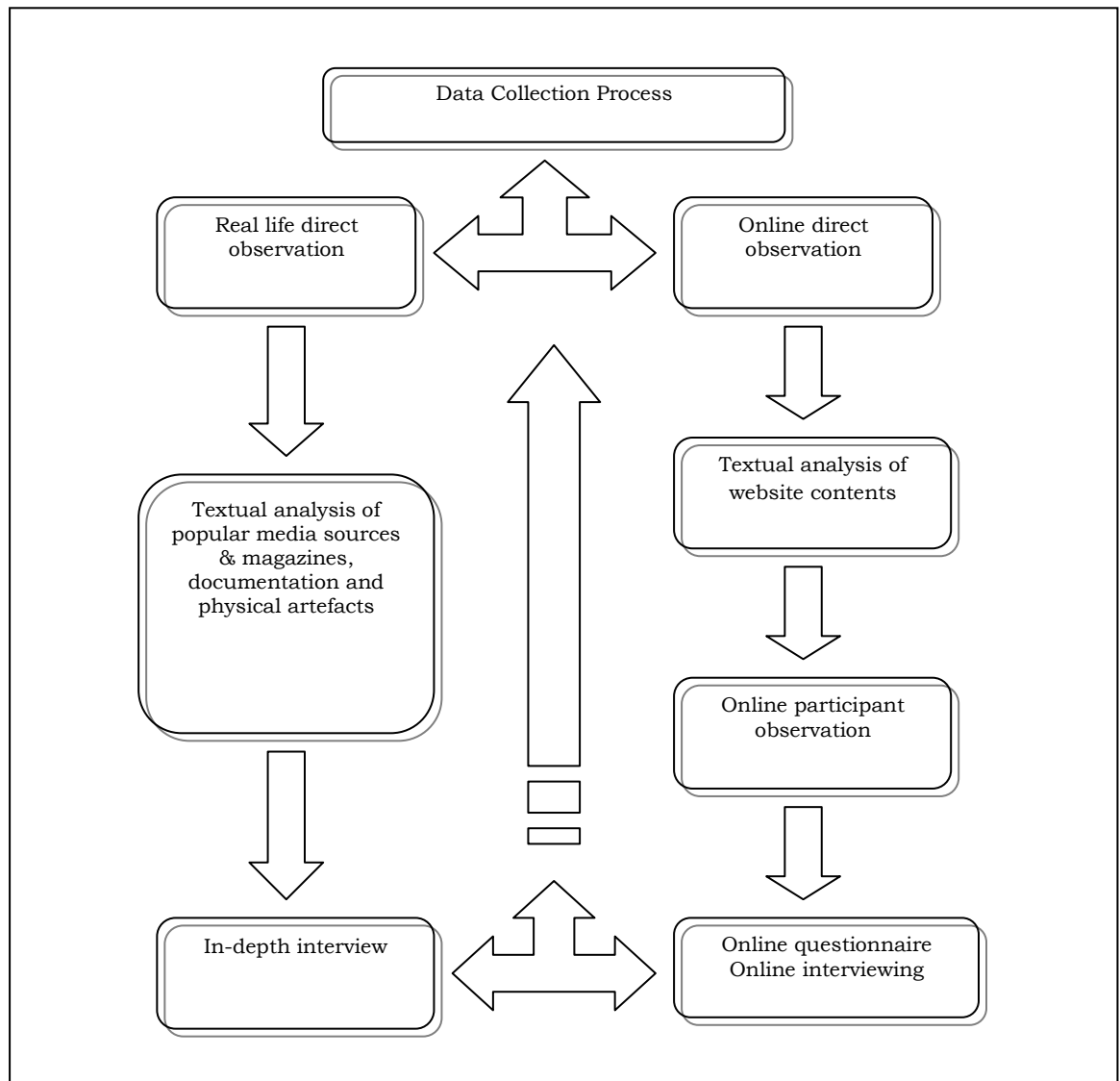


Figure 4.5 Data Collection Process

It is evident that this process consists of two parallel streams: one concerns information obtained from the internet, while the other deals with hardcopy and personal data. The process moves from observation to direct questioning through interview and questionnaire, through a stage of detailed observation and of analysis of the data contained in the respective sources. This intermediate stage ensures that the researcher was immersed in the subject and the nature of the data available, which gave him the knowledge and subject background he needed to structure the interviews so as to obtain the maximum amount of information targeted at answering the research

questions. The arrows reflect the constant reciprocity between the two streams at the first and last stages of this process. Observations made in one stream modified those made in the other. The central arrow demonstrates that this process is as much circular as linear: rather than being the end of the process, the interview results modified succeeding data collection and helped to further shape the results.

#### **4.5 Ethnography**

The basis for what Denzin (1997) and Denzin and Lincoln (1994) describe as auto-ethnography and Holbrook (1995) calls “subjective personal introspection” is the demand that ethnographers become fully participant observers of the nature of consumption, in distinction to positivist research that necessitates a dichotomous observer/subject approach. Hammersley and Atkinson (1983, p. 12) advocate the adoption of “an approach that respects the nature of the social world, which allows it to reveal its nature to us”, while for Denzin (1997), deep involvement in the subjects’ worlds is a sine qua non of achieving Verstehen of those worlds. The present researcher has consequently sought to immerse himself in the world of Mini enthusiasts.

This is not to be understood, however, as a rejection of positivism. Rather, it adopts Hammersley and Atkinson (1983) rationale that reflexivity, the acknowledgement that we are all participants in the same world, whether we are researchers or subjects, there is a reconciliation between the two approaches, because it applies equally to both. Neither should such immersion in the subject community necessarily involve a loss of objectivity. No matter how fully an observer attempts to immerse themselves in that community, they are still aware that they are an outsider. Their very awareness of this dichotomy is a powerful tool in obtaining and interpreting qualitative data (Hellowell (2006)), especially as these two processes are conterminous as much as sequential. Data is gathered and contributes toward an understanding that shapes the next stage of data collection.

The researcher's first step in this immersion was to buy himself a Mini. This purchase of a consumption object immediately conferred two benefits: it gave him a personal experience of the car that was the community's *raison d'être*, and it provided proof of his seriousness about the project, winning him kudos with potential interviewees, many of whom would be more willing to provide information.

Three major events were chosen as being together representative of the community; it was decided that participation in these events would ensure the widest coverage of community interests and provide the most fertile ground for investigation. Activities ranged from a Mini jamboree to a more organised event centred around activities, including Mini races and competitions. There was a mix of ages: the British Mini Showdown saw younger attendees, at around 25-35 years of age, the Mini Fair was for older participants of 35-40, and the British Mini Day covered the spectrum of Mini owners below the age of 50.

The informality of the Mini Day, which included picnicking and much informal conversation, yielded good opportunities to talk to people and provided potential interviews through the snowball effect. The more strictly timetabled British Mini Showdown was more of an occasion for the researcher to show his commitment to the cause and further establish his credentials. The Mini Fair was a gathering devoted to the exchange of Mini memorabilia and to the showing of the film "The Italian Job", which has achieved cult status in the community.

The foregoing might give the impression of an entirely affected attempt at ingratiation with the community in order to achieve "hidden" ends. This would be quite misleading, however. In fact, it represents the dual approach that has already been identified as being essential to the conduct of qualitative research: the full recognition of Hellowell's (2006) dichotomy. Complete participation in the events was the only way for the researcher to reach the best possible understanding of what motivated the members in particular and

the community in general, an understanding that is of necessity instinctual as much as rational. Contribution towards group discussions at the British Mini Day, cheering for a particular team and waving Mini flags during the races at the British Mini Showdown and talking over the film “The Italian Job” after its screening at the British Mini Fair all served to draw the researcher further into the Mini community’s world. He was able fully to participate in the emotional life of this community while simultaneously remaining detached enough to evaluate the data he was receiving and mould it to shape and be shaped by further data gathering.

The data collection process, mainly consisting of in depth, semi-structured interviews but also including focus groups, necessitated a full engagement of the rational faculties. The researcher had to be fully engaged mentally in order to decide if and when to intervene during interviews and focus groups and what to make of the data in the light of previous experience and of his developing understanding of the community. The balance between involvement and detachment, between insider and outsider, was well enough struck to enable him to reap a rich harvest of information by judging the correct interplay between information collection and information processing.

Of course, the process was not entirely problem-free. The main difficulty concerned an initial lack of trust on the part of the interviewees. The two grounds for this were some members’ view of the researcher as an outsider, and more specifically the suspicion on the part of some that the researcher was an “infiltrator” from BMW. Both reservations were met by the researcher’s presentation of his DMU student ID card, which established his bona fide credentials as a researcher.

The participation in three different events and the conducting of many interviews and focus groups also served as a corrective. Information gained from one source could be checked against another, and the impressions gained from one of the three events could be modified by the other two. In this way, triangulation served both to facilitate a wider understanding of the

subject community and to correct such misapprehensions as might arise during the course of data gathering.

I began with buying a Mini – fully situated; I wanted to experience the ownership and gaining a personal perspective. Furthermore, it is a useful and a vital instrument to be played to show as a part of the Mini community. Usefulness as a means of stratifying the data- the samples are representative of the Mini community members.

The participants chosen do not just cover a small range but span from 25 years to 45 years old. The British Mini Day was chosen as one of the events for gathering data as it is an event for enthusiasts who enjoy a relaxing day out to view Minis and stroll around the field to engage in conversation with fellow enthusiasts as well as having a family picnic in between. On the day, people brought their food and drink to snack upon and share together. The participants of this event were mainly aged between 30-45 years old. In the event, the researcher drove his Mini to the event, excited and flashing headlights to fellow visitors at the entrance. After entering the event, the researcher walked around the field observing and started to get involved and contribute towards existing group discussions. Besides that, I also introduced myself to the interviewee as a researcher as well as a Mini enthusiast. How you involved yourself into the conversation: praising the interviewee on the adornments and the uniqueness of the car. In the conversation, we talked through many topics, for example, the ownership of the car, why it is so meaningful to them, maintenance of the car, feelings experienced, etc. After interviewing one member, the member introduced other people, this was also a springboard for attracting further interviewees. This allowed me to begin a relationship with them.

Secondly, The British Mini Showdown event was chosen as it covers the age range 25-35. This range of people were at the event primarily to see Mini races and competitions that were held during the day. Participants focused on the aesthetics and performance of the Mini. Wearing a sporty jacket, I involved

myself in the audience and joined the support of one of the teams. From there, I started to make friends and socialise with the members, and while I was talking to them I started to record and note down information. During one of the races in the afternoon, I supported a Mini team, of whose team members had huge banners, flags and Mini shaped plaques bearing phrases such as “Go-Mini-go!” and “Mini power!” I was passed a few colourful flags with the Mini car on it, of which I waved proudly in the air with all the other team members and spectators. The atmosphere from start to finish of the race was truly bubbling with excitement, nerves and full of cheer. Also during this event, I took photographic records such as the slogans for example “100% pure free of BMW parts” (Please see appendix).

The Mini Fair was the third event chosen because it consisted of participants of who fell between the ages of 35-40 years old. At this event, participants involved themselves in viewing cars, Mini merchandise and collectable/souvenir items. I also interviewed people from the stalls, and from here I realised that they were not only just selling to earn money, but earning the money to make their own Mini better and improve it. During this event, I also joined the new BMW MINI group members to watch the Italian Job film – a big screen was shown at the big field, and all the Mini enthusiasts were sitting in their own Mini car to watch the film together, including myself. I was amongst a cosily crammed field of cars that were there to enjoy the film as well as the whole experience. Shortly after the film had finished, there was a build up of honking of cars, flashing headlights, applause, whistling and screams of “whoo-hoo!” amongst the field. Shortly following this fantastic show, I contributed towards giving opinions of the film, and I tried to explore and discover the new features, when interviewing members I started having an informal discussion with them, leading on to the semi structured interview itself. In the whole of the events the in depth interview, mainly semi structured interview, focus groups had also taken place, as well as their actions and short video clip of the general overview of the event.

Problems encountered during the Interviewing stage included giving people greater confidence in the interviews, on some occasions I had to provide respondents with my student id as a means of gaining their trust and encouraging them to express their views fully in the interview.

Another problem is that people will have suspected that I may be an insider from the BMW company. In some cases, for internet questionnaires I had to show them identification of who I am and what I am doing as well as sending them a confirmation email from the university and statement from myself. This was to give the respondents the confidence in answering the questionnaires that I had posted on the website.

#### **4.6 Forms of data analysis proposed**

Interpretivist research, a category into which this study falls, arose out of the dissatisfaction felt by researchers in the social sciences with research methods designed for the natural sciences. The latter sought definite, quantifiable, universal answers to specific problems, but investigations into the vulgarities of human conduct and behaviour could not use such methods. The roots of an alternative approach can be found in the work of social psychologist Herbert Mead (1863-1931) and his sociology of symbolic interactionism, which seeks to explain individual behaviour in the light of its social context through the meanings ascribed by people to the things and the phenomena around them. This is but one of a number of areas in which the interpretivist approach is applied, others being ethnography and phenomenology. What they all have in common is subjectivity, the treatment of the researcher as an active participant rather than an impartial and unaffected observer.

In the 1980s, this approach was recognised as being more relevant to consumer research than the prevailing positivist methodologies, dominated as they were by the scientific method, which could not handle the complexity inherent in human behaviour, and which, it was realised, were not even oriented to the goals that were felt necessary. Hence interpretivist

methodologies increasingly became adopted. Rather than seeking definitive answers, such methodologies sought understandings of the subject using the researcher as an active participant in the investigation, rather than as a transparent means of arriving at an “objective” answer. This made for far richer enquiries into fields connected with consumer behaviour, because one of the central tenets of interpretive research is that it be holistic – that is, that it takes into account the subject’s context.

The interpretivist paradigm involves the researcher gaining a deep understanding of the topic through first and second-hand research before commencing the interviews. The researcher’s familiarity with the subject matter and his or her abilities in analysis may serve to strengthen the interpretation eventually arrived at (Spiggle, 1994). In the present case, the researcher used a dual strategy shown in the figure (Figure 4.5) of observation of both real-life phenomena and virtual texts in gaining this rich understanding of the Mini community, which then enabled to frame the questionnaire in such a way as to elicit the richest possible responses.

One aspect of the research method demonstrated by this figure is the cyclical rather than the linear nature of the process, which did not begin with observation and end with the gathering of information by interview and questionnaire. This is similar to the practice of grounded theory in that the gathering of information feeds back into the previous stages of the process, helping to (re)frame the research objectives and questions.

The cyclical nature is also evident in the next stage of research, analysis. Spiggle (1994) describes the seven elements of this process, not all of which need be present in any given piece of research: categorisation, abstraction, comparison, dimensionalisation (“identifying properties of categories or constructs”), integration of data to produce theory, iteration (the performance, and where necessary re-performance, of research stages in a non-sequential manner) and refutation. She states specifically that these activities are not clearly distinguished, nor that they are listed in order of performance (the



order above is hers). It should be noted that none of these involve actual interpretation of the data; they are means of manipulating it. The purpose of Spiggle's (1994) article is to draw a clear distinction between analysis and interpretation. The latter involves making "sense of data through more abstract conceptualisations".

More specifically, the process of categorisation occurs during coding. It is where the recognition of general patterns in the data begins. Abstraction continues and formalises this process, taking categorisation beyond the level of a relatively mechanical process, needing only the researcher's pre-existent understanding of the subject in order to assign units of data to categories. It involves a more creative engagement by the researcher with the higher-level implications of the data, generalising from specifics. Like categorisation, the process of comparing incidents in data to look for similarities begins at the outset of analysis, and feeds back into subsequent data collection. Dimensionalisation assists the construction of theory by clarifying and enriching its conceptual meaning and by allowing the researcher to explore cross-category and cross-construct relationships. Integration maps the relationships between conceptual elements.

The computer software programme NVivo was used in this research to aid the process of coding and thereby analysis. Computers cannot quantify in qualitative research in the same way as they do in quantitative, but they can powerfully assist in the identification of patterns, and thereby help to build theory – in fact, such programmes are known as "theory builders" (Gibbs, 2002). NVivo is used as a means of extracting pieces of text from interviews and other sources and coding them without losing their origin. As long as certain caveats are borne in mind, NVivo is a powerful tool for this purpose. Its use is not restricted to grounded theory research, for which it was designed, but can be used for any form of qualitative investigation.

The cyclical nature of the whole process is embodied in iteration, which makes it clear that a given process may be repeated as required by revelations of

succeeding data or stages of analysis. The data, its sources, and the inferences based on both that data and on the entire data set can all be repeated as more information comes to hand. The resulting theory is validated by being subjected to empirical scrutiny, in an attempt to refute it.

What follows is the process of interpretation, described in Spiggle's (1994) article and by Thompson (1989). This is the ascription of meaning to the results, and constitutes the real point of the research. Spiggle (1994) points out that the terms "analysis" and "interpretation" are often used imprecisely and, indeed, interchangeably. She attempts to provide the grounds for a vocabulary by which the two distinct processes can be discussed. Ascribing meaning to results is done by means of examining the relationship between signifiers and signified. Researchers attempt to understand the meanings ascribed by others to the subject matter by translating it into their own terms and then looking for patterns in the categorised data. This is not a rigorous, positivist procedure which objectively imposes order upon the data. Spiggle (1994) describes interpretation as "playful, creative, intuitive, subjective, particularistic, transformative, imaginative and representative. Interpretive insights often spring from serendipity."

Thompson (1989) enlarges on this identification of patterns in his hermeneutic study of consumer stories. He postulates two levels of pattern recognition: the researcher must see patterns in the meanings expressed by any given consumer and by several consumers. From these patterns comes the derivation of broader implications. He sees this process as a hermeneutic framework by which to find meaning in the texts obtained by the researcher from his or her informants. He takes some issue with what he sees as Spiggle's (1994) possible "romanticisation" of the process as embodied in her quote above. Rather, he stresses the role of the researcher's expertise, which certainly does not exclude any of the "artistic" attributes mentioned by Spiggle (1994), but unifies them into a purposeful whole. As the researcher has attempted to obtain the correct balance as described by Thompson (1989) between the artistic and the scientific facets of the investigation by immersing

oneself thoroughly in the world of the Mini community and participating in their activities. Their understanding has been translated by the researcher and, using the extensive background he has obtained into the subject matter, and triangulated the subjective results of the data collection through analysis in order to find patterns and thereby meaning in the consumption stories presented to him.

The research data is collected using interpretivist theory in which a deeper understanding is developed through first- and second-hand research. One's own familiarity and abilities regarding analysis may strengthen skills of interpretation (Spiggle, 1994).

The initial stage of qualitative analysis is coding, in which the various data collected will be classified into conceptual units and categories. These categorisations derived from the data indicate significant themes and issues which will determine the foci of future data collection. The relationships among these categories will be rearranged to form sub-categories, which are used to explain and identify the main aspects of the phenomenon under study. Finally, selective coding will take place after a lengthy period of data collection (Strauss and Corbin, 1990) to integrate categories and sub-categories to form a core category in order to develop an explanatory theory and associate this with the phenomenon.

The use of the constant comparative method in the analysis stage is also appropriate for this study. According to Glaser and Strauss (1967), this method goes through four stages, each of which evolves into the next in order to provide continuous development through to the end of the analysis process. The main advantage of the constant comparative method is to constantly compare the data to look for similar and divergent meanings, form them into categories and integrate the data to form new categories. When categories are well defined and have explicitly stated properties, they become saturated by evidence, and form a foundation or central category for the underlying main theme of research (Connell and Lowe, 1996).

The whole data analysis procedure is illustrated in the figure below (Figure 4.6). Some stages are iterative and may need to be repeated.

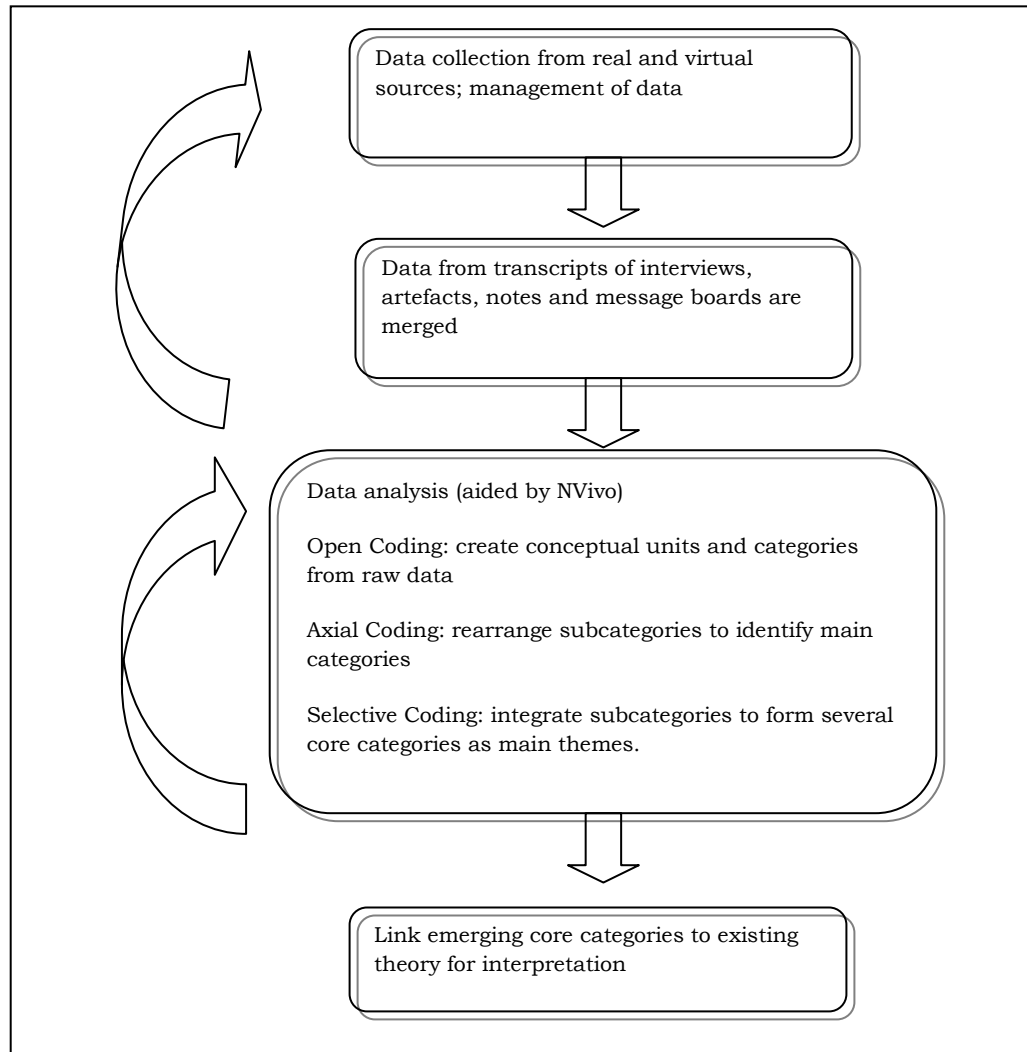


Figure 4.6 Data Analysis Procedure

#### 4.5.1 Limitations of using the software - Nvivo

The sophistication of the data poses its own problems, however. In the complexity necessarily involved in handling quantitative information, it can be easy to become distracted by this complexity. This is a temptation that must be resisted by constantly returning to the data itself and understanding its shape. In this way, the important points will not become submerged in the detail of processing individual quotes. In the present case proved especially

important not to delve immediately into the nodes identified during the research, but to make sure of the whole before dealing with the part. This was also necessary as regards the templates and the set rules, which tended to make the cases more complicated.

Many of the statements are naturally quite similar. This raises the problem of duplication of quotations, the number of which rises the more closely they are related. Not only does this pose problems in terms of sheer mass of material, but it can also affect quantitative analysis of the proportion of different viewpoints.

#### **4.6 Issues of reliability, validity and reflexivity**

Miles and Huberman (1994) detail the methods that can be used for validating the results of secondary research. The present researcher has used these methods as a model. He has checked for the effects he himself might have had on the research, and especially on data collection. This is a standing issue with personal data collection methods such as interviews and questionnaires. In this case, the researcher chose to identify himself with the subject matter so closely that he no longer appeared as an “outsider” to the community’s members, thus helping ensure that his efforts to elicit information would be seen as coming from inside the group rather than outside it, helping ensure his own “validity” to the group’s members and in this

way providing for the acquisition of the richest possible dataset. The genuineness of his involvement is thus reinforced to the group, ensuring that their responses can be better trusted. At the same time, he made sure to diminish the effect of the community on him, thus biasing him in unforeseen ways, by spreading his pool of informants to include dissident viewpoints. This was particularly easy because of the presence of the BMW MINI subculture, which provided views contrary to those of the Mini community.

The researcher triangulated his informants' results constantly with other data sources and with his own extensive background knowledge, using this and his own understanding to weigh the information he collected for trustworthiness. His efforts to validate his conclusions about patterns took a form similar to that of Spiggle's (1994) final analytical step of refutation: he checked the meaning of exceptions to the patterns he detected, in order to establish their reliability.

On the one hand, it was necessary for the researcher to immerse himself to the fullest extent possible in the Mini community, going to the extent of buying himself a car in order to acquire the inside knowledge needed to live the community's experiences. On the other hand, it was equally vital that the researcher was aware of this involvement and of the impact this would have on the final result. This latter process, called reflexivity, was carried out intermittently in the present case. Periods of immersion in the community and its activities were interspersed with periods of reflection, in which the researcher stood back from the data and examined its contents in order to determine his own contribution to it.

The researcher asked himself questions about, among other things, the choices he made with regard to the conduct of the research in detail, and whether these choices might have been made differently. If, for example, the researcher had chosen to adopt a more "objective" approach to the research, approaching community members strictly as an outsider (confining his approaches to, say, questionnaires and semi-formal interviews), rather than choosing to identify himself with them and gain his information informally, would he have gained more in impartiality than he would have lost in richness of information? In this case, the answer was clearly: "no". Impartiality was ensured in parallel ways, by his constant withdrawal from psychological and emotional involvement with the community during periods of reflection and analysis, while a distancing of involvement would only have resulted in a reduction, not only in the quantity but the quality of information, as community members would not have volunteered facts they did in fact do.

Such a relatively detached procedure would also have alienated him from the community, impeding the instinctive “*verstehen*” of the subject that is imperative in qualitative research.

The investigation thus shaped and was shaped by its subject. This is as it should be, because the latter offers a corrective to the former. Too much researcher involvement would indeed risk skewing the results and reducing their validity, but the right amount has ensured the maximum benefits in every way: the researcher has acquired the richest dataset possible while retaining the ability to process and analyse it in a way which is of benefit to the research community. The final act in this process must be for the end results to lay the full extent of the researcher’s involvement open to readers, allowing them to make their own judgments as to what the impact of that involvement has been, and therefore to determine the validity of the investigation.

#### **4.7 Sacred and profane**

Finally, it should be noted that Belk et al (1989) propose some interesting extensions of the interpretive approach as applied to consumer research, which could be applied to future work on the present subject. They suggest an “*idiom of ritual*” in order to free discussion from what they describe as the “*tyranny of paradigms*” and the “*constraining nature of metaphors*” in order to create a richer vocabulary for discussion. Their discussion of the processes of sacralisation and secularisation by which consumer society operates opens a broader field of enquiry by widening what they claim is an overly narrow application of metaphors such as “*loyalty*”.

#### **4.8 Summary**

This chapter has examined the differences between the positivist and interpretivist research paradigms and has justified the adoption of the latter in the present research, as being more appropriate for the social as opposed to the natural sciences. This is largely because of the different purposes of

research in the two areas: natural science seeks to obtain conclusions regarding an “objective” reality, whereas social science research attempts to achieve an understanding, or “verstehen”, of the subject. Interpretive research is also found to be far superior when used to investigate a fluid, dynamic subject rather than a static one. Given that the purpose of the present research is to investigate the interaction between a brand object, the consumption community which forms around it, and that community’s environment (specifically where the brand object is possessed rather than consumed), case study was chosen as the investigative method because it is far more comprehensive than some commentators have assumed, and is the most appropriate to the research aims. It can be used from the initial stages of a piece of research through to the analysis of the results and the drawing of conclusions. Other research methods were used as appropriate, including in-depth interviews, focus groups, questionnaire, netnography, observation, documentation and the study of artefacts. The Mini/BMW MINI community is an ideal vehicle for such an investigation, because the brand object is lovingly preserved, often for several generations. The presence of a new subculture (that associated with the BMW MINI) additionally sets up resonances with the original community, and these reveal new insights, including those concerning the demarcation between a subculture and a new community. The case study method helped to illuminate the process of brand meaning as negotiated by community members as well as the characteristics of the different relationships existing within that community.



## CHAPTER 5 FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS I

### 5.1 Introduction

This chapter documents the 50 years or so history of the Mini in order to place the present research in its historical context. It details the reasons for the car's creation, its subsequent popularity and establishment as a cultural icon, the rationale for BMC's decision to cease manufacturing the car, the continued loyalty and enthusiasm of the Mini community, and BMW's rebranding of the car and the community's reaction to it. It includes reference to the film "The Italian Job", arguably featuring the Mini as its star. The film provided a springboard for a eulogistic view of the car, especially of its character and agility.

### 5.2 Research Background: The history of the Mini

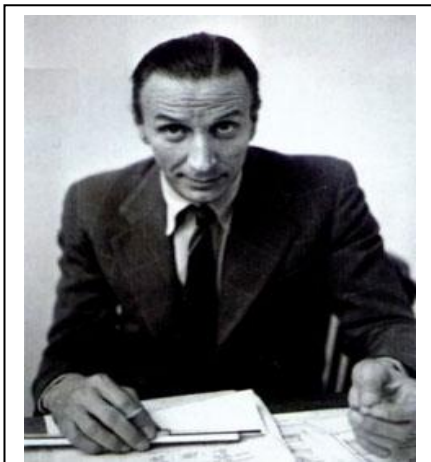


Figure 5.1: Alec Issigonis, 1946.  
(Source: British Motor Industry Heritage Trust, 2006)

The design and manufacture of the Mini came about because of the political and economic issues regarding oil supplies that arose during the mid 20th century. In the context of transport, these events made smaller, more fuel-efficient and affordable vehicles more attractive.

In 1956, the Egyptian government led by General Abdul Nasser nationalised the Suez Canal. In response, Britain, France and Israel agreed that the latter would invade the Canal Zone and that Britain and France would "intervene" to take over the area, separate the armies and take over the Zone. The subsequent invasion proved to be militarily successful yet it was politically disastrous due to the absence of support from the United States. The fallout from this crisis included the boosting of Nasser as a potential pan-Arabic leader on the Eastern "side" in the Cold War. The implications for the West's

oil supply were obvious. In that year, petrol rationing was reintroduced in Britain after it had been abolished after the Second World War, restricting drivers to 200 miles a month, and petrol rose from 4/1d to 5/6d after an increase in petrol tax.

This situation led to the rising popularity of small, highly fuel-efficient “bubble cars”, sometimes “three-wheelers”, often manufactured in Germany. The decision was made by the British Motor Corporation (BMC) to design a vehicle to counter the incursions by bubble cars (also called “microcars”) into the British market. The company’s chairman, Leonard Lord, declared that the aim was to “drive these bubble cars off the road”. A BMC engineer, Alec Issigonis, who had come from Alvis (and before that Rootes and Morris) in 1955, was given the task of creating a four-seater car smaller than the A35 and Morris Minor (the latter of which was also his design), using an existing BMC engine, within a frame measuring no more than 10 x 4 x 4 feet.

Issigonis’ solution was achieved by several innovative techniques, including a transverse engine mounting rather than a conventional “north-south” one, and the use of front wheel drive. Passenger space in the two-door vehicle was maximised by these means, which even allowed a luggage compartment. Form definitely followed function in this new vehicle, which was publically revealed in April 1959. By 1962 the name, after a few variants such as Austin Seven and Morris Mini-Minor, became standardised as “Mini”, playing on the idea that “small is beautiful”, in the sense that although the Mini is a car smaller than its predecessors, it would still possess the same allure and charm of larger vehicles on the market at that time. In many peoples' eyes, the Mini was perfect, in the sense that it offered performance, handling and sheer zip to a whole spectrum of people, nearly all of whom were higher up the social ladder than the people the car had been designed for. At the same time, Mini enthusiasts also asserted “that the Mini was the car you either love or hate, and fortunately the people at the start of the Mini’s life loved it...” “Pininfarina” (a famous carmaker from Italy) once joked to “Issigonis”:

*‘Pininfarina: Why don’t you style the Mini a bit?’*

*Issigonis: [without hesitation] It will still be fashionable when I'm dead and gone...'*

*(British Mini Club, 2006)*

This shows the incredible foresight Alec Issigonis had. By the 1990s the utilitarian design had become so iconic that it was registered as a trademark by BMC's descendant company, Rover.

The Mini has become a world-famous icon, and is for many a lifestyle choice rather than just a car. It constitutes an enduring part of their lives, all of which is testament to Issigonis' imagination, technological advances and a highly "savvy" media campaign.

Large segments of society have been drawn into advertising campaigns geared around brands and the concepts they convey. However, countercultures have arisen that have had the potential to erode the effect of such marketing efforts. These countercultures are resistant to the very idea of brands as insidiously destructive of individuality and freedom of choice. Brand marketing, however, far from seeing such movements as inimical, has come to view them as allies in the struggle for brand supremacy. The Mini brand is a case in point. Over the last two decades it has stayed abreast of social trends and attitudes, and in this century the BMW MINI has proved adept at adapting to and competing with opposing brands and forming favourable alliances, as is attested by the numerous Mini and MINI communities that have sprung up over this period. This countercultural movement has affected many iconic brands (Holt, 2004), which have learned to cleverly modify their marketing strategies to maximize these counter-cultural meanings.

*'Many in American Business...imagined the counterculture not as an enemy to be undermined or a threat to consumer culture but as a hopeful sign, a symbolic ally in their own struggles against the mountains of deadweight procedure and hierarchy that had accumulated over the years.'*

(Frank 1997, p. 9)

According to Frank's (1997) view, the anti-branding movement is not opposed to business, but is an element in the realization of competitive advantage.

*'It will be chasing the young and the restless with whatever it takes, including millions in marketing campaigns and many, many more models.'*

(Dawson and Armstrong, 2001)

The message above indicates the perseverance and marketing drive of the Toyota Motor Corporation. It demonstrates that some companies are prepared to invest lump sums of money into media advertising and the design sector to aid their company's brand strategy.



In a sense, being a member of a Mini club can have quasi-religious overtones, because of owners’ loyalty and commitment. Macintosh is another brand whose “marketing department works hard to foster the devotion of its followers” (Kahney, 2002), thus fostering such levels of loyalty. These are examples of how companies focus their time and effort into forming a long term relationship with consumers as well as developing customers’ faith in the company.

Despite the Mini’s now iconic status, however, it was not an instant success.

Only 20,000 units were sold in its first year, but by 1962 this figure had grown tenfold. This increase was due in part to astute marketing which included the use of celebrity endorsements, which saw the car given to eighty

leading figures, and the seal was set on the Mini's fame when Issigonis used one to drive Queen Elizabeth II around Windsor Park. As well as the car being nimble in a tight parking spot, ownership of one was seen as "cool", and became a fashion accessory. The Mini was considered as a desirable accessory in London, the "Style capital of the world", with Mini owners posing in their uniquely adorned cars along Carnaby Street and King's Road, Chelsea:

*'You didn't need an unobtainable sports car to burn some one off at the lights; you needed an easily affordable Mini.'*

*(Graham Robson, 2006, p. 26)*

Nonetheless, the fun characteristic also played an important role at the time:

*'It was cheeky and it was, above all, fun. To have fun and to be seen doing so was essential and never has a car given so much fun per pound note as the Mini.'*

*(Graham Robson, 2006, p. 37)*

In those halcyon days, Mini became the ideal car to drive in Great Britain, particularly in London, where the English motorway system was in its infancy. Before the M25 "Ring of Death" developed in London, long journeys at motorway speeds were not such a part of everyday life as they are now. The Mini was just the right car to drive at that time:

*'A cool Saturday afternoon might take in a visit to Mary Quant's clothes shop in the King's Road, Chelsea, then a short drive up to Barbara Hulanicki's Biba shop in Kensington Church Street before driving down to hang out in Carnaby Street to watch the fashion parade on the pavements. You could hardly be cool if you were stuck in traffic or sweatily trying to squeeze into a tiny parking slot, so a Mini proved the perfect vehicle.'*



Figure 5.3 fashion designer - Mary Quant with the Mini and the fashion outlet.  
(Source: Top Foto, 2006b)

(Fryatt, 2001, p. 36)

*‘There’s something about driving one, the way it turns as fast as you can think, the way it darts through the motorbikes-sizes gaps, the way the gears and exhaust whine and burble as you cut through the traffic – as the sticker said: “ You have just been Mini’d”’.*

(Mundy, 2002, p. 8)

It is perhaps not coincidental that the Mini and Mary Quant’s miniskirt were both popular during the 1960s: both challenged contemporary notions of “correctness” in their respective spheres, and were adopted largely (or almost exclusively in the case of the miniskirt) by younger people. This was due to the Baby Boom (immediately after World War II) in 1947 that occurred in the United Kingdom, where a great number of babies were born than any other year since the peak after World War I in 1920. Better education, income and living standards meant for the stability of producing more children. As a result, there was a greater number of young people during the 1960s.

The effect of the miniskirt on this era was characterized in an article entitled *Icons – a portrait of England*:

*‘Blowing sky-high the notion that English are reserved bunch, the miniskirt exploded out of Swinging London on the fashion scene in 1966’*



Figure 5.4 a woman wearing a miniskirt in the 1960s.  
(Source: Top Foto, 2006c)

*(Icons, 2006)*

It made some other comments about the miniskirt:

*‘As much as the mini is an icon of England, this “mini” icon is actually about the skirt, which is (IMHO) much more interesting for totally different reasons. Although a girl in a mini, wearing a mini is probably even more English.’*

*(Icons, 2006)*

“Small is beautiful” was thus doubly ratified, by the car and by the item of clothing. The Mini became the symbol of London in particular, as the capital of the “swinging Sixties”, and as the trendsetting, youth-centred, pop culture capital of the world. The following quotes show how the Mini is recognised as an iconic symbol of the 60s, associated with England pride:

*‘Even though we also produced the Mini here in Australia, it is instantly recognised and identified as being an English vehicle, more so than any other car. I’m sure it’s also more identifiable world wide as being English than a lot of other “English Icons.’*

*(Icons, 2006)*

*‘Alongside the Land Rover, the (original) Mini is instantly recognisable and instantly associated with England. Both were exported extensively and are still popular throughout the world. To be an icon, I believe global recognition is needed. Both these vehicles have this and deserve the title “English Icon”’*

*(Icons, 2006)*

*‘A fantastic little car. Fun and easy to customise. Wouldn’t be without one! Thousands of enthusiasts agree, gathering at British Mini Club events throughout the year. Very much an icon. What more can I say!’*

*(Icons, 2006)*



In addition to being a cultural icon, the Mini also became a veritable ‘fashion statement’. Many celebrities of that era drove Minis that had been customised by famous British coachbuilders, for example Peter Sellers’ wicker side-panelled Mini built by Hooper (the Rolls- Royce coachbuilder,) which appeared in his movie *A Shot in the Dark*. (Wikipedia, 2006).



Figure 5.5 Mini enthusiasts gather together to watch The Italian Job film.  
(Source: Wikipedia, 2006)

The car’s reputation was boosted that same decade by the Mini Cooper, which successfully took the Mini onto the racetrack, winning the Monte Carlo rally three times. Other variants followed, including modifications as

pickups and vans. The decade closed for the Mini with its starring role in the film “The Italian Job”, in which the climactic car chase features Minis outmanoeuvring Alfa Romeo police cars. This increased the Mini’s patriotic associations, as can be seen in the following quote in which Mini enthusiasts express their feelings towards the car, particularly after watching the film:

*‘I went and romped in my grandfathers after watching that movie; you really can drive those downstairs, no just kidding but fun none the less. Apart from that, they do get the attention of high school girls, either they never seen one before or they think it’s cute...’*

*(Amanda, in depth interview)*

*‘I just watched The Italian Job...I have some respect for the Mini now’*

*(Anonymous, internet questionnaire)*

*‘I thought the same thing too after I watched that movie!!’*



*(Anonymous, internet questionnaire)*

In the following two decades the car was updated and restyled to keep it in tune with contemporary tastes and demands, the main redesigns being the Mini Clubman in 1969 and successive marks of Mini through to 1990. By that year, however, the car had ceased production in many overseas plants, and the same happened in Britain in 2000. This was a decision by Rover, BMC's descendant company, which had been taken over by BMW in 1994.

BMW redesigned the Mini as the MINI in 2000, a decision which divided opinion in the Mini community. This in itself demonstrates the liveliness of that community prior to that date. But the split was not complete, as demonstrated by the quotes provided by respondents in the present research show, and while some clubs ban MINIs, others actively seek members owning both cars. The new MINI is a larger, heavier car than the Mini but with less passenger room. This is largely because of the crash protection which the classic Mini was not legally required to have.

### **5.3 Launch of BMW MINI**

The selloff of the Rover group by BMW in 2000 meant the loss of thousands of jobs, the ramifications of which affected the British government. However, this decision led to a greater future for the company, as it took on the much loved Mini, set apart as another brand. BMW planned this in order to cater for people who required a smaller compact car, especially since their smallest model was the 3 Series Compact.



Figure 5.6 The Bean Mini an intricate car with character to spare  
(Source: Character-cars, 2006)

Volkswagen's new Beetle and BMW's new MINI are cars that are adored by many and are similar in the fact that they are small and compact. However, the new MINI retains the original design and engineering concept, where the engine is situated at the front. Development of the new MINI combined the original Mini concepts and incorporated the latest motor technology. A mere glance at the new MINI instantly reveals that it is a modern interpretation of the original vehicle. Both cars are unique and are seen to possess a friendly,

attractive aura.

The following quote shows that the car is immediately recognisable: even a three year old child can associate the new MINI with the original.

*'When I showed her the new MINI, she immediately said it was "Mr Bean's car'*

*(Hardy, 2003)*

The car in the Mr Bean series was a Mini, and is commonly perceived as a "fun" and "cute" car. This shows that the new MINI has been a success in being able to retain the charm of the original.

On the other hand, the launch of the new MINI was not welcomed by all, as some had a thought that the original Mini could have continued to be manufactured for many more years to come instead of ceasing production and introducing the new MINI. Others, on the contrary, believe that the MINI was inevitable due to modern safety regulations and the latest technologies. One of the reasons why some Mini enthusiasts do not support the new MINI is because it is a longer, wider and heavier vehicle. Nonetheless, it is much more

safe and stable to drive. MINI drivers have a host of benefits such as the fact that the “driver and front passenger are protected by frontal airbags” as well as “side airbags integrated in the seats.” Another safety feature that has been adopted from BMW motors is the “crash sensor” that automatically disables all the door locks if the car is involved in a serious accident. This demonstrates the evolving concepts of the Mini due to the greater knowledge of modern materials, safety requirements and computer technology. Consequently, drivers of the new MINI are better equipped as regards safety than are drivers of the original Mini.

The dispute, such as it is, between the old and new cars will doubtless continue for a long time to come.

Prior to the launch of BMW MINI in 2001 there was a huge marketing wave that was set out to inform the world of “the rebirth of a legend” (Wood, 2001) When the launch of the new MINI arrived, there was a sigh of relief by many Mini enthusiasts when the new MINI was revealed to the public. This was because the car was not “badged” with the BMW logo, but had its own brand within a brand.

Another aspect of the public reaction to the launch is that there was a diverse range of reactions. Some praised the high-tech advances and some felt that the new MINI’s personality was quite different. The launch focused on the prominence of the brand and technological issues rather than characteristics of the Mini, such as it being a “*symbol of fun, glamour and cheekiness*” (Wood, 2001) which was the main aim of the original Mini promoters.

A disappointment to some was that the new MINI was not nearly as affordable as was the classic Mini in its days of production. The reason for this was economic changes and the costs of modern technology and production machinery. Despite the new MINI being considered far more expensive than the original, and other compact cars for that matter, it still retains its appeal amongst the younger generation. Television, magazines and the internet have

boosted sales of the new MINI and has maintained the interest of old and young alike, as demonstrated by the following quote:

The following quotation indicates the anticipation and excitement of both the old and young generations.

*'People on the waiting list have been young lads waiting for their 17th birthday and their new driving license up to 75 year old grandmothers eager to get into a Cooper S.'*

*(National Mini Owner Club, 2006)*

As well as the effects of the advertising campaign, younger people may be swayed by the social desirability of possessing the status symbol of the latest, most fashionable car, while for those who remember the classic Mini, the new vehicle may provide a connection to that past, both social and personal.

The marketing of the new MINI was successful in conveying the image of a high technology, reputable brand and of a car that is stylish car to drive. The "MINI Adventures" television adverts in particular were unconventional and so attracted a diverse audience, emphasising uniqueness and helping build a distinctive personality for the brand. The internet was also an invaluable source in promoting the MINI, as it allowed the public to check out the looks and features of the car, as well as providing financial information of payment plans so as to provide guidance as to affordability. The success of this campaign in creating this image is shown in the following quote:

*'I'm proud to say that now it's not a question of how many people can you fit in a Mini, but how many awards can you fit in a MINI trophy cabinet!'*

*(Houghton-Berry, 2002)*

One clear opinion expressed in the findings is that the Mini is usually associated with 'fun' and with positive connotations. Although it has been to the object of society's counterculture due to the introduction of the MINI, it still remains a steady and well-anchored brand. Driving either the Mini or the

new MINI is still seen as leading to the experience of 'adventure and excitement', as many respondents mentioned. The common factor in all the in depth interviews conducted for this research was what lay at the root of their enjoyment:

*'My Mini is so good to drive; it's just the perfect car for me. It looks fabulous too.'*

*(Rachel, in depth interview)*

*'I think the MINI is such a great little car. I find it so convenient to park when I am in town and looking for a place to park. Even the smallest space I can park in and I have never had problems with steering.'* (Shazmin, in depth interview)

*'I always feel in the mood to drive when I am sitting in my MINI. There's just something about it that makes me want to go places.'*

*(Chris, in depth interview)*

The launch of the new MINI has been a success in the sense that it has created a modern personality for the Mini that appeals greatly to present society. This is partly due to the innovative advertising campaigns before and after the launch, advertising the MINI's unique character and its suitability for various sectors of the public. In conjunction with this, the well established reputation of BMW has public confidence in the MINI.

#### **5.4 Summary**

This chapter has traced the history of the Mini, from the historical circumstances of its conception, design and manufacture, through its initial – somewhat muted – reception, to the reasons for its uptake and increased popularity to the point at which it became an icon. This historical study is essential for an accurate assessment of the Mini community, because its brand loyalty resides to a large degree in historical factors, including the

original marketing campaigns. The eventual cessation of production and the car's relaunch by BMW are also examined, highlighting again that an understanding of this historical environment is crucial to an investigation of the current MINI subculture. The following chapter will consist of the collection of data and analysis concerning online and offline observation ranging from in-depth interviews focus groups, popular media sources, online interviews and Mini board participation.

## CHAPTER 6 FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS II

### 6.1 Introduction

This chapter analyses the results of the data collected, which involves both online and offline observation from in-depth interviews, focus groups and popular media sources, online interviews, and participant observation through message boards from the Mini community website. It consists of three sections. The first presents an overview of the Mini community's history and of its present makeup as seen by the members, exploring the nature of this community specifically with regard to Muniz and O'Guinn's (2001) three markers of community. The second examines the relationships between the brand object and the community, and between community members, in order to explore the nature of consumption. The third investigates the deeper symbolic significance of these relationships and of the individual community member's psychology as it relates to this consumption activity, with special reference to Belk's (1988) model of the extended self.



Figure 6.1: The logo of the British Mini Club and the community homepage

Source: British Mini Club, 2005; The Mini Club, 2005

### 6.2 History and General Overview of the Community

The research discovered the existence of a number of decades-old Mini communities, with Mini car clubs and organised Mini community events. In the United Kingdom there are over 150 Mini clubs. Europe and Asia also have large numbers of Mini clubs, particularly in Italy and Japan. Figure 6.1 showing one prominent manifestation of this community ethos.

During the course of this research, it became evident that the activities of the Mini community impacted on members' habits and behaviour of Mini brand community members. Muniz and O'Guinn's (2001) three markers of community – consciousness of kind, moral responsibility, and ritual and traditions (discussed earlier in the Literature Review) – will form the basis for much of the following discussion. Firstly, however, some general background would be appropriate. There are a total of about 38 Mini community branches in the United Kingdom, grouped into three strongly marked regions: Monmouthshire Minis, the Northeast region (Shropshire branch) and Staffordshire. These clubs were set up by groups of Mini enthusiasts in order for them to meet each other, swap advice, exchange parts, tell stories and enjoy themselves. Within the club they work as a group, organising weekly meetings, rallies and a chat room. Members feel a meaningful relationship to the brand, as well as a far stronger sympathy with each other. As two interviewees from the Monmouthshire Mini Club describe their experiences and good memories during their involvement in the club:

*'We also meet sometimes just to have some fun together.'*

*(George, internet questionnaire)*

*'Most Mini lovers have a certain unspoken community feeling that I quite enjoy.'*

*(Paul, internet questionnaire)*

Despite the large number of Mini clubs worldwide, the international Mini community proves to be remarkably homogenous, which means that members tend to be welcomed wherever they travel, either nationally or internationally. Brand loyalty usually supersedes any other considerations regarding acceptance into the community. Here are some examples taken from Mini community's homepages which demonstrate their views towards the Mini:

*'British Mini car club for the Mini you drive!'*

*(British Mini Club, 2005)*



*'As long as you have a Mini you are welcome...'*  
(Derby Mini Club, 2006)

and a comment made by one of the respondents found in the chat room at the Japan Mini cooper website.

*'Mini- A Car for fun and for everyone.'*  
(Mini Cooper Register Japan, 2006)

Unlike other clubs, which charge membership fees, most Mini clubs are run by volunteers as non-profit organizations. The Mini club or community is never determined by social status and financial background. As stated above, it is more concerned with the strength of the member's devotion to and possession of the Mini, and an awareness of its historical value. Here are some the statements and slogan the taken from Essex Mini Club:

*'The idea being for like minded followers of the worlds most loved small car a place for meeting up and exchanging ideas and solutions to problems.'*  
(Essex Mini Club, 2006)

*'The club is run by enthusiasts, for enthusiasts.'*  
(Essex Mini Club, 2006)

Some of the interviewees, such as Ralph, a pensioner, and David, a lifelong Mini enthusiast who the present researcher met at the British Mini Day, both testified to the strength of their devotion to the Mini, and especially to its historical value:

*'I just like to see old cars kept running for us all to enjoy.'*  
(Ralph, in depth interview)

*'It would be excellent if I could always have [a Mini]...I would never be happy driving any other car...it is the best car for me.'*

*(David, in depth interview)*

The Mini has proved itself to be a desirable and reliable vehicle despite its age, as Cox, who works in a restaurant, attests:

*'After 41 years of production it still holds its own with modern Super Minis.'*

*(Cox, 2000)*

These responses reflect one of the brand culture's main features, that of longevity, both on a personal and a wider level. They demonstrate both a consciousness of the value of tradition (obviously seen in a positive light), and also a determination to maintain that tradition; in other words, they show an awareness of a phenomenon outside themselves, and they make themselves an active part of that tradition.

### **6.3 The Three Markers**

The existence of this community will now be explored in greater depth, using Muniz and O'Guinn's (2001) three markers as mentioned earlier, these being consciousness of kind, moral responsibility, and ritual and tradition. These markers, according to the authors, are used to define a community.

#### **6.3.1 Consciousness of kind in the Mini Community**

Consciousness of kind was evident in our brand communities, and it is also the most important element in the community literature (Muniz and O'Guinn, 1998). Consciousness of kind always refers to the essential connection the members feel toward one another. Bender (1978) also asserts that community members feel a sense of community which can be described as "we-ness". Members feel part of the same circle, and have a strong affinity for the brand. According to Muniz and O'Guinn's (2001) studies on brand community, the two most important brand community mechanisms engender consciousness of kind are legitimacy and oppositional brand loyalty. In context, legitimacy is the

process by which the community recognise their identity and the distinction between “true” members, the members in marginal space, and those who are not members at all. On the other hand, oppositional brand loyalty gives the community member a sense of distinctiveness from those who do not “belong”. There is a special significance in the case of the Mini, because of its modern conversion into the BMW MINI by BMW, which has created additional grounds for oppositional loyalty, not just between brands but within a particular brand. This can be illustrated by club members’ opposing quotes regarding the BMW and classic Minis. A sense of identity is here reinforced by the increasing refinement of distinction brought about by intra- rather than inter-brand opposition:

*‘The BMW MINI is a nice car, but it is not a true Mini. The character has gone and it has become just a “normal” car. With the true Mini, no two cars looked the same because each owner added their own touch of personalisation.... now the BMW MINI looks the same.’*

*(Peter, internet questionnaire)*

*‘To be honest, I don’t like the old Minis.’*

*(Alex, internet questionnaire)*

The importance of negative reinforcement of consciousness of kind is obvious. Banister and Hogg (2001) explore this topic, and find that it can be subcategorised into the “undesired self” (which they characterise as “So not me!”) and the “avoidance self” (“Just not me!”). The avoidance self relates to products which are not seen as inherently undesirable, but are not regarded by the subject as suitable to them – in other words, their desirability is relative. This category does not find expression in the quotes: no one expressed the opinion that “the Mini (or BMW MINI) is OK, but just isn’t for me”. The more extreme, absolute, category, on the other hand, is very evident: that of the undesired self, in which the subject does not want to be associated with an object because of its perceived inherently negative qualities. This has obvious ramifications for the Mini/BMW MINI disagreement. Every quote

which registered an opinion on this debate, or on one or other of the cars in isolation, referred objectively to the Mini or the BMW MINI. Subjects either did or did not want to identify themselves with the Mini/BMW MINI because of certain inherent qualities possessed by the car(s) – an attitude, by implication, they felt ought to be universal, or at least universally recognisable.

The author's examination finds that the absolute category above is expressed in various disparaging ways. These include stereotyping people who identify themselves with undesirable objects as automatically exhibiting further undesirable traits, as Nathan, a worker in a knitwear factory, puts it:

*'I don't like people who just follow the crowd. They're just sheep. I prefer to be distinctive, which is why I'm a Mini fan'*  
(Nathan, in-depth interview)

According to Nathan, owners of such "ordinary" cars as Ford Mondeos or Vauxhall Astras have no individuality, whereas owners of Minis do. The choice of the object automatically implies certain things about the chooser, according to this view.

This positive/negative dichotomy is often expressed in the same quote, and thus reinforces each other.

Kates (2001) raises the possibility that groups of communities characterised by Muniz and O'Guinn (2002) as "brand communities" might in fact be specific forms of "interpretative communities", whose focus is on particular brands. This would make the whole Mini community a subset of an "interpretative community", or a "metacommunity" which interprets a range of social phenomena in common ways. He then raises an alternative possibility, that each perceived "brand community" may in fact consist of several as yet undetected interpretative communities. This is a useful way of viewing the Mini community as a whole, divided as it often is into the Mini and BMW MINI camps. According to this view, the Mini/BMW MINI community would share

common assumptions about desirable qualities (“fun”, “style” etc.), but would project these qualities onto similar but rival objects. This might explain the intensity of the feeling between the two camps as expressed in some of the quotes (see below in this section). The more similar groups are, the more violently they often clash, because they are competing for the same ground. The most extreme analogy would be that of warfare, regarding which it has often been observed that civil war is generally more vicious than warfare between states.

As mentioned, Mini brand communities are volunteer social organisations. This has many parallels with “legitimacy” ideologies, in which the legitimacy of the community and its activities are reinforced by association with activities regarded as praiseworthy by society at large. The Mini enthusiast can freely join the community, as long as he or she can appreciate the community’s culture, history, rituals, traditions and symbols. In the following extract, Mark, who is one of the Mini community members, conveys the friendliness of his club, the National Mini Owners Club (Staffordshire):

*‘We welcome anyone interested in Minis to join us, whether just casual, enthusiast or visiting. Fast engines, slow engines, classics, standard, old and new, hell! You don’t have to have a Mini to come along, just drop in and have chat, good beer, interesting conversation (well most of the time) and loads and loads of Minis.’*

*(Mark, in-depth interview)*

This demonstrates inclusiveness; conversely, this legitimacy was also present in an exclusive form, where the community member tended to be conservative, and to protect the Mini from “intruders” or anything that might harm the brand. Daniel, a devotee of the Mini for almost two decades, and a dedicated Mini club member, reveals his antagonism to the new BMW MINI:

*‘We don’t do anything with BMW; we might get some members who joined the club might have a new one, but to us it is not a BMW BMW’*

*MINI, this is a Mini, the classic one is a Mini, the BMW will never be a Mini. So, we keep ourselves to ourselves.'*

*(Daniel, in-depth interview)*

This research has shown that community members were very keen to preserve the demarcation between themselves and “others”. This became evident when members referred to people using the same brand but in different makes, which generated community concern about the value of the object, in that the “wrong” brand was seen to devalue it.

During the Mini Fair, a discussion group was held, where community members value being someone “special” or “uncommon”. One of respondents describes themselves as a “Classic Mini” type and stressed that the Mini he owned is spelt “Mini”, not “MINI”. This shows the member’s consciousness of kind in his recognition of belonging to a distinct group of people. The following quotes by Connor, Gary and Craig, all friends who meet at the pub every Friday, illustrate the stance of the classic Mini community members towards supporting the Mini car:

*'All classic Minis wave to each other, no matter what model! People who drive BMW MINIs (spelt MINI as it is not a Mini) never wave to us (and vice versa) as they are just wanna-be cars. We owned the real Mini ...'*

*(Connor, focus group)*

*'BMW MINIs will never be Mini. Purely in the time aspect, the marketing and advertisement nowadays (BMW’s launch of the BMW MINI) has been amazing. So much time and money has been dedicated in trying to sell them...'*

*(Gary, focus group)*

*'The majority of classic Mini owners I know would not buy one for this reason. We felt that BMW have simply “used and abused” the brand name.'*

*(Craig, focus group)*

Statements such as these engender the mechanism of consciousness of kind, otherwise known as legitimacy. In this context, community members have the “competence” to differentiate between “true” members and those who are “pretending”, or are even “abusers”. These reflections strengthen the unity, cultural appreciation, historical value, rituals traditions and symbols of the community.

Similarly, consider the following quotation from Michael, a Mini enthusiast who is a primary school teacher, who hard to find the time to deal with the long term and continuous problems of his Mini:

*‘We are ready for Mini! The Minis are relatively easy to work [with] and it is satisfying to know you help someone. When something goes wrong on their Mini, it makes you look at their problem in case the same thing occurs on your Mini, i.e. crap terminals on the fuse box, so you check yours. Dodgy coil lead, you check yours.’*

*(Michael, in-depth interview)*

As shown above, oppositional brand loyalty is an additional social process perpetuating consciousness of kind, from which brand community members derived an important characteristic of their communal experience. As well as this, it is an important component of the meaning of the brand, from an oppositional to a competing brand (Muniz and OGuinn, 2001).

Interestingly, in the Mini community, oppositional brand loyalty is strongest as regards the re-branded BMW MINI. This feeling has become a source of unity in the Mini brand community. The following examples are quotes from in-depth interviews collected during the Mini Showdown at Shakespeares County Raceway. Sam is a driving instructor and Bruce works in a fashion boutique:

*‘Yes my Mini is a real Mini, not a foreign imposter with a stolen name.’  
(Sam, in-depth interview)*

*‘...and our Mini club will never let BMW things in. Every member voted not to let it in so we will remain 100% free of BMW parts, like what it says on the back of every member’s Mini.’  
(Bruce, in-depth interview)*

Figure 6.2 shows the community’s negative feelings towards the BMW MINI. The sticker’s messages include “100% FREE OF B.M.W. PARTS” and “REAL MINI BEWARE OF IMITATION”.



Figure 6.2: Stickers pasted on the side window of a Mini.

Members view the Mini as a small, classic, fun and economical car, as opposed to the BMW MINI, which they see negatively:

*‘Too big, too slow, too expensive. They get pissy when I leave them standing on the road!!’  
(Alastair, internet questionnaire)*

This irritation with the re-branded BMW MINI has extended even to the use of the name “Mini”:



*'Cashing in on brand names is poor.'*

*(Derek, internet questionnaire)*

*'What bothers me is that the new BMW MINI is called a Mini! After all, it is so far removed from the original car that it is ridiculous to brand it with the same name.'*

*(Dillon, internet questionnaire)*

Pride is taken in denigrating the opposing brand:

*'It's ugly and too big. It's just an insult to the name of Mini.'*

*(Anthony, internet questionnaire)*

*'Too many expletives to print!'*

*(Matt, internet questionnaire)*

*'Shite!'*

*(Gus, internet questionnaire)*

More negative comments were made by the community members after watching the new BMW MINI advertisement, screened after the film *The Italian Job* at the Mini Fair. This included that of Scott who was there on the day:

*'I really don't like that BMW commercial with the two old people driving around in the buff, smacking people on the back of the head with a fish. I prefer the classic advertising. I feel that the BMW ads show the drivers and owners as being rude people. Not a good image to portray.'*

*(Scott, in-depth interview)*

Undoubtedly, the strength of this opposition goes some way to explaining the unity of the Mini community. Bensman and Vidich (1995) and Kephart and Zellner (1994) note that many groups and communities pull together and experience their closest bonds during periods of distress or threat to the

community. Zack's comment to some extent echoes the feelings of the endangered Apple Newton community.:

*'We really have to stay together at this moment. They try to use the name of the old Mini to gather customers for the new one. This effort is rather pathetic, since the new Mini is more similar to the VW Golf than to a Classic one.'*

*(Zack, in-depth interview)*

As part of this defensive mentality, actions by the opposing brand which lend themselves to demonisation are avidly seized on. In this regard, Bensman and Vidich (1995) in their study of neighbourhoods assert that the dominance of a neighbourhood by one institution can create a counter-community whose sole reason for existence is its opposition to that institution. The following three interviewees all expressed outrage at real or imagined attempts to subvert or attack the classic Mini:

*'BMW have gone to court to ban all Mini garages, part stockists etc. from using the Mini name. The Mini name is timeless. It denotes a classic world-renowned icon that will never be bettered.'*

*(Calvin, in-depth interview)*

*'I didn't like the way they mercilessly pursued and sued Mini traders who had been in the business longer than them over the use of the word "Mini.'*

*(Nicholas, in-depth interview)*

*'They tried to stop all of us using the name. They want total control!'*

*(Samuel, in-depth interview)*

These recall the various conspiracy theories so beloved of survivalist groups. Calvin, Nicholas and Samuel clearly see themselves as identifying with David in opposition to BMW's Goliath. Holt (2002, p. 83) points out that this

identification with the underdog began in the sixties, in which consumerism was not rejected “in toto. Rather, only brands that were perceived as overly coercive lost favour.” The very name, and the brand name’s connotations of small size, provide a subconscious reinforcement of this feeling, while also conforming to Holt’s (2002, p. 82) observation that “to be socially valued, cultural content must pass through branded goods.” One brand is pitted against another, each being assigned stereotypical and opposed characters: the tyrannical, large corporation ruthlessly suppressing the innocent little victim without justification or pity. In this sense, the scenario operates like a morality play in which the spectator identifies with the “good” character and opposes the machinations of the “evil” one.

This parallels one contemporary view, expressed by such writers as Naomi Klein that modern large corporations are entirely self-serving, and destructive of community, individuality and real worth. The small group is portrayed as embodying worthwhile values – in this case durability – which is threatened by a large corporation.

The antagonism towards the BMW MINI, however, also operates in reverse. Some members felt that the newer vehicle was a definite improvement over the classic car. BMW MINI owners at the British Mini Showdown event felt negatively about the classic Mini:

*‘I don’t like the old Minis. They would die, really, if BMW didn’t carry on the concept.’*

*(Perry, in-depth interview)*

*‘I never thought the old Mini was a safe car. I like the new BMW MINI. It’s well built.’*

*(Haden, in-depth interview)*

*‘The old Mini was very unsafe if you had an accident, but the new BMW MINI is far safer, very modern.’*

*(Wallace, in-depth interview)*

*'The old Mini was a lot less reliable, especially the electronics.'*

*(Zane, in-depth interview)*

It should be noted that these views are expressed in questionnaires rather than in public forums. This is in fact typical of the responses received by the present researcher, and suggests that adherence to the classic Mini constitutes the dominant “ideology”, with which (paradoxically, in the light of the previous paragraph) BMW MINI enthusiasts find it difficult to disagree, at least publicly.

It is interesting that in the case of the Mini/BMW MINI, the antagonism between the two camps served as the main vehicle of oppositional brand loyalty. Occasional remarks, only some of them derogatory, were made about other makes of car, and many of those were made incidentally to insults about the BMW MINI:

*'It looks like a squashed Vauxhall Corsa'*

*(Winston, internet questionnaire)*

*'When I see [a BMW MINI] from behind I can't tell it from something else like a SAAB.'* *(Terence, internet questionnaire)*

This rivalry is not, however, enough to force every member to declare their allegiance. Some were quite relaxed about the difference between the two models:

*'It doesn't bother me whether it's BMW or a classic.'*

*(Giles, internet questionnaire)*

*'A true Mini fan would appreciate all types of Mini – BMW and Classic. It's disappointing when you hear about so-called Mini fans damaging other cars because it was a BMW.'*

*(Patel, internet questionnaire)*

This also applies to other makes. Chad proved quite open-minded about various brands of vehicle:

*'I also like Beetles, Jaguars, British and Italian sports cars and Smart cars.'*

*(Chad, in depth interview)*

### 6.3.2 Moral Responsibility in the Mini Community

Moral responsibility, another of Muniz and O'Guinn's (2001) markers, refers to a sense of duty to the community as a whole, and to individual members of the community. It also produces collective action, and contributes to group cohesion. Many community members feel a real sense of responsibility to the other members, and to the community as a whole.

There are two critical and traditional communal missions. The first of these is the recruiting, integrating and retaining of members to ensure the continued existence of the club, as Kendrick from the Brighton Mini club states:

*'I built the Mini community. Mainly I am trying to bring everyone together. The more people you get together, the bigger the community.'*

*(Kendrick, in depth interview)*

Kendrick's proselysing is quasi-religious: the number of "true believers" must be expanded. Oliver shows how the wellsprings of this zeal are internal to each member:

*'I adore the car. It's very hard to explain why. Only a real Mini fan can understand why it is so appealing to own and drive one.'*

*(Oliver, in depth interview)*

This fervour, with its attendant implied exclusivity ("only a real Mini fan can understand...") highlights the dissonance between the necessity to preserve the distinction, and by implication the superiority, of the brand's adherents on the one hand, and on the other the equal necessity of making "them" into "us" – of (again by implication) removing the distinction between adherents and selected outsiders by translating the latter into the status of the former. The very means of separation can also be those of attraction. Max obviously sees the car as imparting some measure of superiority on him:

*'Envy is the first emotion, followed by curiosity. Everyone I know personally thinks it's the coolest car. The strangers love to ask questions, and look through the glass when we're parked.'*

*(Max, in depth interview)*

The "envy" is by definition of something that the jealous person does not possess. Yet it is this emotion which can be seen as drawing them into the adherents' orbit, and to join one of the clubs.

Many members, however, reported having recruited someone who did not even realise the existence of the Mini. The following conversation which was taken from a focus group held at the British Mini Day, explains how a visiting American friend of one of the members got to know the Mini and became part of the community:

*'Mark: ... the couple coming over here are American, they are now our members as well. So they will give you another perspective.'*

*Lucy: When Cintia came over to England and we introduced our Mini to them and we told them how much fun it was to have a Mini. Then she*

*said, "I want that little car", and that was when she had to have a Mini, that's what she said when she came over*

*Cintia: Yes, exactly. I fall in love with the Mini. I love the Mini and will bring it back to America and show it to my neighbour and keep it for good of course.'*

*(Focus group, British Mini Day)*

It should be noted that 'Cintia' was very grateful to receive the recommendation and she consequently became something of a missionary for the brand.

This "zealotry" can be important to brands of any kind. Emotional loyalty to a brand is used by marketers in general, and is a powerful motivating force behind the recreation of such brands as the Mini and the VW. Ignorance of this factor can ruin a reformulation of a well-loved product, as happened in 1985 with New Coke (Rozanski et al, 1999). "Zealotry" is a natural consequence of the extremes of brand loyalty shown in some of the quotes in this chapter.

Holt (2004) explores the origins of this "zealotry" in the transformations of brands into cultural icons. A key constituent of this transformation is the "myth market", in which cultural contradictions are resolved by the adoption of myths, which are the indirect vehicles by which national ideologies are expressed. By this view, emotional loyalty to the Mini stems from and is reinforced by the "small is beautiful" and "fun" myths generated in the 1960s, which. One of Holt's (2004) case studies is the triple reinvention of the Mountain Dew brand, as it reacted to disruptions in American society, each of which rendered the previous marketing campaigns irrelevant. Of course, the Mini can no longer react in this way; instead, its adherents determine the cultural value of the brand, which becomes much more autonomous than that of a current brand could be. This makes it much more the adherents' "own" brand, rather than that of a marketer, adding to their "zealotry".

The “small is beautiful” and “fun” myths were reactions to the dour 1950s, in which Britain recovered only slowly from the Second World War, and fashion changed relatively little from the preceding two decades, and prestige in any form was inextricably connected with the concept of “large”. The myths the Mini’s marketers capitalised on four decades ago are still of concern today, albeit in somewhat altered form: giant corporations produce virtually identical cars, to which the Mini is an ideal antidote.

The second communal mission is internal: assisting members to use the brand in a “proper” way:

*‘I will continue to help Mini drivers if they are in trouble with their cars.’  
(Spencer, internet questionnaire)*

*‘At London to Brighton I was a marshal so I had to show people where to park. But usually we just go to look at the cars, and maybe buy bits and pieces at the stalls to make the Minis we have better.’  
(Kendrick, in depth interview)*

*‘I will [help] when I can, even if it is just lending tools. Helped my husband with his, if that counts.’  
(Travis, internet questionnaire)*

Kendrick, one of the “zealots” quoted before, recounts his “missionary” activity on behalf of the brand. This can often be positively reinforced by community involvement in activities which are socially perceived as commendable. In such cases, the “good” of being identified with the brand is associated with a social “good”. Mark obviously identifies himself with socially praiseworthy objects:

*‘We do lots of things for the community, we help the air ambulance for access and we support them with donations and charity. We do lots of charity work as a club. In August we are going to Devon with 300 Minis,*



*to raise money for children's hospices. We do a lot of good in the Mini club.'*

*(Mark, focus group)*

This same dynamic also operates in a negative sense. The social benefits of being in the club are withheld from those who are "outsiders". Phillip's excludes "the enemy" from his solicitude for his fellow Mini owners:

*'If we see a Mini broken down, we help; we stop and help, but not a BMW.'*

*(Philip, in depth interview)*

These activities are towards the practical end of the scale. There are others which tend more toward the ritual, as Rachel testifies:

*'Collecting Mini collectables helps to reinforce the relationships among the Mini community members and create stronger rapport among them.'*

*(Rachel, in depth interview)*

(The ritual aspect is discussed in more detail in the following section.)

These can all be classed as "proper" activities, by virtue of the fact that they are approved by the members. Individual members or clubs may have feelings about what constitutes "proper"; this is seen especially in the "classic vs. BMW" controversy:

*'[The BMW] is a nice modern car...but it's not a Mini anymore. It has nothing in common with the real one.'*

*(Hugo, internet questionnaire)*

The word "real" signifies that only the classic Mini qualifies as the "proper" brand article. The BMW is merely a remake of the original – "tasteless", "shallow" and "pathetic" are epithets used by members of more traditional clubs to heap scorn on the BMW MINI. On the other hand, other members and

clubs are more accepting of the BMW version. What is “proper” is evidently somewhat flexible, depending on the membership.

### 6.3.3 Ritual and Tradition in the Mini Community

In Muniz and O’Guinn’s (2001) study of various brand communities in the USA, they use the presence of ritual and tradition as one of their markers of a community. Since the brand communities concerned include the motor vehicles SAAB and Bronco, they are particularly relevant to this study. However, Muniz and O’Guinn’s (2001) “Ritual and Tradition” section consists of two subheadings, “Celebrating the History of the Brand” and “Sharing Brand Stories”; the subject matter of these, and especially the first one, can only be defined as “ritual” rather loosely. Rook’s (1985) study of ritual in consumer behaviour presents four markers of ritual which serve, among other things, to distinguish it from mere habit. According to the author, ritual uses artefacts (thus, thinking about home at 12pm every weekend does not qualify as a ritual); it is scripted, whether formally or informally by consensus; it is performed by one or more persons playing roles; and there is an audience for the ritual. Using these markers, the regular putting on of one’s left sock first qualifies as a habit, but not a ritual. It should be noted that regularity is not a necessary component of ritual. Christian baptism is performed once in a person’s lifetime, but it is definitely a ritual.

Tradition is one context in which ritual may exist. It implies a communal consciousness. It may, for example, be a communal tradition to perform a certain ritual, whether regularly or not. Monthly meetings obviously conform to this model, especially where there are speakers and/or hosts and a set order of events, corresponding to a script. Traditions are not necessarily performance-related: many interviewees mentioned “tradition” as a loosely-defined feeling of historicity relating to the Mini car, one which embodied certain attributes discussed elsewhere in this study.

Rituals have limited or no practical value; rather, they serve to increase the sense of identity and inclusiveness among members. The overwhelming majority of quotes refer to accidental meetings on the road rather than to planned rituals between members of the same local club. This sense of identity is thus extended from the local outwards to the regional, national or even the international – as in the case of ‘Cintia’ above. In any case, the sense of belonging, of “we-ness” is constantly reinforced, as Ross’ and Frasier’s enthusiasm demonstrates:

*‘You flash and wave; it is like an unwritten code. All Mini owners do it. It’s nice to see.’*

*(Ross, in-depth interview)*

*“Depending on where I am at the time, what side of the road the Mini is on and all? if they are coming towards me I would flash my lights and wave and if I was passing on the motorway for example I would wave as I went past. If I am a passenger I cheer and shout “Mini” to alert my boyfriend so he can wave too.’*

*(Frasier, in-depth interview)*

Wesley associates the ritual of the headlight flash with its practical application in the form of help for other members in trouble.

*‘Definitely, I’m living in the Big Mini family. Everybody’s got a Mini. And flashes as you pass on the road. We’re part of the big family. If you break down, somebody will come and look after you.’*

*(Wesley, in-depth interview)*

Community rituals spill over into social ones, as Alfie describes:

*‘One flash of the headlights and a wave. If they are parked I will try and park as close to another mini as I can. If I actually meet the person will remark on their car.’*

*(Alfie, in-depth interview)*

This is really no more than a recognition of something in common acting as a possible conversation starter, but with the added intensity of at least one of the participants, Alfie, (the narrator of the above quote) being aware of belonging to a larger community. There is an assumption among members that they share similar traits, and that their common interest means that they have common characteristics:

*‘All the original Mini owners get on great - they give a friendly wave on driving past each other.’*

*(Drake, internet questionnaire)*

Most clubs have regular meetings, which serve to further reinforce both the bonds between members and the uniqueness and exclusivity which are essential components of the sense of identity mentioned before. But again, far from being a “pure” ritual, they have a social and practical function, in that they perceive the evening to have been “a good time”, and that they share knowledge about the brand object:

*‘I socialise at all the clubs. It could be technical stuff....or I could just share experiences.’*

*(Spike, internet questionnaire)*

Nigel, a solicitor in a small partnership, agrees:

*‘I am part of a local, close-knit Mini club... We all have great fun with Minis. We go to a regular meeting once a month for dinner.’*

*(Nigel, in-depth interview)*

Participation in special events demonstrates further loyalty to the brand, and further bonds the members together. It should not be imagined, of course,

that the boundary between things brand-related and the social aspect is a hard-and-fast one; rather, one shades into the other:

*'I participate in most Mini shows because of the social aspect.'*  
(Farell, Internet questionnaire)

*'We have a good laugh...we don't just sit around talking about things to do with Minis. It's good to meet new people.'*  
(Al, in-depth interview)

*'Mini ownership is more about bringing people together than looking for differences.'*  
(Debra, in-depth interview)

*'We see each other a lot regardless of whether Minis are involved.'*  
(Freeman, in-depth interview)

The Mini is important to these four people as an excuse for social bonding as much as (or, in Freeman's view, even more than) in its own right. There does seem to be a difference drawn, whether consciously or not, between the member who is mainly interested in using the brand as a pretext for social interaction, and the member whose primary interest is furthering their involvement with the brand and with others of like interests. As Drake, who was aware of a difference, put it:

*'Some of us are in it for the Mini, but some others just want to have a good time and aren't too interested in the car, really. It can get annoying when you want to talk about the technical stuff and they go off on a tangent.'*  
(Drake, in-depth interview)

For Russell, specialisation went even further, into distinctions between the attitudes of those who were "serious" about the brand:

*‘Obviously there’s the hardcore and the casual fan. The hardcore one often gets overcritical of others.’*

*(Russell, in-depth interview)*

At least one interviewee combined ritual and tradition. It is interesting that, for Elizabeth, non-brand- and brand-related rituals become mutually reinforcing:

*‘Every birthday, Christmas, anniversary – whatever – I get something new with the Mini logo on it.’*

*(Elizabeth, in-depth interview)*

Finally, there are common characteristics between rituals and community behaviour in general, as described elsewhere in this chapter. Humanity’s gregarious instinct, its acquisition of possessions and their relationship with self-identity and self-definition, and its use of ritual are all universal. The Mini community simply fits this mould in a particular way.

These markers apply to brand community, not just a Mini community. Before moving on to examine the latter in particular, it is logical to look at the basic element of such a community: the individual consumer. This will be done in the following section, using Belk’s (1988) model of the extended self to explore why consumers make the choices that they do.

#### **6.4 The Mini Community Relationship**

Having given a holistic overview of the emergence of the Mini brand community, referring to Muniz and O’Guinn’s (2002) studies on brand community, and outlined Belk’s views on the psychological reasons for consumers’ purchasing decisions, the discussion now focuses on the brand community relationship, using the Mini community as a specific example. It will use McAlexander et al’s (2002) customer-focussed model, with four elements of the environment with which the consumer reacts: the brand, the

product, the marketer and other customers. An extension of their brand relationship model will then be proposed.

#### 6.4.1 Community–Brand Relationships

In her exploration of relationship theory, Fournier (1998) comments that the consumer may project anthropomorphic qualities (and therefore a semblance of “life”) onto brands, but the brands themselves remain inanimate. The case of the Mini community highlights a qualification that must be made to this assertion: brands *can* respond, albeit slowly. SAAB, for example, prides itself on its responsiveness to its very loyal and vocal community. Brands can therefore at least appear to have human qualities, in that they “react” to initiatives by the community at large; individual community members can internalise this interplay, thus impersonating a relationship. This is the case with a brand which is still current, such as the BMW MINI. However, the “classic” Mini can no longer respond to the community in any meaningful sense, so in this case Fournier’s (1998) observation is literally true. The brand “lives” only in the mind of the consumer, and research will concern itself with the brand per se only insofar as it is given such existence.

Referring to Muniz and Schau (2005), the case of Apple Newton provides a close parallel. The first PDA in 1993 did not achieve great popularity, but did spawn a strongly loyal community of users. This community used myths to sustain its existence, including ones relating to persecution, resurrection and survival, in which the Newton is not just shown to be a superior product but is anthropomorphised, given qualities of sentience and perception. The main element of this community’s consciousness seems to be that of persecution, in which the community is victimised by public misunderstanding and by Apple’s abandonment. This quasi-religious “worship” of the brand object is similar to some of the more extreme Mini owners’ views; in the case of the Mini, the direct parallel is with perceived persecution by the BMW MINI, as outlined earlier in this chapter. However, the Mini community is bound by ties which are more positive than those of the Newton community. The bulk of responses

to the present research of Mini community members relate to the reasons for owning the car, and what it symbolises; the consciousness of self is much more on its own terms than in opposition to an antithetical “other”.

It could be said, therefore, that members are free to make their own associations with the brand object without reference to any development in that object. In that sense, the object is historical, not contemporary. But this, on the other hand, implies that the community is much less able to shift from the original myths on which the car was marketed, as Mountain Dew was able twice to shift its brand image to meet changes in contemporary social demands in order to remain successful. The community is bound by the “small is beautiful” and “fun” ethos of the sixties, and were social conditions ever to make such concerns irrelevant, it can be assumed that the community itself would eventually either disappear or assume a more countercultural face, in the same manner as the H-D community in the US. The prevalence of certain terms clustered around the same concept to describe the Mini, together with a reverence for its significant historical brand role, would seem to bear out the reliance of the community on the brand’s historical position.

#### 6.4.2 Community–Product Relationships

Thus far the discussion has centred on the brand, which is an idea, perhaps symbolised by a logo of some description. A distinction must be made between this and the product itself. Customer loyalty to a brand may be engendered irrespective of the qualities of the product itself, as when people buy a product that has already failed them, hoping that the next one will not. The brand allure of, for example, “Dyson” has proved to have a degree of resilience in this regard. As has been implied previously, the brand strength of both the Mini and the BMW MINI is much greater because of the various “selves” (fun, uniqueness and patriotism are among the foremost of these) into which consumers can extend. The previous quote about addiction could refer equally to the brand and the product. The following quote by Miles, however, while



superficially similar, makes clear that it was his experience with the product itself which engendered his loyalty to the brand:

*'I wasn't a huge fan of the Mini when I first started driving them. I thought they were fun... but it was only when I got my third Mini that I realised I had become hooked.'*

*(Miles, in-depth interview)*

The product usually must live up to the promise of the brand in order for loyalty to be maintained. This study presents a special case, because dissatisfaction with one brand finds an outlet in loyalty to that brand's counterpart. Those who expressed antipathy to the classic Mini, usually on the grounds of reliability and safety, were accepting of the BMW MINI. The reverse was also true, but on grounds which tended to reflect the brand image, such as patriotism or a failure to live up to the classic Mini's "small car" aura, rather than the qualities inherent the product itself.

The various qualities of the car which engendered brand loyalty could be practical or aesthetic, or could be reinforced by nostalgia. Kay was motivated to return to the fold after a long absence:

*'I had a bright yellow Mini as my first car, and after years of driving around in boring company cars I decided to go back to something fun.'*

*(Kay, in-depth interview)*

The car's appearance is the important factor for Owen:

*[with reference to the BMW MINI:] 'Just the retro looks of the car, because it looks so much like the old Mini. It's a lot bigger and a lot safer and I just have to have one, it just looks so good. The looks, really.'*

*(Owen, in-depth interview)*

For Stan, on the other hand, it was very much current “hands-on” experience which kept them devoted to the product.

*‘It’s a car for people who are interested in mechanics and who don’t care about having to do some repairs on their cars.’*

*(Stan, in-depth interview)*

Some found that the car was reliable and easy to maintain. Others, however, found the opposite. It is noteworthy that many of the latter were not put off by what should have been negative experiences. In this case, a lack of reliability, which would usually discourage a consumer from adhering to the brand, could actually have been the means of maintaining or increasing loyalty. The following four people have all remained with the brand despite its confessed shortcomings:

*‘Once you buy one, you’re committed. The bastards keep rusting! All Minis are unique, that’s why they’re so appealing.’*

*(Tod, focus group)*

*‘Very very dated and impractical today, but fun in their own quirky kind of way.’*

*(Rupert, focus group)*

*‘There’s a lot of maintenance with the Mini...’*

*(Adele, focus group)*

*‘If you didn’t love it, you wouldn’t put up with it breaking down on a regular basis.’*

*(Grant, focus group)*

The explanation for this degree of faithfulness must be that it applies to the brand, and that this loyalty is enough to override any objections to the performance of the product.

It should also be borne in mind that the very nature of the product itself engenders community. Technically (or technologically) complex objects such as cars and PDAs are not amenable to DIY fixes, requiring specialised maintenance and repair. When in production, such products are backed up by a network of service specialists. When production ceases but their use continues, the brand community must rely on its own internal resources. Members must cascade technical knowledge, information as to the whereabouts of scarce resources such as spare parts, and hints and tips to others in the community in order for the objects to keep working. A series of elements thus serves to reinforce communal bonds: members' reliance on each others' skills and knowledge, leading to closer personal bonds; a sense of achievement in that the community is seen as self-sufficient; and a perception of a community under threat because of the removal of its source of supply, which tends to develop a survival mentality as well as an internal market. This would obviously not apply in the case of such objects as, for example, a brand of confectionary, which would demand much less in the way of commitment from the consumer.

#### 6.4.3 Community-Marketing Relationships

In this case, the brand is marketed both within and outside the community. External marketing mainly concerns the new BMW MINI, marketed by its manufacturer BMW, while internal marketing primarily involves brandfests and other large-scale activities.

Regarding external marketing, as this is a consumer-centred study, the following commentary relates mostly to members' relationships with marketing rather than vice versa. Members' views of BMW's marketing were decidedly ambivalent. Some liked the advertisements; Rolf recognised their effectiveness:

*'I think the advertising campaign itself [regarding the new BMW MINI] was very good. The adverts were very funny, and this was proved in sales, as the new BMW MINI is the most sought-after car in the UK.'*

*(Rolf, in-depth interview)*

Guy contrasted them favourably with Rover's old Mini advertisements:

*'I like the way they are trying to portray the car in its fun element. I don't remember Rover ever advertising the Mini in the same way.'*

*(Guy, in-depth interview)*

Arthur, however, remained wedded to the original campaign, seemingly for nostalgic reasons:

*'I really don't like that BMW commercial with the two old people driving around in the buff smacking people on the back of the head with a fish. I prefer the classic advertising.'*

*(Arthur, in-depth interview)*

Those who disliked BMW's marketing most intensely formed a definite subgroup which bore a resemblance to the Apple Newton community. Both perceive their community as constituting a distinct culture centred around a unique brand object. In both cases this perception is characterised by an oppositional quality, the Apple community's towards the manufacturers who had "abandoned" them as well as more recent and supposedly inferior PDAs, and the Mini community's towards the BMW MINI. Both express antipathy towards their oppositional "others".

In the case of the Mini, adherents who expressed antipathy towards the BMW remake extended this antipathy toward the new marketing campaign. This included the proposal to remake the film "The Italian Job" with the new car. Brendan expressed outrage:

*'I hate the idea that they're going to redo the film. It's sacrilege. The old film's a classic. They're not content with destroying a classic car; they have to do the same thing to the classic film as well.'*

*(Brendan, in-depth interview)*

Note again the quasi-religious expression of “sacrilege”. This adds an extra dimension to the Apple Newton situation. That group saw themselves as being abandoned because Apple had simply ceased production of their product. From that time on, the Newton community was a remnant of “old faithful” who remained loyal to the PDA against its more modern rivals. For them, the threat was analogous to a country deprived of food imports, in that their source of supply and maintenance was cut off and they had to become self-sufficient. The situation with regard to the Mini community is much more complex: they see themselves as being under threat from a counterfeit, a fake copy of the “real thing”, which subverts the values of the original. Their situation perhaps resembles more closely a corporate takeover of a family business, gutting it of its intimacy and character and replacing it with a cold, market-oriented object bearing only a superficial similarity to the original. (The image of a corporate takeover is, of course, very apt in this case.)

The most dispassionate interviewee, however, “didn’t blame” BMW for its strong advertising of its product, citing the original heavy marketing campaign for the classic Mini. It is noteworthy that opinion was more completely divided on the relative merits of the marketing than on those of the cars themselves: several members were dismissive of strong attachments to either the classic Mini or the BMW MINI, and recognised that both had advantages and disadvantages. Also significant is the fact that not one respondent said that they had bought a BMW MINI (as opposed to a Mini) as a result of a marketing campaign.

By contrast, feelings regarding internal marketing were uniformly positive. This was partly because the marketing was generated from within the community, rather than being “imposed” from without, and there was not the same pressure to buy as there was in the purely commercial sphere. This is despite the fact that there is more in common between these apparently disparate styles of campaign than one might at first imagine. Items are bought

and sold at brandfests, and sponsors and commercial sellers therefore generate a particular style of advertising. This provoked no negative response from these two respondents:

*'...Lots to look at and usually stuff to buy.'*

*(Harry, focus group)*

*'This show is great. You can walk around and get lots of Minis and new ideas.'*

*(Joe, focus group)*

It is noteworthy that Rover's marketing of the Mini was never strong and its management led to financial losses. It appears to have been the Mini community itself that kept the car popular over the years. This allowed BMW to tap into a very strong existing market when it re-launched the car in 2001, and gave it a totally new lease of life. This, of course, strongly contrasts with the Apple Newton community, which has been left completely high and dry by Apple. This partly accounts for the fact that the Newton community's fervour appears more extreme than that of the Mini community, which is on a more secure footing. Muniz and O'Guinn's (2005) investigation into the former reveals a culture which tells quasi-religious stories involving, among other things, persecution and resurrection. The Mini interviewees' responses were certainly not characterised by this spill over into quasi-religious imagery.

The difference in origin between internal and external marketing campaigns, rather than their content or tone, seemed to be the main determinant of the difference in how these were viewed. The fact that the content was not so forceful (because intra-community advertisements are, as it were, "preaching to the converted") reinforced this impression.

There is one marketing category that is highly peculiar to this study. The film "The Italian Job" (1969), starring Michael Caine, has been regarded ever since among the Mini community as a virtual feature-length advertisement for the

classic Mini. This film was a major component of the creation of the Mini myth, and of its iconic status.

Unlike the BMW MINI as mentioned above, this film generated at least one sale for the classic Mini:

*'In the original [the film was remade in 2003] the Mini was great, and [the film] made it an icon. It was one of the determining factors in me buying a Mini, especially a blue one, as my boyfriend has a red one and a friend has a white one. I wanted a blue one so we could do "the Italian job".'*  
(Curtis, in-depth interview)

It can be assumed that there were many such sales. Other comments reflected the marketing potential of this film. Both Colin and Roger, while doubtless enjoying the film, also recognised its marketing potential:

*'Probably the best advertisement for the Mini ever created.'*  
(Colin, focus group)

*'Definitely it reinforces the brand image of cheeky, a bit of rough-and-tumble, that kind of thing.'*  
(Roger, focus group)

Almost in passing, it could be noted that just as the old and new cars and their old and new attendant marketing campaigns have their supporters and detractors, so the remake of this film generated controversy. Robin was unfavourably impressed by the remake:

*'The original film is an all-time classic. The new film is a very poor copy.'*  
(Robin, internet questionnaire)

But internal marketing is much more than a "formal" process of advertising meets. Most marketing in such a community is carried out informally. Verrips

and Meyer's (2001) experiences in Ghana highlight this in the context of a culture totally different from a Western European one. Attitudes to car repair, maintenance and use are much more "democratic" than in the West, where repair and anything other than basic maintenance tend to be the province of specialists. In Ghana, repair and maintenance is a common activity in the community, and is carried out with equipment which would be considered in a Western context to be grossly inadequate. "...even lay people have an admirable working knowledge of motors and can easily engage in technical debates with the mechanics." (Verrips and Meyer's, 2001, p.177) This extends to more than just theoretical knowledge: "People easily and pragmatically take it [i.e. the engine] apart, and even rig up self-made spare parts from improper materials...". The authors also point out that the distinction between use and repair is blurred in Ghana.

What this amounts to is a largely self-sufficient community with a strong communal ethos which includes a spiritual aspect (the subject's car was called "God never fails", and was blessed by a clergyman). This equates very strongly with the Mini community, but to a greater extreme. The "spiritual" component is comparable to the identification of the Mini with national identity, a sense of "Britishness", which many of the interviewees felt. Dale, one of these, said that:

*'the Mini is just one of those British things. People think Britain, they think Mini.'*

*(Dale, focus group)*

Internal marketing, if defined as any communication between two or more members that has to do, whether primarily or tangentially, with the community's focus, is the glue which holds that community together and strengthens it. In the case of the Mini community, internal marketing might consist of anything from a club website advertising merchandise and events down to a fortuitous meeting of two club members who proceed to have a chat about, inter alia, their respective Mini memorabilia.



The difference between the two examples – the car in Ghana and the Mini community – is less than the end result of this marketing. Membership of the latter is entirely a matter of choice, whereas those Ghanaians encountered by Verrips and Meyer (2001) constituted a “full” community (i.e. a group of people of various ages and genders living in the same locality), of which their experience with the car was but a part. Of course, that part has the character of necessity, whereas the Mini is a matter of choice for its adherents. Despite this, the object, whether brand or simply utilitarian, is treated in both cases as more than a functional item; specifically to this section, members share knowledge in more or less formal and ephemeral networks ranging in number from two to several hundred participants, the consequence of which is a strengthened participation in and adherence to the (brand) object.

In fact, it can be noted that the relationships between the consumer and the product on the one hand and the community on the other appear to be reversed in the two cases, which throws the role of some sort of “spirituality” in the Mini community into relief. For Ghanaians, the product (the car) is a necessity; their overtly spiritual, partly ritualistic, involvement with it is entirely superfluous to the functioning of this essential item. The community, not the car, is central to their identity, even to the extent of defining it. The very existence of the Mini community, on the other hand, is predicated on something more than the mere physicality of the brand object; as has been noted, it is what this object symbolises to the consumer that makes them choose to become part of the community. Thus internal marketing for the Ghanaians in Verrips and Meyer’s (2001) article is concerned with the necessity of circulating practical information and material concerning the physical object, in the absence of outside sources of such help, while for the Mini community it strengthens and expands on the choice made by community members to become a part of that community.

#### 6.4.4 Relationships within the Community

It will be noted that in McAlexander's et al (2002) model the focal customer interacts with, inter alia, other customers. For the purposes of this study, this effectively means other members of the community, whether face-to-face or remotely. The interviews revealed that these interactions occur in different ways and with different degrees of intensity. Relationships within the community serve both to bind its members together and set it apart from the rest of society, in what Bender (1978) describes as "we-ness". The binding function can further be seen as being composed of the social, ritual and practical spheres. These sometimes overlap, as when, in regular club meetings, brand-related activity such as a talk is followed by a dinner.

The social sphere, being the one most peripheral to the activities of the brand community (or, to put it another way, involving the least brand-related, most general type of activity), contains the members least committed to the brand, who participate for social rather than brand-related reasons:

*'I like the social side of it as much, really – meeting new people and that sort of thing.'*

*(Jeffery, focus group)*

It is not too difficult to imagine that Jeffery would be quite as happy in another group, with or without an ulterior motive for socialisation. Their commitment to the brand and the members of the community is, however, no less long-lasting than "more committed" members. They choose to join a Mini club rather than a purely social organisation or simply to "go down to the pub every evening", and they sometimes stay longer than some members who are more committed to the brand. In short, they feel the sense of "we-ness" just as much as members who are more interested in the brand-specific activities.

The sense of we-ness engenders a zealotry which can be felt within the community as well as between its members and the outside world. Kurt feels

that there must be something more than mere practicality in people's appreciation of the vehicle:

*'There are of course people who drive Minis just because they are small, cheap and useful – and have no interest in anything else to do with the car. Sad people...'*

*(Kurt, in-depth interview)*

This quote demonstrates that a “special something” more than mere practicality is needed to be a “true” community member, as has been suggested earlier in this chapter. Cars are functional conveyances enabling us to travel to our desired destination. The speaker's “anything else to do with the car” therefore refers to something which is not functional, but which is “felt”. It thereby illustrates that a sense of “we-ness” can exist in groupings within the community as well as between the community and the outside world. This sense of “interior we-ness” can be viewed in this case as being somewhat self-conscious, but other members seem to feel quite naturally frustrated with those they see as “hangers-on”:

*'Some members are just in it for the fun. They're not real enthusiasts. I don't like it when they sidetrack our meetings – I want to get on with the stuff we came here for.'*

*(Mathew, in-depth interview)*

Mathew is obviously referring to members like the ones who made the first comment in this section. The process by which a sense of we-ness is created can be negatively reinforced by members who are repelled by such zealousness. Adam has no time for this sort of outlook:

*'What really gets me down about the Mini community is that the vast majority of Mini enthusiasts treat the acquisition of rare and interesting parts as a competition or some sort of demonstration of virility. When*

*your fellow collectors look on their kind as a threat that is when I find something more fun to do.'*

*(Adam, in-depth interview)*

This suggests some sort of informal hierarchy among members, depending on their level of zealousness. Kozinets (1999) draws up a table which characterises participants in virtual communities according to whether they have weak or strong ties to that community, and to what extent the community's core activity is central to their self-concept. This results in the "insider", who is equally strongly interested in the community and its object; the "devotee", far more loyal to the object than to the community; and "tourists" and "minglers", who are the opposites respectively of the insiders and devotees. One can construct a scale from this model, with insiders at one end and tourists at the other. In terms of the brand object, the intermediate steps would be the devotee, strongly attached to the brand object, followed by the mingler, who is not.

Of course, such categories as those given in this model can never be hard and fast. Many if not most insiders would pass through at least one of the previous three stages. People also form their own hierarchies, with their own perceptions at the centre. The previous respondent, was obviously by someone who was neither a devotee nor an insider, but who if asked might have constructed an entirely different hierarchy with "people in it for fun" at the centre, and "fanatics" on the outside. The Mini, according to this view, is a facilitator of a primarily social experience. At the other extreme would be the devotee, for whom the consumption object is all, and the community merely a means to the end of a greater expression of loyalty to that object. Their "hierarchy" would doubtless put themselves at the core of Mini-related activity ahead of insiders, who they might see as being distracted by the community's social activity from the "real" business, which is exclusively Mini-oriented. Matthew, the last but one interviewee, belongs more to this camp.

“Adam” was in fact giving practical expression to Cova’s (1997, p. 311) dictum that “the link is more important than the thing”. Otnes and Maclaran’s (2007) study of a British Royal Family (BRF) brand tribe also reflects this. Of the tribe of 22 people, only eight could be described as “hardcore” members; “the rest are loosely affiliated through their relationships with others”. The Mini community reflects the same breakdown. There was a degree of fanaticism expressed by some interviewees, but the views of many were more moderate: they enjoyed the club activities and were loyal to the car and what it stood for, but recognised at least some defects of both.

Otnes and Maclaran’s (2007) study also demonstrates that their subject community overlaps but is not coterminous with the Mini community. The BRF tribe consumes heritage in three ways: “creating rituals and establishing traditions; airing grievances and grieving; and sharing fantasies about desired BRF experiences” (Otnes and Maclaran, 2007, p. 55). Of these, only the first is a hallmark of the Mini community. Gatherings of various kinds and at various levels, from local to national and even international, are one of the fundamental forms of ritual exhibited by the group; others, such as the gathering of memorabilia, are more private, and bear a closer relation to those of the BRF tribe.

Schouten and McAlexander’s (1995) study of American bikers redraws Otnes and Maclaran’s (2007) model in the form of a progression with even more strongly hierarchical overtones. Bikers can be classified as outsiders or tourists (they do not often ride, are not bike owners and do not belong to biking organisations), neophytes (regular riders, they own non-Harley bikes and visit clubs often) and insiders (Harley owners, primarily bike riders, who are active members of the Harley Owners Group). This should not be seen as a chronological progression, although doubtless in most cases it is: group members would have begun as outsiders and progressed through the neophyte stage.

It is interesting that the hierarchies in this community are both official and unofficial. There are official positions of president (or director) and road captain; however, another status hierarchy exists which recognises, for example, true outlaws and everybody else. Outlaws on the road will only wave to each other, and will not acknowledge “citizens” (their derogatory term for people who do not belong to their group). Hardcore Harley riders will snub “weekend riders”, who in turn will refuse to recognise non-Harley riders. This is a level of hierarchical sophistication not demonstrated in the Mini community, whose formal hierarchies – such as they are – are much looser, who do not seem to have an “unofficial hierarchy” in the same way as that of the Harley group, and who greet all members with a headlight flash.

The strongest demonstration of hierarchy in their community is the marked, but not rigid, difference between adherents of the Mini and the BMW MINI. The antagonism, such as it is, between members of the same group is invariably expressed in terms, whether implicitly or overtly, of outsiders/insiders (with the speaker inevitably on the inside). Even so, there are those interviewees who are perfectly willing to see both sides, or indeed who refuse to recognise that sides exist.

It remains to mention rituals, which serve to cement the bonds between members by engaging them in activities that, because they have little or no practical function, are more open to choice. These activities are done by some sort of agreement, spoken or otherwise, well-prepared or impromptu, throughout the community as a whole, whereas practical activities are only undertaken out of necessity. The practical, ritual and social value of an action is perhaps better viewed as points on a continuum rather than in absolute terms. A regional or national meet, for example, embodies elements of all three in largely equal measure.

### 6.5 The Extended Self as represented by the Mini

The previous sections have examined consumers' relationships with their environment. This relationship has a psychological basis. Advertising only works if consumers react to it. This reaction can spark off the mutually reinforcing and self-sustaining "chain reaction" between consumers and their environment. But the initiation of this chain reaction must now be examined, and specifically the reasons why consumers see brand objects as so much more than just practical necessities, and why it is possible for such a thing as a consumer culture to arise at all. Belk (1988) gives an intriguing answer to this question in his concept of the "extended self".

Belk (1988) utilises the idea of animism in his hypothesis, by which owners identify themselves with their possessions to a greater or lesser degree; he summarises this in the aphorism "we are what we have". He notes that the purpose of this universal, trans-cultural activity includes giving meaning to an individual's existence, by providing a locus within a broader context, be it in time or space or some other location. More specifically, he points out that "having possessions functions to create and to maintain a sense of self-definition". In the case of the Mini community, this self-definition is extended to the acquisition of Mini collectables such as model Minis, clothing, books, toys and advertising material as well as the car itself, which has the effect of reinforcing the brand relationship:

*'Collecting definitely reinforces the relationship with the car.'*  
(Harold, internet questionnaire)

All interviewees who commented on this felt the effect of this strengthening. For Brad, for example,

*'Someone might know where to get items that I don't and that I would like, so I feel more part of the community because of that.'*  
(Brad, focus group)

Belk (1988) goes on to demonstrate the processes by which owners define themselves. These processes include definition against the environment and against others, and having a sense of the past, viewed in the broadest sense – i.e. on the personal as well as the wider level. He examines Sartre’s (1943) three processes of self-extension, of which the ones applicable to this study are the appropriation and control of objects, and the acquisition of knowledge about them. (It might be pointed out in passing that these in themselves are forms of possession – i.e. possession of power and knowledge. We “have” these, and this serves to assert our possession of tangible “things”, which in turn act as reflections or reinforcements of ourselves).

All of this has an obviously close relationship to Fournier’s (2004) model of “self-connection”, in which the brand and the consumer are identified to some degree. Also closely related is Ball and Tasaki’s (1992) “attachment”, in which the consumer uses the brand to maintain their “self-concept”. This might be seen as the reverse of the same coin: for Belk (1988), the impulse is outwards from the owner to the possession, while for ‘Ball’ and ‘Tasaki’ the consumer draws the object in. They both use self-connection to some degree or other to achieve these ends.

Fournier’s (1998) observation that anthropomorphism is used as the primary means to this end follows logically from the idea that there can be a “relationship” between the possessor and the possessed. In the present research, many Mini (or BMW MINI) owners made comments such as this one by Clifford:

*‘She [i.e. the car] is called Bertha. She’s a little lady with wide hips and big eyes. Sort of like a grandmother that surprises you with her strength and grace.’*

*(Clifford, in-depth interview)*

The “extended self” concept can be applied individually and corporately, and as such it becomes a complex of interactions between individual community



members, sections of the community, the community as a whole, the community's environment at any level from family members to society at large, and the brand object itself. In McAlexander's et al (2002) model, this can be represented by their arrows showing a reciprocal relationship between the focal customer and its four objects (customer, brand, product and marketer), to which must be added arrows joining each of the four objects to each other. This has the effect of diminishing McAlexander's et al (2002) emphasis on the focal customer in favour of a more holistic view of the complexities of relationships.

A combination of McAlexander's et al (2002) model with Belk's concept of the "extended self" provides a highly appropriate framework for the interview quotes obtained during this research. They can be placed along points on an "interior-exterior" continuum, which would correspond to McAlexander's et al (2002) "focal customer" at one extreme to his "customer" at the other. The most intense personal experience, one concerning only themselves and the brand object, felt by interviewees was one demonstrated by terms such as "hooked", "addicted" and "infected by the [Mini] virus". Others felt a "passion", which for Bill actually spilled over into financial hardship – which did not, however, put him off the car:

*'It broke the bank to buy, but it's the best car I have ever had in 18 years of driving'*  
*(Bill, focus group)*

At the other extreme, some interviewees revealed a strong sense of belonging to a wider community. Jasper's enthusiasm is for the community as much as for the car:

*'I go to all the meets wherever I can. You meet other people and find out all sorts of things about the car that you never knew. The people are great. It's like you're part of a bigger Mini world.'*  
*(Jasper, in-depth interview)*

All attributes of the brand imply a position within this spectrum. Uniqueness, for example, implies feelings of self-worth and self-esteem, in that the brand object is seen as having qualities that set it apart from and above other similar objects. Kit highlights the distinctiveness of the car itself:

*‘The genuine British Mini has a personality of its own, unique’  
(Kit, focus group)*

while Martyn identifies its individuality with that of its drivers:

*‘I have a great admiration for anyone who drives anything different from the norm and I’m not too impressed by people who follow “fashion trends”. It shows that they can’t make their own minds up and are happy to follow each other.’  
(Martyn, in-depth interview)*

The ability of brands like Mini to exemplify what is perceived as individuality was admired by many interviewees, who often used words and phrases like “individual”, “cool”, “unique”, “not like anything else” and “a personality of its own” to describe the car.

It should be noted that the previous quote demonstrates a paradox: “Martyn” is dismissive of people who show their lack individuality and independence of thought by following trends, yet of presumably as attached to a brand as any of them, and he (again presumably) further demonstrates attachment to a brand by becoming part of a community of like-minded individuals. The very formation of such communities is determined by their size relative to the number of users of all objects in the brand’s class, their degree of specialisation, and the extent to which their interest is under threat, as might be the case with Macintosh computers versus PCs.

Leo identifies patriotism more obviously with an “other”:

*'It means British. It's a British legend, and it means proud to be British, especially because nowadays not many cars are made in Britain.'*

*(Leo, in-depth interview)*

(Of course, this applies only to the classic Mini.) Here, the relationship can be either a positive or a negative one, depending on whether the self is extended by being "identified with" attributes of which society at large approves, through the brand object, or "opposed to" attributes seen as undesirable. This is particularly relevant for the present study, with the presence of a British original and a German rebranding, creating the opportunity for rivalry on patriotic as well as technical and personal grounds. For Luca, the nationalistic element features strongly:

*'It's the same as Bentley now having a German engine and Lamborghini also being owned by Germans. I don't like it.'*

*(Luca, in-depth interview)*

The relationship between brand and community member is strengthened in all these cases by qualities which are seen as desirable by the member, and sometimes by society at large, and which are seen as being possessed in some way by the brand. It is an extension of the self in that members seek to use factors outside the strict confines of the brand-community member relationship to justify or to reinforce their adherence to the brand object. This is an extension essentially in space, from McAlexander's et al (2002) focal customer to other customers and to the world outside the brand community. However, the self can also be extended in time, with the historical brand community or with the brand's history:

*'A classic car that will never go out of fashion (even if it can be impractical).'*

*(Noel, internet questionnaire)*

The self is extended by and into the brand culture, as expressed in this case by the concept of “classic”. The interviewee identifies themselves with the durability of the brand, and by extension with the culture of which that concept is a part; this is in fact a mutually reinforcing relationship between the brand culture and the individual’s self.

A sense of the brand’s longevity can be an integral part of this history:

*‘After 41 years of production it still holds its own with modern Super Minis, and the fun factor is still there.’*  
*(The Marvellous MINI, 2004)*

Hugh stresses the national aspect of this heritage:

*‘It’s heritage. It’s been going on about 80 [sic] years I suppose, really, for the first Mini, and we just carry it on, really.’*  
*(Hugh, focus group)*

while for Dudley, that same feeling of heritage is personal:

*‘My family has always had Minis, so I was born into them.’*  
*(Dudley, focus group)*

Again, paralleling the spatial continuum from the personal to the extra-brand community, the temporal continuum extends from the history of the self through that of the brand community to that of the outside world. Victor and Glens’ opinions, like those of Hugh and Dudley, are two sides of the same coin, one personal, the other national:

*‘I was born in 1947, so the Mini has been part of my life for as long as I can remember.’*  
*(Victor, in-depth interview)*

*'It's part of British history. It shows that we can still come up with great things, just like we used to.'*

*(Glen, in-depth interview)*

An examination of the above quotes shows that nostalgia features, sometimes strongly and sometimes not, in the responses. Goulding (2002) highlights an important aspect of nostalgia which needs to be remembered for the purposes of this study: that it is often directed at a period outside the subject's own memory (she notes that it is usually for a period of about 10-15 years before the subject's birth). This "vicarious nostalgia", combined with her observation that all ages, including the young, are prone to this feeling, bear strongly on the Mini community. It should be pointed out, however, that this is the subject of some debate, as Holak and Havlena (1992) point out. Some commentators do not believe that vicarious nostalgia can exist. However, it is evident that some people do feel a strong attraction to a previous period outside their own personal experience, and whatever one chooses to call it, it is so similar to nostalgia that this researcher will accept Goulding's (2002) findings at face value.

One might assume that, as the classic Mini fades into history, the strength of the communities loyal to it would decline. This is not the case. The Mini community has as many clubs as it ever did, and their membership is steady, implying a constant infusion of new members; it is reasonable to assume, without quantitative data being available, that some of this new membership is too young to remember the classic Mini in its heyday in the 1960s and 1970s. Quotes relating to history and tradition have a nostalgic component that could account, at least in part, for this influx of new membership.

On the other hand, some of the nostalgia expressed above definitely relates to a personal past. The subject above who was born in 1947 grew up with the Mini, and is part of the community today because of his fondness for his personal memories of two or three decades ago, as is the one whose family always used Minis. At this point there is a significant overlap with the area of

tradition. “Elizabeth”, quoted above, gets something containing the Mini logo with every annual commemoration. This tradition has created a personal, obviously fondly remembered, history, about which she quite presumably feels nostalgic. Tradition, as outlined below, can relate to personal history, or to wider context such as national or regional, as well as histories of artefacts, but in all cases it parallels nostalgia as a means of extending the self.

Nostalgic feelings, whether for a personally remembered past or a vicariously lived one, are by definition positive. It is implicit in the type of quote discussed in this section that nostalgia filters out negative feelings associated with the period; that is, indeed, an essential component of nostalgia.

Nostalgia is, of course, a powerful reinforcer of a self which the subject chooses to extend into a brand object, hence its relevance at this point. An iconic object such as the Mini is strongly evocative of a whole series of associations to do with the period of its heyday, the 1960s and 1970s, especially (in the case of the Mini) that of “fun”, redolent of the “swinging 60s”. This is part of the Mini’s particular constellation of myths, which together form a major part of the brand culture. It must be noted, however, that relatively few of the quotes obtained expressed “pure” nostalgia, or what Holak and Havlena (1992) classify as “first-order” nostalgia – in other words, “with the simple, unquestioning belief that ‘things were better in the past’”. (Their second- and third-order nostalgias are, respectively, critical examination rather than sentimentalisation of the past, and analysis of the nostalgic experience itself.) This feeling can be powerful enough to override concrete evidence to the contrary, as the quote in Section 6.4.2 concerning its mechanical unreliability shows. The interviewee loves the Mini despite its failings – or even, perhaps, because of them.

A minority of quotes expressed “second-order nostalgia”, as expressed above:

*‘I never thought it was a safe car’*

*(Jon, focus group)*

*'I don't like the old Minis'*

*(Trev, focus group)*

*'The old Minis are very unreliable, and are just too much trouble to keep on the road'*

*(Barry, focus group)*

This second-order nostalgia is, of course, given enormous impetus by the existence of the BMW MINI, and the consequent antagonism sometimes expressed between the two factions. The BMW MINI is variously seen as carrying on the tradition of the Mini or of distorting it.

Instead of a significant third-order nostalgic presence, however, the quotes shade off into those in which nostalgia is mentioned alongside other factors. Bradley takes a professional interest in the car:

*'I like to come back to the old Mini...because I'm an engineer, and I enjoy tinkering with the engines'*

*(Bradley, in-depth interview)*

If he were not an engineer, or in any other profession related to the automotive industry, he might not have his interest in the Mini sparked in the first place. In this case, nostalgia is a minor part of the response. This might support the argument that the Mini community is being significantly reinforced by younger members, who might have more concrete reasons than “mere” nostalgic feeling for their loyalty to the brand.

## **6.6 The Symbolic Meaning of the Mini**

It is implicit in the foregoing that consumers ascribe meaning to an object over and above its strictly utilitarian purpose. A Mini “means” much more than a method of transport. It serves as a symbol, in fact. This is because the brand is an abstraction which relates to consumers' perceptions as much as to their

practical needs. What the brand symbolises is therefore crucial to an understanding of the roles it plays in consumers' lives, both individually and communally, over time.

Over the decades, the Mini has come to attach multitude of symbolic meanings which reflect upon various aspects of consumers' social lives, including perceptions of fun, excitement, freedom and attitude. These meanings have emerged mainly from its cultural history, especially as regards the fashion industry and mass marketing campaigns. These meanings are interpreted by consumers in a way which mutually reinforces a culture based on fun and an emphasis on lifestyle. The core symbolic meaning, however, lies with the car itself, specifically with its cheeky appearance and its perceived characteristics that embraces a unique personality incorporating "fun" as an essential element. Individuals have expressed their perception of the car in terms such as the following:

*'Fun exciting and adventurous'*

*(Dee, internet questionnaire)*

*'Heritage... engineering intelligence... motor sport... handling... evolving zeitgeist... personality'*

*(Chester, internet questionnaire)*

During the 1960s the fashion industry became hugely influential in culture and society, as it targeted a younger market with concepts and designs which broke away from the more austere previous decades. The Mini was an essential part of this movement; its perceived characteristics of being fun and exciting to drive were at the forefront of this development. The word "cool", which according to the OED's etymology occurs as an approbatory adjective as early as 1884, recurs many times in descriptions of this car, both contemporary and in the interviews for this study. Of course, the vehicle's starring role in the film "The Italian Job" only reinforced this perception, which became mutually reinforcing between the public, the advertising sector and



the media. Owners of the car still react largely in the terms set during the period in which the car was originally marketed: they see it as “unique”, and gives them a “freedom to express [their] personality through the Mini”. In fact, it would not be going too far to say that it is something of a way of life, to some members of the community at least. The reciprocal nature of this relationship has become the focus of an entire model of cultural, and by implication consumer, behaviour: symbolic interactionism. At the core of this model is process.

### 6.6.1 Symbolic Interactionism

For Mead (1934), process was at the heart of the ascription of meaning to an object, including people, who are regarded as social objects. The process can be thought of as a relationship in which the object and the subject together define the meaning the latter attaches to the former; the process is at least as important as the object. It is a recognition of this process that accounts for the “new consumer behaviour” school of the 1980s which dominates discussion of this subject today.

The object can thus be seen as a symbol of a value which registers with the subject, as well as the facilitator of a purely practical function. Levy’s (1959) recognition that “people buy things not only for what they can do, but also for what they mean” finds a strong resonance in the respondents to the present study’s questionnaire. The classic Mini is seen for some as symbolising both a bygone era and a perceived national persona which naturally calls forth pride in those who partake of it:

*‘It symbolises Britain and the ‘60s’*

*(Kurt, internet questionnaire)*

*‘I’m so proud of driving my Mini in another country. People are always talking to me about it.’*

*(Hazel, internet questionnaire)*

People who express such sentiments identify their interests with those of a country, and express nostalgia for an era which is seen to have distinguishable features. The 1960s was the first post-war period in which British fashion palpably departed from, or even revolted against, the norms which had prevailed since before World War II.

The meaning for others is one or the other, or some combination of, “cool” and “fun”:

*‘I enjoy the feeling of happiness and excitement when I drive it.’*  
(Milly, internet questionnaire)

*‘It’ got freedom and fun’*  
(Dean, internet questionnaire)

*‘It’s the coolest car ever.’*  
(Warren, internet questionnaire)

The word “cool” especially, while of much greater antiquity than the 1960s, came into prominence amongst youth during that decade. It is, of course, virtually meaningless in itself. It simply expresses approbation, in exactly the same way as does the expression “jolly good show”, without stating what is being approved. The term in which such approval is expressed, on the other hand, largely determines what the term can be used for, because of the cultural associations that term has attracted. The Mini and the term “cool” both belong to the same cultural package, which also includes the keywords “fun”, “freedom”, “excitement” and “happiness”. It can therefore be seen that such statements as the preceding three are mutually reinforcing, not just because of the sentiments, but because of their mode of expression. This is highlighted by the consideration that the approbatory phrase “jolly good show”, which carries an entirely different set of “cultural baggage” bound up with perceptions of public school education, the upper class, the aristocracy,

the military (and specifically the army), maleness and superiority and even the “upper class twit”, would be entirely inappropriate when applied to the Mini. It might be noted in passing that the union of the two concepts, “cool” and “patriotic pride”, dates from the 1960s as well, in the 1967 song “Cool Britannia” by the Bozo Dog Doo Dah Band, but this apparently has no connection with the later use of the term to express UK culture under Tony Blair’s leadership. In any case, this is an interesting combination of two concepts which is particularly apposite to the Mini, uniting as it does two of the most prominent reactions of Mini fans to the vehicle and what it represents.

Both of these and other meaning packages fulfil one of Charon’s (1979) three criteria by which symbols in social interaction are defined. The first is the apparent truism that they have meaning. Blumer (1969) would argue that everything can potentially serve as a symbol, while Charon (1979) imposes the condition that in order to be a symbol, a social object must be “used for representation and communication.” The Mini/BMW MINI can serve as a symbol as much as anything else, and this brings up another of the three criteria: arbitrariness. There is nothing inherent in the car which makes it any more “fun”, or for that matter any more of a “classic”, than any other car. Countless models of vehicle have been forgotten by history without having attained the status of classic, and one could imagine that proponents of the Fiat Bambini or the Volkswagen would say that their favourite car is every bit as much “fun” to drive as is the Mini. Any meaning assigned to an object is the result of a human construct being placed upon it, rather than an inherent quality in the object itself. Charon (1979) adduces the example of a peace sign of two fingers. Why two fingers? “It could just as well be a thumb in the air, a hand closed above our head, a black mark on our forehead”. The gesture has been arbitrarily assigned as a symbol for peace.

Likewise, there seems no inherent reason why it could not have been the Jaguar, say, or the Rolls-Royce rather than the Mini that achieved the status of a vehicular counterpart of the concept of “fun”. That it was the Mini that did

so is a combination of historical accident and the momentum generated by the original marketing – but whatever it was, it was not an inevitable outcome of some quality of the vehicle. This is not to discount the argument that certain features lead inexorably in a certain direction. Therefore, the small size vehicle and its engine made it economical to run, which gave it obvious popular appeal after the oil shock of 1973. Likewise, the small size would militate against the success of any marketing ploy based on luxury. But neither of these is necessary. The concept of luxury, for instance, is today exemplified by (among other things) technological miniaturisation, so that the most expensive, high-tech electronic equipment is also often the smallest. And the Mini attracted purchases by film and rock stars as well as by the general public, showing that some of the wealthy set were, at the very least, attracted by the idea of “small”.

What applies to arbitrariness also applies to convention, the third of Charon’s (1979) criteria. If a quality or feature is not structurally identical to that which it symbolises, such symbolism must be assigned by some external mechanism, and must be agreed by enough people to make it a convention. This is demonstrated in the frequent references in the responses to “small” and “fun” being synonymous, as Drew, a hair stylist, exemplifies:

*‘The Mini’s so small that it gives me a sense of driving for driving’s sake, just for the pleasure of it.’*

*(Drew, in-depth interview)*

Of course, as mentioned before, the car’s enthusiastic by the “glitterati” of the 1960s gave implicit sanction to the idea that something “small” (which would hitherto have had more pejorative, or at least mundane, connotations) could give pleasure, especially for something as purely aesthetic as indulging in an activity for its own sake. The two concepts could be seen as being mutually exclusive rather than compatible, as they would be if the object were luxury mansions. The idea of “small” being “fun” belongs to a particular cultural package which can be seen as being typical of, among other things, the 1960s,

and which has continuing relevance to enough people to provide the impetus for the formation of a Mini community which shows no signs of diminishing in either numbers or zealotry. At the same time, the concept “just for the pleasure of it” is another marker of the 1960s: wartime and postwar austerity was for the first time banished, and the primary purpose of life began to be recognised (again) as enjoyment rather than mere survival.

Grubb and Grathwohl (1967) recognised the need for convention (i.e. social recognition) in order for an object to convey symbolic meaning. For them, a person’s self-concept is given direction by their behavioural patterns, and is then reinforced by others; this self-concept is advanced by the consumption of goods as symbols. The authors introduce the social sphere here, which is obviously of crucial importance to many (but by no means, it should be stated, all) members of the Mini community. One of the essential aspects of personality is difference. People in Western culture need to feel distinct from others, unique; possession of a Mini is seen as answering this need. For Brett, difference and “fun” is the key:

*‘I was attracted by the Mini because it was different and exciting. Not like the boring old Peugeot 206, which is the same sort of size. All cars like that are very similar, very boring.’*

*(Brett, in-depth interview)*

He obviously feels it necessary to set themselves against, and above, the “ordinary”. The car makes him feel special. This self-concept is then reinforced by behavioural patterns, both on the individual scale:

*‘I do the same thing each year: I always get a Mini item for Christmas, something to do with the Mini.’*

*(Bradley, in-depth interview)*

and on the social:

*'It's the meets that I like. They're really fun, you get to know other people who like Minis.'*

*(Mary, in-depth interview)*

This then leads to an interaction which further reinforces the symbolic presence of the object. Albert's interest in the car is repeated for the community:

*'Everyone's so nice at these meetings. If you've got a problem with your car, they'll help you out. It's just a part of the Mini thing.'*

*(Albert, in-depth interview)*

This interaction is taken one step further by Belk (1988), to actual identification with and extension of our "selves" with our possessions. He makes a powerful claim for his model of the extended self when he calls the identification of our identities with our possessions "the most powerful fact of consumer behaviour". Mini owners and enthusiasts strongly echoed this sentiment, often in very nearly those words:

*'My Mini is just me, you know – it's like an extension of who I am.'*

*(Jasper, focus group)*

Belk (1988) incorporates Sartre's (1943) notions of how this identification happens. According to him, there are three mechanisms. The first is appropriation and control, the second is creation and the third is knowledge. (Interestingly, the quintessential consumer activity of buying is seen, not as appropriation, but as creation: money enlarges the sense of the self by the acquisition of appropriate products.) One word which recurs often in responses to the questionnaires is 'hooked'. This process can either be instantaneous, as with Perry:

*'I only got a Mini because the insurance was half price. I wanted a faster car, but as soon as I drove the Mini for the first time I was hooked.'*

*(Perry, in-depth interview)*

or it can happen over a longer time, and seemingly insidiously, as Damien found when he was subconsciously drawn in:

*'I didn't have any strong feelings about the car the first or even the second time. It was only when I bought my third Mini that I realised I was hooked.'*

*(Damien, in-depth interview)*

The “hooking” is obviously not something that an inanimate object does to a person, but it is rather a process by which a consumer identifies a brand object with their persona strongly enough to enable the relationship to be characterised by adjectives such as “zealous” and “fervent”. The strength of such an identification is a clear example of Belk’s “extended self”, in which a brand object is invested with anthropomorphic qualities by advertisers and (over a period of time) by custom, and a consumer, perceiving such qualities as desirable, increases an identification with them by acquiring the brand object. The anthropomorphism is echoed by those Mini owners who refer to the car as “she”.

Others have identified various means by which objects are incorporated into the extended self, one of them being collection. Mini owner Benjamin is an avid collector of memorabilia to do with the car:

*'I love going to Mini meets and getting all the badges and so on. Having them around the house just makes me feel more like I belong to the Mini.'*  
*(Benjamin, in-depth interview)*

Jay shows his collections off to others, thus reinforcing her sense of self:

*'When others come around, I'm always showing them my Mini stuff. I don't know if it's boring for them, but I just can't help getting enthusiastic about it.'*

*(Jay, in-depth interview)*

## **6.7 Conclusion**

This chapter has taken the results of the research against the background of a history of the Mini community and of its members' views of that community, before examining their deeper significance in the light of Muniz and O'Guinn's and Belk's models of, respectively, how a community manifests its existence and the role played by symbolism in the psychology of possession. These two aspects of that deeper significance are linked using the concept of Symbolic Interactionism. The following chapter will build on these findings and propose a new conceptual framework by which communities of consumption may be studied.



## CHAPTER 7 DISCUSSION

### 7.1 Introduction

This chapter opens up the results obtained by a study of the Mini/BMW MINI community into a general discussion of consumer behaviour and communities of consumption. It examines previous models of such behaviour and finds them wanting, instead proposing a new conceptual framework characterised by the flexibility necessary for a full study of this topic, and then uses this new conceptual framework to obtain new insights into the community.

### 7.2 The Conceptual Framework

McAlexander et al (2002) outline three models, including their own, which seek to define the components relating to the brand community, and to show the relationships between them. This section will demonstrate the inadequacy of each of these models in turn, and will then propose a new conceptual framework that will more effectively summarise these components and their relationships.

McAlexander et al (2002) first give what they represent as the “Traditional Model of Customer-Brand Relationship” thus:

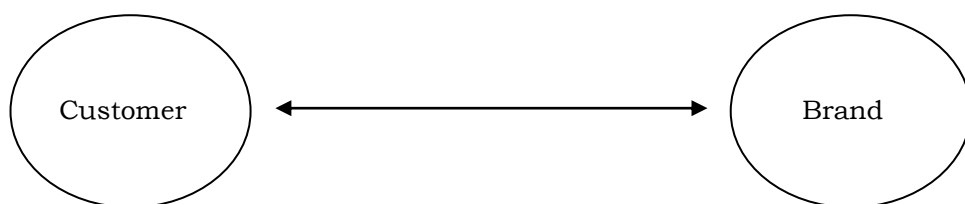


Figure 7.1 Traditional Model of Customer-Brand Relationship  
(Source: McAlexander et al, 2002, p. 39)

This is a bald statement of a direct and reciprocal relationship between the customer and the brand. For the present research, the “brand” is the Mini/BMW MINI, a trademark which is purchased by a customer. The authors themselves imply that this model is clearly inadequate. It fails to take into

account any of the elements in the brand's or the customer's environments which impact on those components. Marketing, for example, does not appear, nor do other customers. The Mini/BMW MINI dichotomy is a refinement that this model is entirely incapable of catering for.

It also fails to make clear the nature of the relationship between the two elements. It merely states that such a relationship exists. It can be argued, of course, that this is not the function of such a model. However, the very simplicity of this one means that no inferences can be drawn from double-headed arrows denoting relationships between more than two elements of the model. Such richness is beyond the scope of this model, and, as it clearly fails sufficiently to explain or even to contain all the pertinent components of the brand community, it must be rejected. Quotes in the present research relating to the customer's relationships with other customers, or with what some community members see as competing brands (i.e. Mini Vs BMW MINI) cannot be contained in this model.

McAlexander et al (2002) then present Muniz and O'Guinn's (2001) attempt to enrich the model thus:

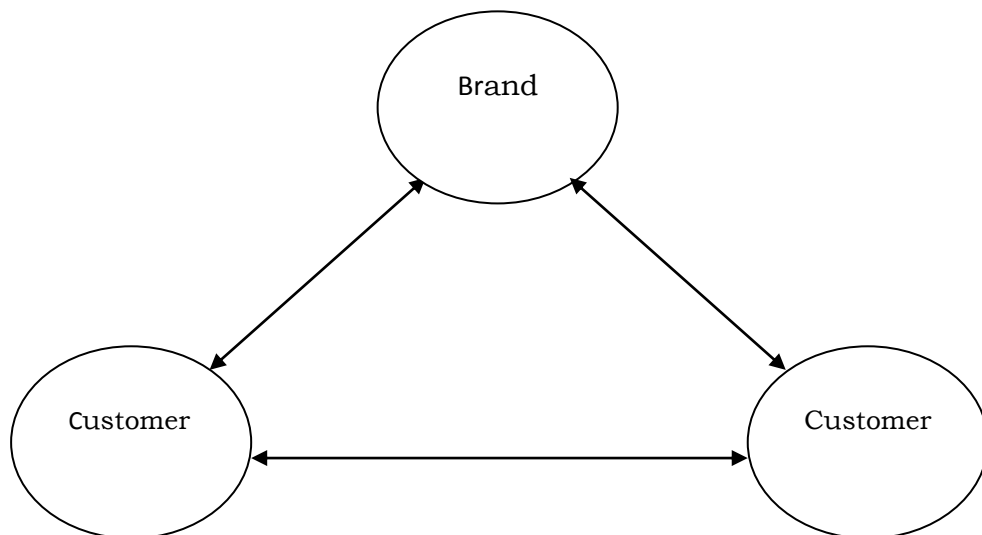


Figure 7.2 Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) Brand Community Triad

Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) call this the "Brand Community Triad". This is clearly an advance on the traditional model. It takes into account the effect of customers on each other as well as on the brand, thus opening up the community to examination internally as well as externally. It also contains the beginnings of the possibilities for richness of interpretation, the lack of which was criticised as regards the previous model. Specifically, it opens up the possibility of studying the relationships between the classic Mini and the BMW MINI communities, as well as exploring the interactions between these two separately and the brand object. (Of course, this is purely fortuitous – the model was not designed to do that.) It is obvious how much richer the potential areas of study are in this model as opposed to the previous one.

However, it will not do as a tool with which to comprehensively analyse brand communities. This is partly because the extent of the elements it contains is still not wide-ranging enough. The effect of society outside the brand community, which plays such an important part in, for example, validating the community's rituals and traditions (as discussed above), finds no place in this model. It still accounts only for elements within the brand community itself.

It is also deficient in that the brand element needs to be broken down in order to effectively account for many of the relationships. The relationship between the product and the brand can be quite different, especially in the case of the Mini, the classic version of which is defunct as a marketing entity. This model could not adequately account for both the existence of the classic Mini and the BMW MINI, and could thus not serve as a starting point for discussion for the present study. Neither is it able to distinguish between various levels of community. An important factor in the present research is the ambivalence in the relationship between the classic Mini and BMW MINI communities (is the latter a subculture of the former, or is it a truly separate but related community?) This level of complexity cannot be catered for by this model. A related limitation is that it is concerned with individuals, not communities. The relationship between the two is simply ignored, despite the fact that the individual consumer's views shape and are shaped by the communal culture. Nor does the element "brand" distinguish between the brand itself, which

might (for example) be seen favourably, and marketing campaigns, which might be viewed in the opposite light:

*‘I like the way they are trying to portray the car in its fun element. I don’t remember Rover ever advertising the Mini in the same way.’*

This quote, used previously, refers to the BMW MINI marketing campaign. It contains three elements: the brand object (here the speaker seems to conflate the old and new BMW MINIs), the former campaign relating to the Mini, and the present one for the BMW MINI. The first and third elements are viewed positively, the second negatively. The wealth of associations between these elements cannot be adequately accounted for by Muniz and O’Guinn’s (2001) model.

McAlexander et al (2002) then present their own “Customer-Centric Model of Brand Community”:

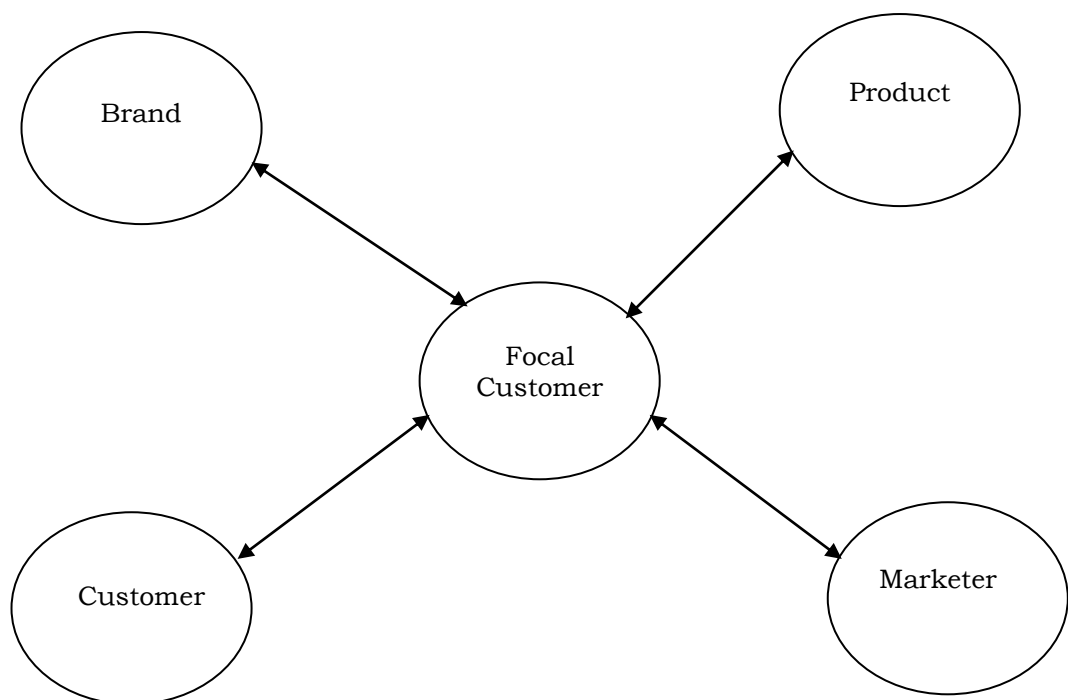


Figure 7.3 Customer-Centric Model of Brand Community

In its attempts to provide a greater articulation of the various elements of the community's environment, this is clearly an advance on both of its predecessors. A seemingly comprehensive range of factors is now shown in relationship with the focal customer. Indeed, the present researcher considers that the factors shown constitute a complete list of those that impinge directly on the focal customer in their direct relationships with the brand object and everything directly associated with it. But this model still does not go far enough. It is necessarily centred on the focal customer – but this figure may not be the subject of study. In this focal customer-centric model, all the relationships are between that element and the others. It is not possible to study, for example, the relationship between the brand and the product, an association referred to repeatedly by the respondents:

*'I bought a Mini because it means Britishness, and I'm quite patriotic, but it can be a hard car to work on if things go wrong.'*

Likewise, respondents referred to the brand and the "outside" customer which is not shown in McAlexander et al's (2002) original model, but which clearly impacts on their "focal customer".

*'We don't do anything with BMW; we might get some members who joined the club might have a new one, but to us it is not a BMW MINI, this is a Mini, the classic one is a Mini, BMW one never be a Mini. So, we keep ourselves to ourselves.'*

It will be noted that in the quote above, the focal customer is in fact very much in the background. The three elements present in the quote are the brand community (the speaker is explicitly speaking for that community, not for himself), the Mini and the BMW MINI. McAlexander et al's (2002) "focal customer" is, as the name implies, very much at the centre of the model. This again highlights the model's assumption that the focus of study will be the focal customer. This is not necessarily so. If one wants to study a community

as a whole, or the relationships between any of the “outside” elements, this model is clearly inadequate.

The simplest addition to this model would be arrows showing relationships between each of the “outside” elements, thus:

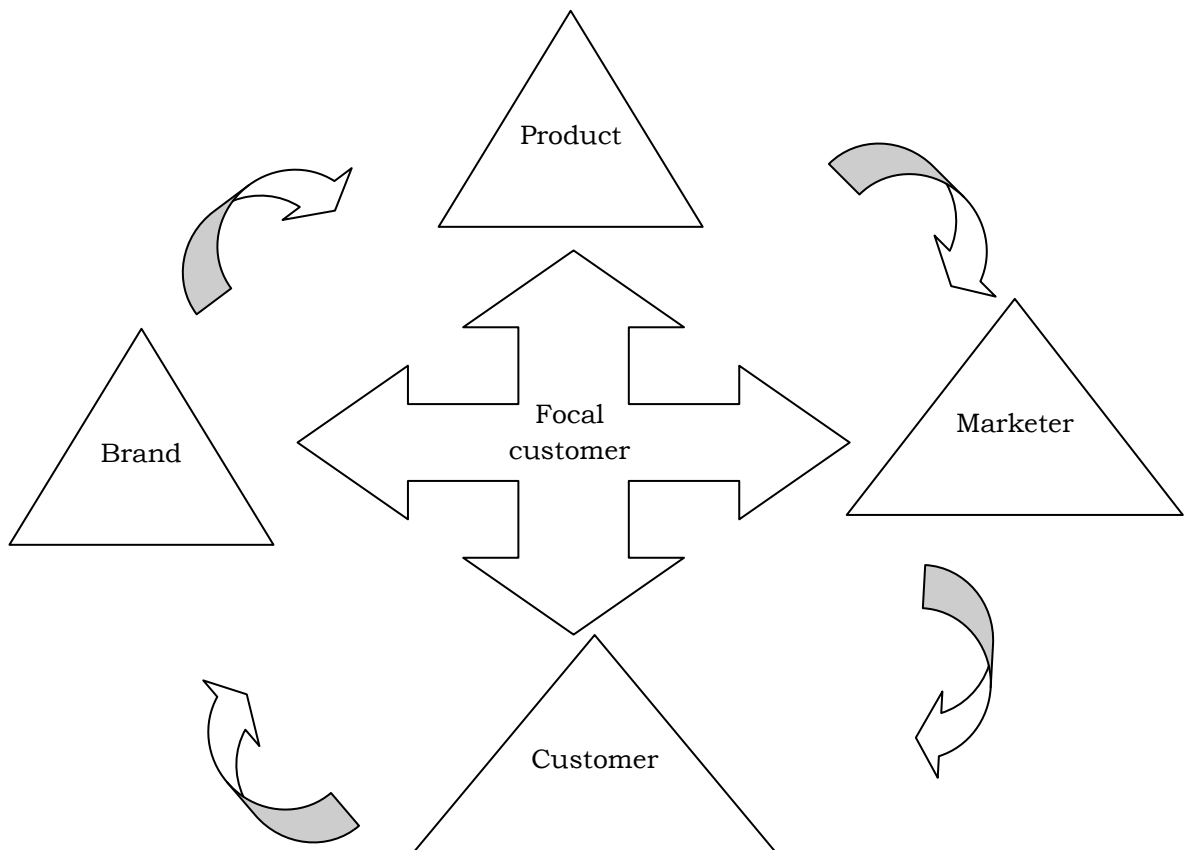


Figure 7.4 (Enhanced) Customer-Centric Model of Brand Community

(Source: adapted from McAlexander et al, 2002, p. 39)

The additional arrows demonstrate relationships that, at least indirectly, could impact on the focal customer.

Alongside this, the present researcher proposes a conceptual framework that differs in construction as well as in content from the previous models, which are simply refinements of the same approach. It is the present researcher’s

contention that this approach itself, not any version of it, is inadequate to explain the functioning of a brand community, for two reasons: its elements are too discrete, and the relationships between them are too varied to show easily. The problems, together with the basis for their solutions proposed in the present research, are tabulated below:

Old Customer-centric Model			New Conceptual framework
The Nature	The Problems	Reasons	
Focal customer is at the centre of the model	Focus of study will be always at the focal customer.	Contemporary marketer may not always want to focus on the focal customer, as they may want to look at the brand community as a whole	No particular element is compulsory to be focused on, as it permits easy study of relationship between all levels
Articulation of various elements	Only provide greater understanding of relationship occur within the community's environment	Researcher may want to research on the relationship which include of outer ones of individual and society	The existence of society which play an important elements, which taken account of social cultural context
All the elements are allocated separately	Elements are too discrete	It show the relationship between are too varied	Using Venn diagram has show the logical relationship between all the elements

Figure 7.5 Table of Old Customer-centric Model Vs New Conceptual Framework Proposed

The researcher proposes the following as an initial exploration of a comprehensive scenario:

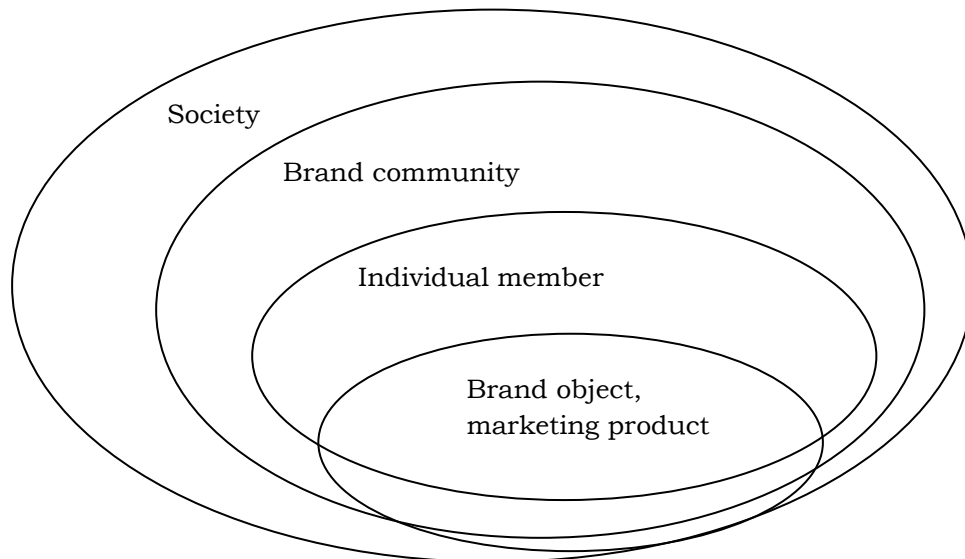


Figure 7.6 Proposed Conceptual Framework of Brand Community Relationship I

Firstly, this emergent conceptual framework draws an important distinction between individual and corporate elements. The individual is a member of a brand community, which in turn exists within the context of society as a whole. This conceptual framework permits the easy study of relationships between all these levels, including the outer ones of individual and society. It also makes clear the nature of these relationships – whether they are equal or subordinate, and which element impinges on which others. The inanimate brand object, for example, cuts across all of these categories. It relates to the individual, to the community and to the brand.

In particular, this conceptual framework gave the researcher an appropriate framework within which to explore the relationships between brand communities. McCracken's (1986) identification of the movement of cultural meaning is applicable here when considering the adoption by the BMW MINI marketing campaign of the cultural values attributed, within the wider socio-cultural environment, to the classic Mini. The proposed conceptual framework is highly relevant to the social and cultural aspects of this transition, both



because it caters for these elements and because it reveals the relationships between them. The conceptual framework can reveal how consumers “buy into” the cultural values associated with the old Mini when they purchase a BMW MINI. They transfer meanings between the socio-cultural environment to the brand object; the conceptual framework makes this clear through its Venn-diagram structure of sets and subsets. Moreover, the conceptual framework is able to draw distinctions between individual elements on the one hand and corporate ones (i.e. the brand object, marketing, the product and society) on the other.

One adjustment might be made to this conceptual framework. If it is assumed that the ultimate reduction of the brand community is the individual member, and that the brand is the other universal element, the conceptual framework might be reformulated thus:

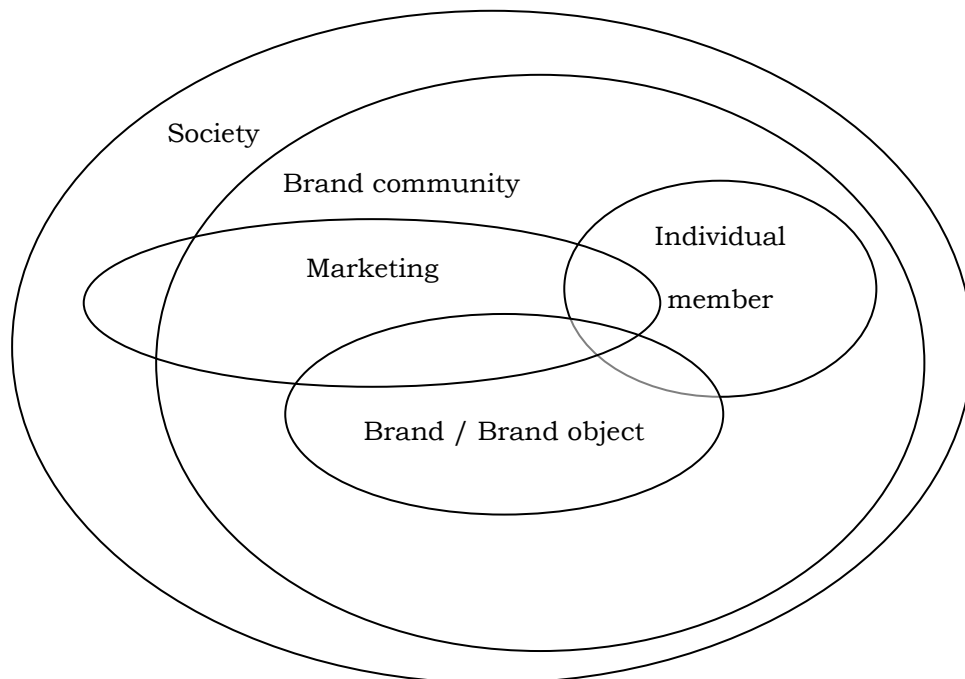


Figure 7.7 Proposed Conceptual Framework of Brand Community Relationship II

In this conceptual framework, the brand and individual form a constellation at the centre, within operating environments of, immediately, the brand

community and, at one remove, wider society. Marketing, internal and external, is the element that interacts with the whole.

A further point in which this conceptual framework proves superior is also due to its flexibility. Elements can be removed or added as necessary. In the present case, there are two communities, the Mini and the BMW MINI. This conceptual framework could represent them in several ways, depending on how their relationship was viewed. If they are seen as two independent but interacting groups, they would be portrayed thus:

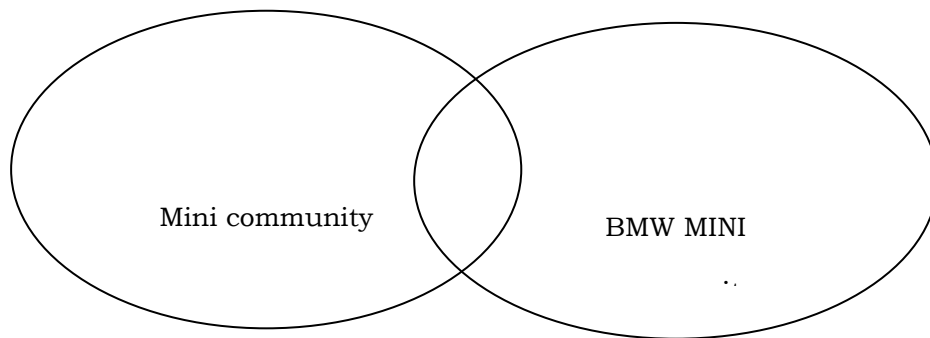


Figure 7.8 Proposed Conceptual Framework of Brand Community Relationship III

If, however, the BMW MINI community is perceived as being a wholly dependent subculture of the classic Mini community, the conceptual framework would appear thus:

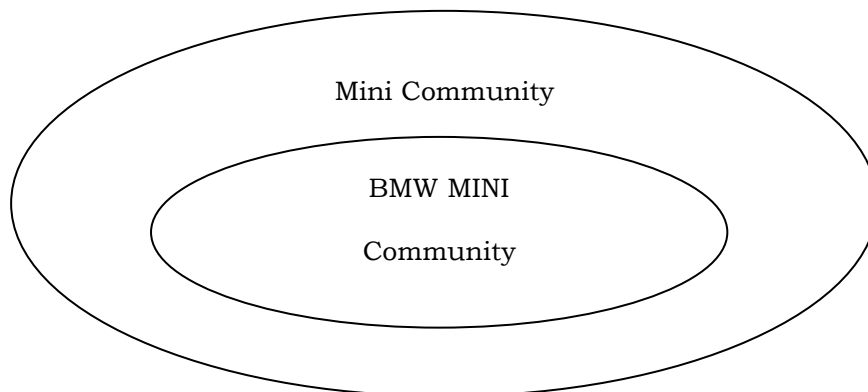


Figure 7.9 Proposed Conceptual Framework of Brand Community Relationship IV

It will be noted in passing that the flexibility extends to what to omit. The complete conceptual framework as shown in Fig.7.5 represents every

pertinent level of the phenomenon under study, from the individual member to the socio-cultural environment, with the brand object being common to all the other elements. However, the focus can be narrowed to demonstrate, for example, the nature of the relationships between two segments of the community, as has just been demonstrated. It might similarly be necessary to find out how the members relate to the community, in which case the social environment might be dispensed with.

A particularly useful area of study in the present context would be an examination of the relationship between the individual member, the brand object and the brand community. This could be abstracted from the main diagram thus:

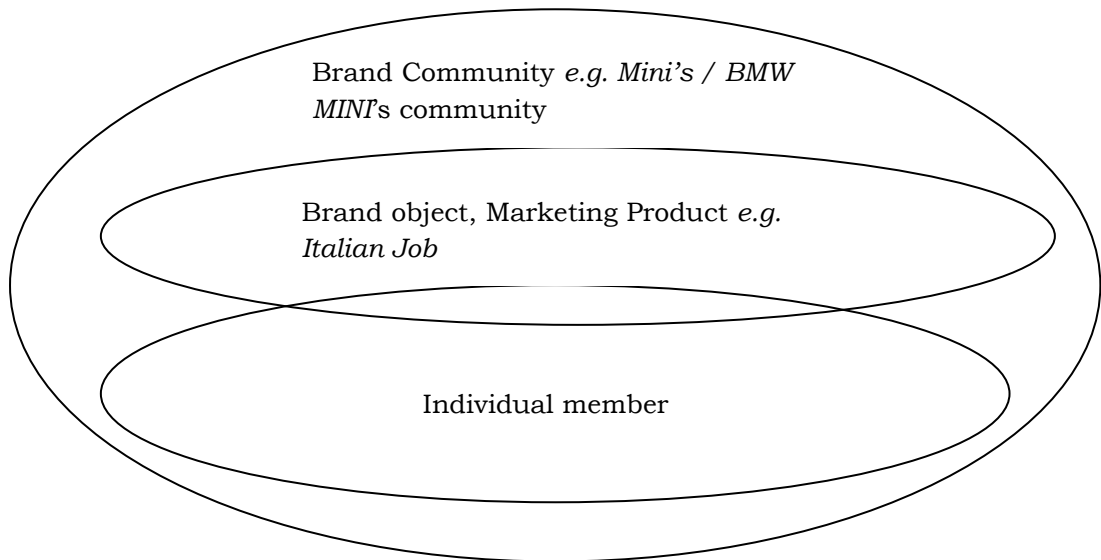


Figure 7.9.1 Proposed Conceptual Framework of Brand Community Relationship V

In this case, the researcher would use that part of the conceptual framework in examining the interaction between the individual and the brand community as regards a specific marketing product such as the film "The Italian Job". Of course, this runs the risk of ignoring relevant factors. Such a narrowing of focus should therefore only be used during the course of the research. The focus can be widened by degrees until the full socio-cultural environment is

brought back into view and the insight gained from the detailed study is incorporated into that context.

### 7.3 The Conceptual Framework and the Three Markers of Community

This study has taken Muniz and O’Guinn’s (2001) three markers of community (consciousness of kind, moral responsibility, and ritual and tradition) as a starting point for discussion concerning the nature of the Mini community. These three markers will be explored in turn using the conceptual framework postulated in this study, after which they will be used as the basis for the researcher’s own theory, constructed using an interpretative approach. The first thing to note is that the conceptual framework is flexible enough to incorporate other models such as the aforementioned three markers. These fit the present conceptual framework neatly, providing the mechanism by which the individual member relates through the brand community to the socio-cultural environment, as shown below:

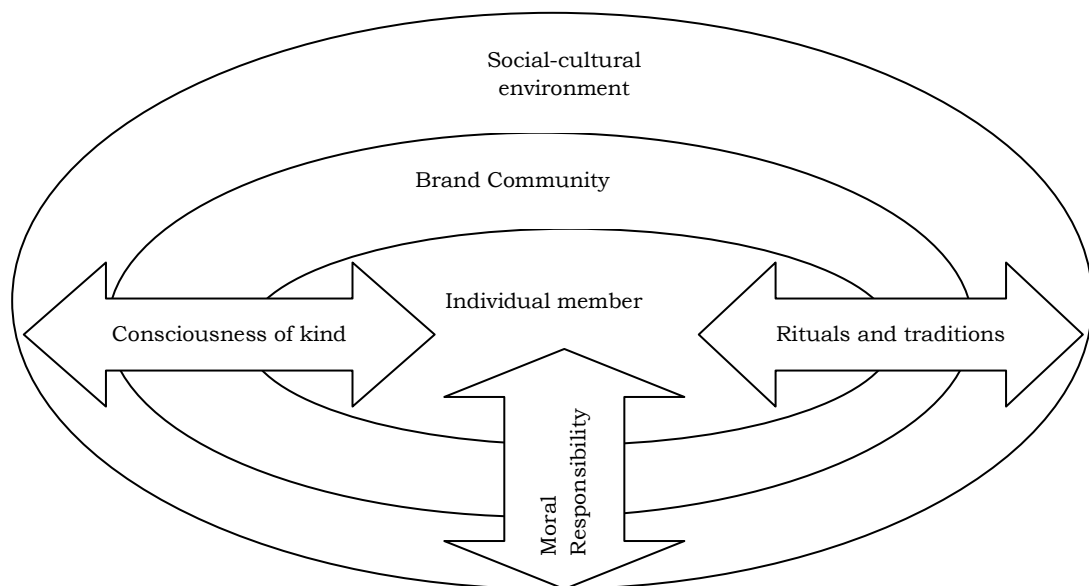


Figure 7.9.2 Proposed Conceptual Framework of Brand Community Relationship VI

Community can be broadly conceptualised as the consciousness of connection with at least one other human in at least one aspect to some degree, which in turn implies some degree of separateness from other humans in respect of

that aspect or aspects. It can thus be thought of as positive, negative or some mixture of the two. Bender (1978) has defined the positive element as “we-ness”, referring to the connection between members of the community which is the justification for the existence of that community. The negative aspect can be characterised as “oppositional loyalty”, in that the self is defined in opposition to a quality or element, or group of qualities or elements, seen as undesirable.

Where the aspects seen as being held in common cut across boundaries of kinship, communities come into being. The Mini community is a case in point: people who do not otherwise know each other feel a strong enough bond, whether negatively or positively expressed, to call themselves part of a community. This usually – but not inevitably – leads to indulgence in activities the sole purpose of which is to give expression to this bond, or sense of “we-ness”. These activities range from the formal to the informal and include local, regional, national and even international meetings at which the bond between individual members is strengthened by the reinforcement of their membership of an organisation (used without a necessary implication of a formal structure) of like-minded individuals, an organisation which performs a validatory function among other things.

The conceptual framework reflects this ubiquity of the three markers, whose influence extends from the individual through the brand community to the socio-cultural environment. Values are transferred via these markers from society to the brand, and the consumer “buys into” that image. In turn, the wider community implicitly validates the process and the resultant value set. The Mini’s combination of Britishness, fun and small-is-beautiful have been adopted from social values and have reinforced those values, in each case by the mechanism of the three markers and as mediated by the brand community.

The individual’s relationship with the community is further reinforced by a sense of moral responsibility felt by the members. This can again be seen

negatively as well as positively. In the case of the Mini community, it can be used to enforce a moral obligation to reject “unworthy” objects such as the BMW MINI, and by extension the people associated with them. Even a positive moral obligation can be used coercively, in order to ensure compliance with the standards and structures of the group, with the ultimate sanction of expulsion from that group. This can be seen in any number of organisations. A well-known example is the Roman Catholic Church, which as a last resort excommunicates members who contravene its doctrines or practices. In this respect, the Mini community is a far looser organisation. There are no standard principles of conduct or belief analogous to a religious creed or statement of belief, only a manifest liking to some degree (depending on the individual community) for the brand object. In many of the Mini communities studied, individuals felt quite free to leave or join as they wished. Coercion in this respect, as in a sense of loss when leaving the community, is a function of the individual’s perception rather than of some formal sanction or action by the community.

This sense of “we-ness” is also reinforced by rituals and traditions whose practical function is limited or non-existent (or even possibly illegal, as with the Mini recognition ritual of the headlight flash), but which serves a psychological function in reinforcing the bond between members, and by extension the validation of individual choices that comes from being part of a larger community. The case of the headlight flash is significant here: it is the most fleeting of contacts between members who in all likelihood would never meet otherwise, but for whom this ritual raises their consciousness of their membership of an unseen – and therefore psychologically powerful – community of like-minded individuals.

That the Mini community forms a distinct subculture is fairly obvious. The relationship of this subculture to its parent culture needs teasing out, however. Hebdige (1979, p. 67-68) in his study of the punk movement in Britain, observes that the style “tended to develop in direct antithesis to its apparent sources” This could equally be said of the Harley-Davidson (H-D)

community, which according to Schouten and McAlexander (1995) is partly characterised by a “rebel” mentality which is, paradoxically, not at all at odds with a sense of patriotism: the H-D is the last of the US motorcycles, and a strong sense of American identity throughout the community manifests itself in proud participation in national celebrations such as Independence Day and in xenophobic references to foreigners and their countries, especially Japan – which, of course, manufactures the machines which have largely out-competed the H-D on the world market. This sense of a community under threat, of course, distinctly echoes that of the Apple Newton community.

However, a sense of belonging to a parent culture in one sense does not translate into every sphere of thought. The same bikers who proudly call themselves Americans are well-known for a certain antipathy to the laws by which the wider society of which they are a part lives. This is because of another part of the H-D ethos, one which again echoes an American ideal: personal freedom and the pursuit of happiness. Where this runs counter to the values of the surrounding culture, community members take pride in flouting those values. This, in short, is clearly a subculture that partly defines itself in opposition to its parent culture and to the society which gives rise to that culture. To that extent, its mentality can be described as “rebel”. These particular group values can thus be seen to be internally validated; society rejects them rather than endorsing them. The three markers operate, as it were, in reverse. The process of internal validation happens when consciousness of kind, moral responsibility and ritual and tradition are thrown back by society into the brand community.

One difference between the H-D and the Mini communities is this operation of the three markers. The Mini community cannot be seen as being “antisocial” in the same way that is true of the H-D community. The Mini was rebelling against the identification of large size with prestige, but this was a sentiment that a large segment of society sympathised with. The Mini was not seen as a rebel against society; if anything, it helped change it. American society, on the other hand, remains relatively untouched by the H-D community’s values taken as a package (as opposed to those values taken individually and

generically). The three key aspects of the Mini myth (fun, small-is-beautiful and Britishness) were all values that could be espoused by its parent society – and which indeed were, in the aftermath of the Suez Crisis and its consequent oil shock.

One possible sign of this is the fact that the H-D community is much more hierarchically organised than is the Mini community. This is to be expected of a subculture some of whose core values are strongly felt to be in opposition to its parent. The antipathy results in something of an “enemy” mentality, which can logically lead to the feeling of a need to organise against this “other”. As is pointed out elsewhere in this study, the Mini community’s (and communities’) organisation is not nearly as hierarchic because it has not nearly as much to fight against. Another symptom of this is that Mini owners do not and never have had an antisocial image (part of the BMC’s initial marketing ploy was to have the Queen drive in one, and many famous figures in British public life took to the car), which is not something that can be said for their H-D counterparts. The Mini’s association with Britishness is the equivalent of the H-D’s with the American dream, but without the latter’s antisocial element. This is because the latter implies a contradiction with the former, something which the Mini does not have to contend.

The Mini, in fact, has done more than assume certain values belonging to its parent culture. It has become part of a feedback process which has in turn helped shape that culture, a process which has contributed strongly to its assumption of cultural icon status. Like Coke and other iconic brands, the Mini has done this by addressing contradictions in society, as Holt (2004) points out. In the late 50s, size was regarded as a marker of status. This applied to vehicles as to everything else. Then came the Suez crisis and the resultant oil shock, and the size-status equation came under pressure from the need for fuel economy. The German bubble cars addressed this contradiction, as did the Mini. However, the latter also addressed the post-war climate of continued austerity, demonstrated by relatively sombre clothing largely geared to the middle-aged, as well as by rationing, only recently lifted.



The car, together with Mary Quant's fashion revolution, which for the first time tapped the youth market, linked the concepts of small size and fun, both of which ran counter to the prevailing current of thought.

The Mini has assumed this iconic status as the result of a process revealed by Holt (2004). Not only has the brand assumed an identity which addressed contradictions in the society, but this identity has become strong enough to become a persona in its own right. People bought the Mini as an embodiment of a whole package of cultural associations which they saw as of major or even central relevance to them. The car had quickly become a symbol of these values.

Finally, and most widely, the sense of "we-ness" can be validated by society at large. Members who are approached by non-members commenting favourably on their cars reinforce their commitment to the brand object by receiving the approbation of the wider world. This prevents a sense of "ghettoisation" which can occur when society disapproves of an individual's choices or preferences; this can be seen in the gay community before (and to a lesser extent after) it became legally permitted. The Mini community's conduct, whether rituals, organisation of meetings, or individuals' responsibilities to each other, are not arcane, but are easily comprehensible by non-members. The community would appear to be integrated into society as a whole, and to receive at least its tolerance, if not its positive approbation.

#### **7.4 The Mini as a Cultural Icon**

The Mini became a cultural icon in the 1960s and has remained one ever since, even after the car ceased manufacture. Most cars, as with most "practical" brands generally (i.e. brand objects which are regarded as necessary to some degree, such as dishwashing liquid, rather than largely or purely decorative, such as perfume), do not become icons. The Toyota Corolla has been so extensively remodelled as to be a different car from its first ancestor, introduced within a decade of the Mini, and there is no comparable

fan club for this car. Both the Toyota Publica, introduced in 1961 and its successor the Starlet (1973-1999) are barely remembered today. There are certainly no fan clubs for these vehicles at all comparable to the Mini community. The brand communities for these objects, such as they were and are, are concerned at least as much with their primary functions as with secondary ones. Their participation in those communities is largely concerned with purchase, use and maintenance of the brand object, and those communities are mostly unconscious ones, which exist as a statistical rather than a psychological reality. Once the primary function has outlived its usefulness, such communities are replaced by others temporarily devoted to newer versions of those brand objects.

The Mini's very inception was largely the result of an appeal to a utilitarian purpose: fuel economy, as a response to the oil shock which followed in the wake of the Suez crisis. However, its marketing and the public's reaction very soon transcended this function, which is something that did not happen to any of the Toyota vehicles mentioned above. As Holt (2004) points out, this is how brands assume iconic status. The Mini assumed an identity based around the three attributes of fun, small size and Britishness, which appealed to a significant proportion of the population in the early 60s. It was at this relatively early point that consumers started buying Minis because they were Minis, not just because they were convenient cars. The Mini became their only choice because of its identity value; this identity is what consumers bought, rather than a conveyance to get them to their destinations.

The Mini community is not, of course, unique in the automotive world in that other brands such as SAAB and Porsche attract their devotees. However, in many such cases it appears that these communities are set up by the manufacturers rather than being a spontaneous consumer reaction. Of course, it amounts to the same thing in the final analysis, because an "official" community must still attract consumers in order to exist, and such interest appears to be there. The other automotive brands have also been able to control the image of their heritage much more than the Mini's marketers,

whose campaigns throughout the 1980s and 1990s became secondary to the continued stimulus provided by the communities; these decided for themselves what they considered important, whether consciously or subconsciously.

In the case of the Mini community, the conceptual framework can be used to trace the individual's relationship to the community and to society. This relationship is often directly to the rest of society, without being mediated by the brand or a community. A slight modification of a previous diagram illustrates this:

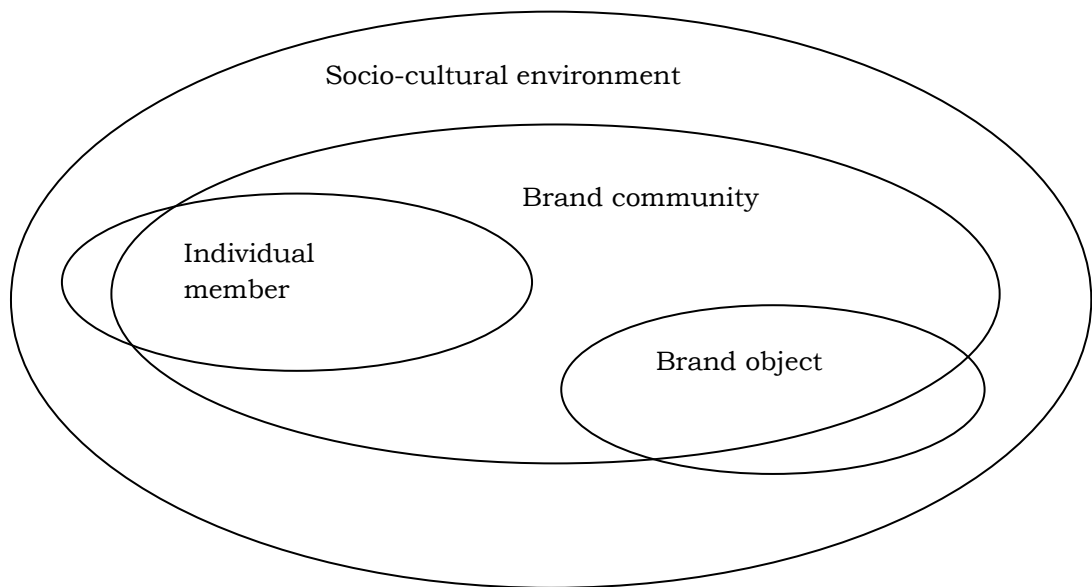


Figure 7.9.3 Proposed Conceptual Framework of Brand Community Relationship VII

Here, individual members can be a direct as well as an indirect subset of their socio-cultural environment, reflecting the fact that they espouse many if not all of the values held by Mini members without formally identifying themselves with that community by joining a Mini club.

The marker of moral responsibility serves to strengthen this bond, both within the brand community and directly between the individual and social values. The brand community and the individual have a moral responsibility to each other. The individual owes the community loyalty, both intellectual

(professions of agreement with the community's ideals) and practical (attendance at meetings and participation in events), while the community has a responsibility to make that commitment worth the individual's while by sustaining and reinforcing it. This moral responsibility extends from people to objects and then to abstractions. In the case of the Mini, the brand has become iconic, and as such emblematic of certain cultural values. This has made it a part of British heritage, to which both individual members and the community as a whole feel responsible. They look after their Minis (or BMW MINIs), and they support the brand and everything it stands for. The society that has engendered these values, enshrined as they are in the Mini community, likewise has an interest in maintaining them.

In any case, these relationships with an iconic brand can be compared to those with a "normal" one. One would probably buy a Ford Mondeo, used or new, primarily for the socially-dictated purposes of travel to and from work and leisure. One's most intimate interaction with such a brand object would be to keep it clean and to maintain it mechanically. Some owners would conceivably be "proud" of such car, even see special qualities in it and retain a lifelong fondness for it, but the aggregate of such people does not achieve the critical mass necessary to spark the formation of a community and the transformation of a mundane item into an iconic symbol. Most users do not have sufficient consciousness of kind, do not feel enough moral responsibility toward other owners of the same brand object, and do not indulge in the level of ritual and tradition associated with their brand object to warrant the recognition of the middle tier of the conceptual framework, the brand community, as a separate entity. In their case, their relationship with the brand object and with their larger environment could be represented by a vastly simplified version of the conceptual framework, thus:

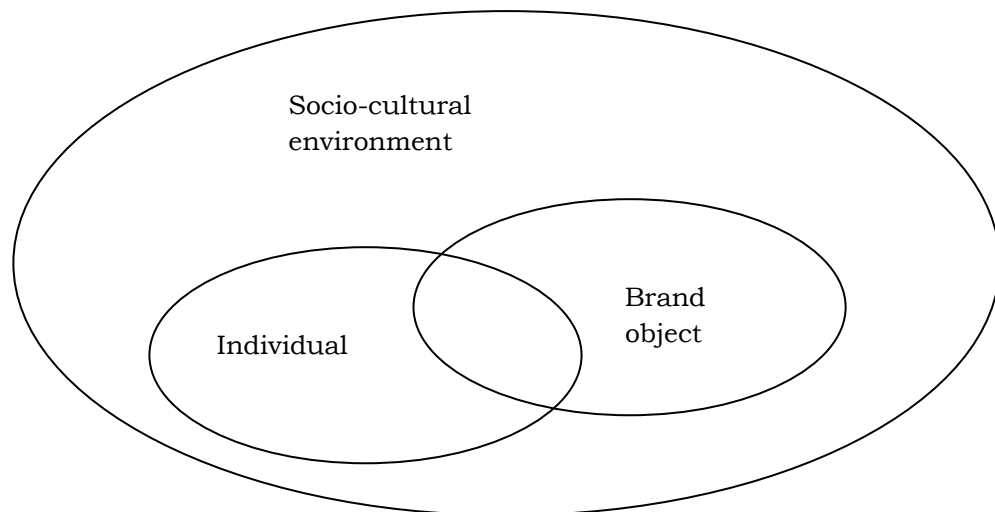


Figure 7.9.4 Proposed Conceptual Framework of Brand Community Relationship VIII

The other marker, ritual and tradition, assumes a somewhat lesser importance relative to the other two in this case. The fact is that the Mini tradition is alive and well. There is no pressure to formalise the community's activities in the form of rituals and their allied organisational hierarchies, as is the case with the H-D community, because it is positively integrated into its social environment. Individual members are by-and-large not viewed as opposed to their social context; in other words, their ownership of a Mini is seen as perfectly "normal" – at most, as providing a point of interest. Rituals and traditions serve their usual function of reinforcing communal values, involving the giving of Mini-related gifts at Christmas or birthdays, a practice which includes the individual in their socio-economic environment. A Mini community Christmas party at which such gift-giving occurs would demonstrate the involvement of the brand community as well, while rituals associated purely with community meetings are examples of relationships between the individual and the brand community. In any case, a strong feature of this conceptual framework is its equal emphasis on the static quality of relative position and the dynamic one of relationships between the levels.

#### 7.4.1 The Mini as Myth

Relatively few objects have achieved iconic status. In the Mini's case, enough people have identified over a long enough period with one or more aspects of their socio-cultural environment, and at the same time perceived the Mini as embodying those aspects, for there to be a "quantum leap", from a largely pragmatic engagement with the car's mundane features to an emotional identification with more mystical elements which cannot easily be quantified. These elements are closely related to myth, and it is precisely this mythical quality which gives the power needed to transform a car into a symbol.

Myths may or may not be true, but this is entirely subservient to their real role, which according to Slotkin (1973) is to provide a metaphor for a cultural tradition. The durability of a myth depends not only on its universality but on "the applicability of its particular terms and metaphors to the peculiar conditions of history and environment that dominate the lives of a particular people...The success of the myth depends on the creation of a distinctive cultural tradition in the selection and use of metaphor" (Slotkin, 1973, p.14). The power of myth is its ability to give non-literal expression to elements of such a tradition; it seems to be necessary for humans to act such elements out, to relive or reinterpret them (Slotkin, 1973). Anything which performs this function can be considered a myth. Thompson (2004) parallels Slotkin's (1973) examination of a national (i.e. US) mythology with a marketplace one in which advertisements construct "an ideal consumer lifestyle". Generalising from his example of the world of natural health, he shows that "mythic constructions...have been incorporated into a distinctive marketplace mythology tailored to specific competitive conditions and a collective viewpoint shared by its core consumer segment; that "this marketplace mythology and its constituent metaphors serve multiple ideological agendas"; that they "harbour internal contradictions linked to diverse and competing stakeholder interests"; and that consumers can use these mythologies and their metaphors in order to challenge as well as reinforce a dominant culture – in other words, to create a counterculture.

This is highly relevant to the main thrusts of the Mini marketing campaigns. As has been discussed, the Mini was marketed as embodying the basic ideas of “small is beautiful”, “fun” and “Britishness”, at least the first of which ran counter to the prevailing ideology of car design, in which greater size betokened greater prestige, and fuel economy was not a consideration. This ideology reflected the post-war relaxation of restrictions such as food rationing, which did not fully end until 1954, and the associated relief and release of tension. Big, expensive gas-guzzling vehicles, however, became less desirable after petrol rationing was reintroduced in 1956 as a result of the Suez crisis. The Mini was introduced to counter the threat of German low-consumption “bubble cars” which were tapping into the new market for such vehicles.

The British Motor Corporation’s campaign, however, clearly went beyond a strictly utilitarian appeal to fuel economy, being aimed at a perceived younger “swinging” set to whom it was important to have fun for its own sake. It was the same generation to which Mary Quant also successfully appealed. (It is interesting in this respect to compare the advertising campaigns for the BMW MINI, which was largely geared to drivers disenchanted with big SUVs. In other words, both campaigns aimed at a group of people who were growing weary of a current set of conditions, and who were ripe for a marketing campaign which thereby found a niche).

The iconic status of the Mini was boosted by its enthusiastic adoption by the Chelsea set and by such notable figures as the Beatles, Steve McQueen, Peter Sellers, Cliff Richard and Paul Newman, as well as well-staged publicity stunts including fitting as many people as possible into the car. However, the creation of the Mini as a mythical object, leading to the formation of a clearly discernable Mini community, was reliant on what Holt (2004) calls “myth markets”. He says that a marketplace exists as much for myths by which social groups play out their roles as for products, and brand strategists aim for competitive advantage in both. Just as the product might change in response to marketplace demands, as with new models of car, so marketing

campaigns must react to changes in social attitudes. His example is the campaigns selling the soft drink Mountain Dew, which in turn appealed to the wild individualism of the Hillbilly, the reactionary redneck and the “slacker”. The viability of each of these was destroyed by social changes in the United States, and the brand strategists reacted accordingly by targeting a new myth seen as relevant in the new conditions. It must be understood that these campaigns did not target Hillbillies, rednecks and slackers: rather, they used these figures which had become part of the national mythology as the central plank of their current campaigns.

As has been implied, the Mini community was engendered during the sixties, when it became a cult object. It reacted to BMC’s marketing drive aimed at a cultural group embodying the values of youth, “swing”, Britishness and fun, which then assumed a momentum of their own. They became the basic values which, singly and/or together, defined the image of the car’s owners through the image of the car itself – a classic example of Belk’s (1988) extended self. It was this image with which marketers had to contend from the beginning. This is in sharp distinction to Mountain Dew, as discussed earlier, which successfully changed its marketing thrust twice. This proved unnecessary in the case of the Mini. The social values which were the targets of the initial marketing campaign have remained relevant today: Britishness, fun, and “small is beautiful”. Part of the marketers’ art is to find the “something” that an icon could represent and to create links to their brand object that are strong enough to resonate with a subsection of the community. If marketers manage to tap into a sufficiently large section of society at a fundamental enough level, there are the makings of an icon. It must be noted, however, that even in these initial stages the relationship between marketer and society is not an active-passive one, as was thought before the postmodernism of the 1980s. Marketers must at least gauge their audiences accurately, otherwise their marketing ploys will fall on unreceptive ears. This is most obvious when marketers mistranslate their slogans for foreign markets: when Gerber baby food marketers retained the packaging, featuring images of cute babies, for the African market, the product did not sell well. Because of the high illiteracy rate



in that continent, packaging usually pictures the contents. This kind of awareness is just as important in intra- as in intercultural marketing, and can be just as difficult to achieve.

Success can amount to little more than luck: the right product answering the need of a large enough number of people. The marketer must simply be “savvy” enough to recognise the opportunity. This was partly the case with the Mini in 1959. Society was emerging from the doldrums of postwar rationing and the Suez crisis, and the younger generation was beginning to find its own distinctive voice. There was a market to be recognised and exploited, and the BMC did that in terms so appropriate to the spirit of the times that it spawned a loyal consumer base part of which went beyond customer loyalty to become a “fan club” – the Mini community, in other words. This is what converted a utilitarian vehicle into an icon.

As previously observed, the BMC Mini is no longer in production, and thus has no marketers to react to social changes, as was the case with Mountain Dew. Any such reaction must come from the Mini community itself, but this has proved unnecessary because the thrust of the original marketing campaigns has retained its validity. To illustrate this, one needs only imagine what would have been the case had those campaigns lost relevance, and that in order for the car to retain a loyal following, it would have had to appeal to a different section of society – say, retired people on modest incomes. Its image could conceivably have been converted into, say, “the pensioner’s car” – but, of course, it has not. Instead, a corpus of myth has built up around the vehicle, giving it an image which has survived the demise of the vehicle in 2000, and is viable enough to provide for a relaunch of the BMW MINI the following year. The case of the Apple Newton is similar, insofar as the PDA spawned a loyal community which survived the cessation of the brand object’s production. In the case of the Mini, this corpus of myth by chance remained relevant to enough of the population, despite the social changes that occurred since 1959, for the creation and maintenance of a brand community exercising Muniz and

O'Guinn's (2001) three markers. It is this community that has kept the myths surrounding the Mini alive since the withdrawal of the marketing campaign.

### **7.5 The Mini Brand Culture and the Community**

The previous models have fixed components. This is the chief difference between them and the conceptual framework presently proposed, which is flexible in that it allows for replacement of some of the elements. In Schouten and McAlexanders' (1995) customer-centric paradigm, for example, the marketer is a fixed element. This paradigm cannot therefore cater for the fact that the marketer as regards the Mini/BMW MINI effectively withdrew for a couple of decades until the BMW's relaunch of the car in 2001. The researchers who constructed previous models have tried to capture what they see as the essential, unchanging elements of the marketing/consumer complex. Unidirectional models like McCracken's (1986) are certainly inadequate to deal with the issue of consumer input into the consumption cycle and their creation of the meaning attributed to iconic brands, much less with the interaction between individual, brand community and the socio-cultural environment. As has just been shown, things do change in the world of consumption culture, and the flexibility of the proposed conceptual framework is an ideal means of addressing this dynamic situation. It is probably fair to assume that the individual consumer will remain as part of this equation, as will their socio-cultural environment, but the intervening elements can always change depending on the circumstances and on the community under study. The proposed conceptual framework is therefore the perfect vehicle for exploring brand communities, whether of extinct or of current brands, as well as any other consumption-related field of study. This cyclical character can be analysed in terms of the three features of "fun", "small is beautiful" and "Britishness."

One of the main constituents of the Mini myth is fun. This is reflected in the comments given by respondents in the present research. One important strand in these responses is that driving the Mini is somehow felt to be an

intrinsically enjoyable activity, due to its light and easy handling characteristics. This is in contradistinction to the BMW MINI, which some detractors felt was too heavy compared with the “real Mini”. It is important to note in this context that BMW has felt it necessary to ignore this criticism in its marketing campaigns since 2001, and to play on the same element of fun that was seen to be embodied by the classic Mini. This hedonism is now seen as characteristic of the “swinging Sixties”, and the Mini, Mary Quant and the Beatles were some of its main expressions. They were all marketed very much at the younger generation, who had little or no experience of the war; it was they who launched what Holt (2004, p. 28) calls “seismic earthquakes [which] pulse through society”. The idea that fun was valuable for its own sake, as opposed to as an adjunct to a “practical” activity, may be thought of as an invention (or perhaps a reinvention) of the Sixties (Holt, 2004). This idea was powerful enough to have retained its validity for people ever since, whether positively or as a form of escapism from the recession of the mid-1970s, emerging as a counterculture to the “yuppie” era of the late 1980s and 90s, and used by BMW to market the new BMW MINI. “Fun” has quite obviously retained its value as a marketing tool.

“Small is beautiful”, the second strand of the Mini myth, was of course a direct and practical consequence of the circumstances surrounding the car’s conception: the oil crisis accompanying the Suez venture of 1956. Again, this took on a life of its own, as large became less desirable and “small” became intrinsically attractive. It is perhaps no coincidence that the era of the Mini is also that of the Miniskirt; both demonstrate a commitment to minimalism. The closely related idea of “economy” applies not only to the Mini’s low fuel consumption but to its much-vaunted maximisation of a relatively small amount of space. Economy has continued to be an attractive idea at least ever since the 1973 oil crisis, as a subsequently increasing ecological awareness informs popular judgment. Again, detractors of the new BMW MINI have objected to its larger size compared with the original vehicle, and again BMW has nonetheless played on this element.

The third strand, Britishness, is perhaps best exemplified by the 1978 BBC sitcom *Butterflies*, in which the main character, Ria Parkinson, drives a Mini completely decorated with a Union Jack. The car has always been seen as a symbol of British engineering (despite its creator being a Turk of Greco-German descent), because of its creation by the British Motor Corporation in direct competition with the German bubble cars seeking to tap into the same market. The Mini has always fitted in very well with the strand of “anti-Europeanism” and “Little Englandism” so popular in England, if not so much in the rest of the UK. Of course, it is the “takeover” of the Mini by a foreign company which is warmly objected to by many members of the Mini community, who perceive the car as expressive of a quality which is quintessentially British, and which has been diluted or destroyed by its German ownership. It should be noted in this context that BMW’s marketing plays on the patriotic card by giving consumers the choice of draping the car in the Union Flag, whether on the sides or the roof or both.

Perhaps the most revealing instance of the extent to which BMW’s marketers have relied on the original values seen to be embodied in the Mini is the remake of the film *The Italian Job* (itself practically of iconic status in the world of the Mini community) using the BMW MINI. In short, there is arguably less “rebranding” going on currently, and more simple continuation of the thrust of the original marketing campaign, due to the continued viability of the first two of the above three elements: fun and “small is beautiful”.

## **7.6 Conclusion**

This chapter has sought to give the findings regarding the Mini community an analytic generalisability using a conceptual framework proposed by the present researcher, who has critiqued the previous models used to conceptualise consumer behaviour and communities of consumption. The researcher has explained the conceptual framework which takes into account all those actors and levels concerned with creating the cultural meaning(s) attached to a given brand object. The final chapter will draw conclusions from

the whole study, examine the limitations of the present research and propose avenues for future investigation.

## CHAPTER 8 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### 8.1 Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to draw appropriate conclusions from the research, highlighting the contributions it has made towards the literature on the subject. These contributions are part of a postmodern trend of increasing sophistication in consumer studies, discovering and exploring the whole range of interrelationships associated with this field. More specifically, the Mini/BMW MINI community is evaluated in the light of Muniz and O'Guinn's (2001) three markers of community and of Cova and Cova's (2002) studies of communities and tribes. Special attention is paid to the exact nature of the Mini/BMW MINI split and the relationship of the two cultures. The community is compared and contrasted to others such as the Apple Newton and Harley Davison ones. As a result of all this, a new conceptual framework containing all the aspects of a consumption community is proposed. The present research into the Mini/BMW MINI community is then set in the context of symbolic interactionism, and has used this as a springboard to investigate the community as a whole as well as the individuals within it, something that previous studies have largely avoided doing. This is one of the main contributions of this research. It then considers the limitations of the present study, mainly those of potential bias and of geographical limitation, and proposes recommendations for future research, which could extend this study's geographical extent worldwide. This community would be an ideal vehicle for such a study because, unlike many of the others mentioned in the course of this research, it is far more international. Its reach in this respect could be even further widened by including the Innocenti Mini. The resulting research would be much more generalisable, being truly intercultural.

### 8.2 Brand Community Relationship – A case study of Mini and BMW MINI

This study has confirmed the existence of an extensive and growing body of literature on brand communities, most of the contributions arriving at their conclusions by means of case studies of particular communities. Any

community provides insight into this topic, whether automotive (in the case of the Harley-Davidson and SAAB), or otherwise (as with the Apple Newton PDA). The principles are shown to remain the same.

This literature arose in reaction to a paucity of studies before the 1980s of communities and of the reciprocal relationships between consumers, marketers and their environments. Until then, literature only recognised a one-way communication from marketer to individual consumer. The burgeoning number of studies since then has shown an increase in sophistication as well as in volume. Fournier (1998) is one of the leading authors in this regard, exploring this reciprocity and establishing the fact that individual intentions are independent of those of the marketer. Muniz and O’Guinn (2001) point to the fact that relationships between consumers are just as important as those between consumer and marketer.

Muniz and O’Guinn’s (2001) research proposes three markers by which a community’s (and not just a brand community’s) existence may be recognised. These markers each refer to a form of communal self-consciousness. The creation of such a community is not simply a matter of numbers: millions of consumers of “Chanel” beauty products do not automatically constitute a community. There must be some deliberate thought processes, individual and shared, involved before this can happen. These thought processes have to do with a consciousness of some kind of communal interest strong enough to create a bond of some kind between the members; the establishment of certain rituals and traditions (two quite different, but closely related, things) which codify this consciousness and demand a certain commitment from the members who engage in them; and a moral responsibility towards other members of the community. These three markers have been used in the present research as a basis for determining the characteristics of communities and thereby to study them better. Other systems could have been used, but these markers were found to be the most appropriate and comprehensive. Consciousness of kind was found to be particularly appropriate to the Mini/BMW MINI community, because of this partial dichotomy between those

members faithful to the original “classic” vehicle and those who saw nothing wrong with the BMW rebranding of 2001 – or who even preferred the newer car. Such oppositional loyalty is a powerful means of clarifying a community’s identity in its own corporate mind. In the present case, it was found that, although there was a sharp difference of opinion among many members as to the respective merits of the two cars, there was not enough animosity to generate a genuine split and the creation of two antagonistic communities. This is at least partly to do with the fact that the Mini/BMW MINI brand is still current in people’s minds; it continues strongly, unlike the Apple Newton, which is a dying brand whose community is consequently characterised by a “persecution mentality” largely absent from the subject of the present study. The three markers were used as a useful basis for discussion and analysis of the findings.

Particular mention must be made in the context of the present study of Cova and Cova’s (2002) contributions, which highlight the essential differences between “real” communities, based on geographical proximity and kinship, and “virtual” ones, more akin to tribes. Brand communities are regional, national or even global; they do not operate through the close personal ties that characterise traditional communities. But there appears to be a similarity nevertheless: “the link is more important than the thing” for both kinds of community. The implication of Cova and Cova’s (2002) argument is that socially alienated modern Western consumers attempt to recreate social bonds, whether virtually or in reality, using brand objects as a vehicle for doing so.

The Mini/BMW MINI community is of particular interest in this context because of its partly dichotomous nature. There is some animosity between adherents of the classic car and those of the BMW relaunch. The question arises as to what extent this dichotomy reflects the existence of two separate communities, and of the role of oppositional loyalty within as well as outside a community. This study has explored these issues in depth, and has reached the conclusion that there is no strong evidence of a split between two



communities, but rather an intracommunity feud. The strongest evidence of an actual split is that some Mini clubs do not allow BMW MINIs. However, this has not gone as far as the formation of two separate communities, identifiable by Muniz and O'Guinn's (2001) three markers.

The standpoints of the two parties involved, as revealed in the findings, certainly bear some resemblance to those which would be involved in two antagonistic communities. Their sense of self, insofar as it exists, is characterised primarily by their opposition to the other party. This is especially true of the classic Mini, fierce proponents of which feel that the values embodied in the car (especially "fun" and "Britishness") have been somehow betrayed or suborned by the newer vehicle. The feeling is not as strong among adherents of the BMW MINI, who seem more tolerant of the older vehicle. This relative intensity of feeling reflects that of the Apple Newton community, which has formed around a "dead" brand object – one which is no longer in production and whose devotees are therefore faced with its eclipse. It is only to be expected that this would engender an almost religious sense of desperation and consequent zealousness in its community. Insofar as the Mini is no longer produced, and is being kept on the road only by the interest shown by its members, the sense of zealousness of a community under some sort of threat is there, too.

However, the car is still so popular, and there are so many still being driven, that the sense of danger is not imminent. No respondent so much as mentioned the possible extinction of the older vehicle. This would explain why the Mini/BMW MINI community has not irretrievably split. The caveat "yet" must be introduced here: it is quite conceivable that in the next few decades, as more and more Minis disappear from the roads, this sense will become intense enough to foster a break, and quite possibly an acrimonious one – assuming, of course, that the BMW MINI stays in production that long. The converse is true of the adherents of the BMW MINI, for the opposite reason: if the Mini community (such as it is) feels in no immediate danger, it is of course inconceivable that those of the BMW MINI should feel so, as their brand object

is still in production, and indeed is being strongly marketed and is very popular. Organisationally, therefore, this community remains, despite some bad feeling, a single one.

In terms particular to this research, one of the questions asks “How do the Mini and BMW MINI cultures clash and feed off each other?” The answer is that the communities – insofar as there are separate communities – clash because of the degree to which the car’s perceived core values are seen to be compromised by the new vehicle. As has been stated, some community members do not object at all to the BMW MINI, others have a violent antipathy towards it, and there are various shades of opinion between these two extremes. Opinions regarding the new car are mainly based on its perceived relationship to the old. It is noteworthy that there does not seem to be a community solely devoted to the BMW MINI. The agenda was set by the marketers and (shortly thereafter) the Mini community in the 1960s, and the BMW MINI community – such as it is – exists as a subset of the Mini one and conforms to its agenda. This applies equally to BMW’s marketing since 2000. The emphasis on the original “small is beautiful” and “fun” ethos is reflected in their “BMW MINI adventures” series of commercials, which obviously plays on both concepts (“Britishness” being rather more tactfully treated!). The Apple Newton community, by contrast, exists in opposition to an “other” which is entirely outside itself: newer, similar (and arguably better) products by other manufacturers, products which are seen as inferior by the “faithful” of the community.

It can therefore be concluded that the Mini community has a parental relationship to the BMW MINI one, or (in diagrammatic terms) that the BMW MINI community is entirely a subset of the Mini one. The BMW MINI community serves to help its parent define itself, whether it be in opposition (“the BMW MINI isn’t the real thing”) or in union (“the BMW MINI carries on the traditions of the Mini”). The “clashing” and “feeding off” of the research question are thus two sides of the same coin rather than true opposites. Unlike the Apple Newton community, the BMW MINI is seen at its worst by the

Mini community as an insidious attack, an attempt at an “invasion of the body-snatchers” by taking over the existing product and gutting it of its true meaning. This has not endangered the community. The strength of feeling will not (at least as yet) support an irrevocable split between the two, and the new group remains fundamentally a part of the old. They clash in that some of their members see themselves in opposition to each other, and they feed off each other in that they espouse the same values.

The Mini/BMW MINI community’s reaction to the demise and re-launch of the car provides an opportunity to study and develop a new theoretical framework setting the relationship between consumer and marketer into the context of the wider society in which they exist. This framework is represented by a proposed conceptual framework which, unlike the previous ones by Schouten and McAlexander (1995) is able to reflect a two-way process between any of the parties, as well as showing their relationship to each other. The use of Venn diagrams ensures that each element can be seen in its true relationship to all of the others: as separate, contained within, containing or intersecting. Special elements can be fitted in as required.

The Mini community’s continued espousal of the original car until the present day is partly expressed in opposition to the BMW MINI, launched a year after the Rover Mini ceased production in 2000. This serves to throw the community’s sense of identity into sharper relief through its opposition to another “heretical” one, and to provide grounds for an examination of the dynamics which drive these communities and their members, and the relationships between such communities and the culture of which they are part.

The history of the Mini community was outlined in enough detail to provide a background to the research. The car had its roots in the emerging youth culture of the late 50s and early 60s, as well as in a native British riposte to the German bubble cars being introduced as an ultra-fuel efficient answer to the unrest caused by the 1956 Suez crisis. The community which formed

around this car perpetuated the marketers' projected values of fun, small-is-beautiful and Britishness well beyond the active promotional life of the car, and fostered a communal ethos which is still strongly exhibited in, for example, the voluntary nature of most Mini clubs' organisation. No fees are charged, unlike many other clubs. The community is also strongly egalitarian, unlike the Harley-Davison community, which has an official hierarchy beside an informal one with all manner of gradations and types of fervour towards the brand object, all of which have more than a little flavour of "one-upmanship", as one set of members establishes a subculture with values which they feel confers a superiority on them over other H-D owners. Mini community members characterise each other and themselves largely if not solely by the strength of their devotion to the vehicle, without such subgroupings distracting them from their main purpose.

This research has shown that the Mini has remained popular enough to support a relaunch decades later partly by design and partly by accident. The marketers astutely perceived and tapped into a growing youth culture, but it seems to have been marketing "tricks", such as designer Issigonis driving Queen Elizabeth II around Windsor in one, which made the car a real sensation. Successive upgrades such as the Mini Cooper kept the car abreast of current trends and sustained the community's interest.

This study has gone further to explore the deeper significance of the existence of such communities. In doing so it has utilised the emerging recognition that products are symbolic of certain roles that people assign to themselves or that society assigns to them. This school of "symbolic interactionism" concentrates on the interrelationships between people, and between people and products (in the case of consumption communities), rather than on fixed social structures. Levy's (1959, p.68) observation that "people buy things not only for what they can do, but also for what they mean" can be regarded as the core assumption which has led to the exploration of the role of symbolic interactionism in consumer society. Perhaps the primary means by which this role is played out

is through the “extended self” proposed by Belk (1988), a concept which has provided the stimulus for much succeeding work in consumer research.

The extended self is a concept in which a person’s self-image is identified with their possessions, using the term in a wide sense to include such objects as family and body parts. Thus, body modification and kinship might be brought into play in a person’s conscious or subconscious determination of their self-construct. Of especial importance to this study is the extension of our selves by the use of tools. This implies a utilitarian purpose – in this case, the facilitation of travel. But immediately the aspect of style comes into play: how do we travel? in what kind of conveyance? These considerations in turn raise issues related to self-image and self-construct, and of the psychological rather than the physical necessity of ensuring that one’s surroundings match and reinforce this image.

With regard to the social sphere, it should be noted in passing that the conceptual framework proposed in this research is better able to handle this sphere than the previous ones by such researchers as Schouten and McAlexander (1995), which are centred on the individual consumer.) Consumption, being largely a cultural process, must be examined in a social context; it is not enough to observe individual responses. The present study has used this field of enquiry in its exploration of the Mini/BMW MINI community. Consumption communities can only come into being when a critical mass of people feel similarly enough and strongly enough about something and have the means to communicate their feelings to others. The feelings raised by the Mini in the years and decades following 1959 had both individual and social components, and these were inextricably mixed. People reacted, for example, to the marketer’s emphasis on “fun” on an individual and a communal level.

The present research has contributed greatly to the field of consumer studies, in particular in the area of brand communities. Previous studies, whether postmodern or older, have implicitly used the individual as the paradigmatic

object of research, and examined his or her connections with their marketing environments. These two research foci have hitherto prevented this branch of consumer studies from exploring all the ramifications of the way consumers behave.

The present research has sought to remedy both of these deficiencies. Firstly, by subjecting the community as a whole, as well as its individual components, to study, it has enabled researchers to examine the reciprocal nature of the consumer/community relationship by flexibly moving between the two without the distortion attendant on a focus on one of these constituents at the expense of the other. The impact of communal cultures and subcultures has been considered alongside an exploration of the psychology that individuals bring to such communities, and which shapes them. It has thus made possible the study of the individual simultaneously with his or her communal environment. This holistic approach has also been used to locate each element in its wider context, as epitomised in the proposed conceptual framework. Each constituent is part of a larger entity, either as a whole or in part, up to the overarching context of society in its entirety. Thus, the community encompasses its members, and is part of a general social culture. The flexibility of the conceptual framework is such that elements can be inserted or removed as attention is drawn to them. For example, the element of a subculture can be interposed between a community and society. The relationships can also be altered, as in the individual, who can be shown as intersecting with the community and with the society outside the community. This flexibility means that equal attention can be paid to any relationship or group of relationships, without the distortion inherent in a conceptual framework which gives primacy to one of the elements in the equation. The present research has therefore provided a framework for the holistic study of consumption communities, in which each part is seen in its proper relationship to all the others.

The proposed conceptual framework fits in well with the interpretivist methodology employed in this research, which stresses the impossibility of

studying people outside their social context – or, more accurately, in the light of the conceptual framework, contexts. Individuals exist and behave within several wholly or partly overlapping contexts. Their behaviours are to a large extent inseparable from these contexts, a fact which this conceptual framework fully recognises. It is thus an ideal vehicle with which to explore any facet consumer research employing a qualitative methodology. It aids in discovering “meaning rather than frequency” (Van, 1983, p.12), which is after all the whole purpose of this research. The era when meaning could be discovered by simple quantification is past; psychological, social and cultural reality is far too complex for this, a fact which accounts for the rise of quantitative methods of social analysis, and which presents the need for a comprehensive yet flexible conceptual framework by which to study social phenomena in whole or in part.

### **8.3 Limitations of the Research**

It is vital for the researcher to empathise as strongly as possible with the members of the Mini community who were the research subjects, in order to properly understand their psychology and motivation. In pursuit of this endeavour the researcher went to the lengths of purchasing a Mini. It should be noted that, as a conscious choice expressing a preference over the BMW MINI, this purchase demonstrates the depth of commitment and the involvement with the community. However, such identification for the purposes of research has its drawbacks: it might inhibit one’s clear-sightedness in the data gathering and analysis stages. Such dangers are often present in qualitative research, and it is a task not so much to avoid them as to retain a sense of detachment during the two stages just mentioned, so that the researcher can glean the maximum amount of useful information while being able to evaluate it dispassionately.

As detailed in this study, the BMW MINI has occasioned a wave of protests by members of the traditional Mini community who see it as an impostor, prompting a response from adherents of the BMW vehicle. The inevitable

excesses involved in these relatively vociferous exchanges might again have skewed the accuracy of the information supplied to me during the information gathering stage, and thus have affected the results.

The present research is also culturally, and to a certain extent geographically, limited. This is because the research on what is a subject common to most industrialised nations was carried out in one country, the UK. Netnographic research method to a certain extent enabled me to investigate Mini communities in other locations such as the US, but the language barrier prevented me from a more than cursory glance at the Mini phenomenon in such countries as Japan and Italy. Thus, while the results may be a full representation of the state of affairs in the UK, it does not represent a truly global vision. The proposed conceptual framework in particular might be less relevant to a Far Eastern culture, for example, than it is to a Western European one.

#### **8.4 Recommendations for the Future Research**

The present study has focused on the classic Mini and its community, without delving very deeply into the BMW MINI community, such as it is. Further research should be done in order to tease out the relationships between the two subcultures in order to determine more precisely and fully the extent to which they interact with each other, and more specifically their exact nature, which will help determine whether the present research is correct or not in concluding that they are subcultures within one community, rather than constituting two separate identities.

Future research should explore the full depth of study offered by the international Mini community. The brand's strong following in the US, Italy and Japan presents a fruitful field of study. This will enable the conceptual framework to be modified in the light of intercultural studies, and a truly universal framework relating to the study of the brand-community dyad constructed.



In this respect it is noteworthy that many of the case studies presented in the literature are not truly international. The H-D community, for example, is largely confined to the US. The Mini is thus an excellent springboard for an examination of how a brand and its community relate to each other worldwide, a study which may shed light on the others that have examined this topic.

Another closely related field of study is that of the Innocenti Mini, an Italian-style Mini which had great success in Italy and indeed throughout Europe in the decades following the 1960s. This was no doubt boosted by the film *The Italian Job*. In any event, it would appear that the classic Mini, the Innocenti Mini and the BMW MINI form a constellation of strongly linked brands and communities which would repay close and careful study in order further to elucidate the nature and extent of their interrelationships and the light this would throw on the psychologies of consumers, both individually and in various groupings.

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## APPENDICES

## Appendix 1

Table of consumer culture theory research and their corresponding theoretical interests.

Context	Author (s)	Points of theoretical contribution
Working class adoption of business education	Allen 2002	A sociological theory of tacit consumer choice
Possessions in a less developed country (Niger)	Arnould 1989	A cultural theorization of preference formation and the diffusion of innovations
White water river rafting	Arnould and Price	Defining extended leisure service encounters and its implications for customer satisfaction
Consumer intergenerational transfer of possessions	Curasi, Price and Arnould 2004; Price, Arnould and Curasi 2000	Individual and familial identity formation processes; the dynamic of inalienable wealth
Gift giving and Gift reception	Belk and Coon 1993; Fischer and Arnold 1990; Joy 2001; Otnes, Lowrey, and Kim 1993; Ruth, Otnes, and Brunel 1999; Sherry 1983; Wooten 2000	Formation and structuration of a moral economy; age and gender role definition and enactment in consumer society
Reenactments of Mountain Men rendezvous	Belk and Costa 1998	Consumer fantasy, the ritual impulse, and the reformation of social role via enactment of consumer fantasies
Swap meets and flea markets	Belk, Sherry and Wallendorf 1988; Sherry 1990	Consumer relationships to market structures; sociocultural dynamics of exchange relationships
Death rituals in Ghana	Bonsu and Belk 2003	Postmortem consumer identity work

APPENDICES

Sky diving	Celsi, Rose, and Leigh 1993	A dynamic model of consumer motivations and cultural account of consumer risk taking behaviours
Romanian women's use of cosmetics	Coulter, Proce and Feick 2003	Rethinking the origin and development of brand knowledge and involvement.
Consumers who lost money in Chondra Za mail order scam	Deighton and Grayson 1995	An empirically based theorization of consumer self-seduction
Five women and their favourite brands	Fournier 1998	A social relationship model if consumer-brand relationships
Thanksgiving dinners; ordinary family dinners	Heisley and Levy 1991; Wallendorf and Arnould 1991	Cultural rituals; construction, maintenance, and negotiation of family relationships through consumption
Homeless women	Hill 1991; Hill and Stamey	Materialism and self identity in cases of involuntary disposition
Drugs addiction experience	Hirshman 1992	Toward a theory of the lived experience of compulsive consumption behaviour
Baseball spectatorship	Holt 1995	A model o consumption practices
Consumer lifestyle choices in a small town/ rural setting	Holt 1997	The role of consumption practices in sustaining symbolic boundaries between social groups, as formed by complex intersection of sociological collectivities
Aesthetic experiences of museum patrons	Joy and Sherry 2003	A post Cartesian theory of embodied consumer experiences
Urban gay men	Kates 2002	Oppositional consumption practices and the confesting of gender distinction
Star Trek fans	Kozinets 2001	Theorizing how consumer =s find Utopian meaning in the commercialized sphere of popular culture and explicating the ideological constitution of fandom

## Appendix 2

Questionnaire.

Interviewer name: **James**, BSc M.S.c.

*Doctoral Researcher*

*Department of Marketing*

*Tel ++ (0) 2577510 Ext 7510*

*Email: kbeh@dmu.ac.uk*

Interviewee name:

Age:

Occupation:

Venue:

Time start:

Time end:

### About Mini

1. First, could you tell about the Mini Car you own?
  - Which model do you drive?
  - What is your age at that time?
2. Did you purchase the car yourself?
  - What motivated you? For what reasons?
  - Why did you choose Mini instead of others cars?
  - Are any of your family members driving Mini as well?
3. How did you know or come across the Mini car?
  - How did it all start?
4. Describe your feelings when you first drive it?
  - Excited? Confidence?
  - Tell me how do you feel?
5. Have you got any experiences driving your Mini worth remembering?
  - Could you share it with me?

## **Negotiations of Brand Meaning**

1. Can you tell me what does the brand Mini mean to you?
  - What does the Mini mean to you?
  - What does it symbolises? Anything in particular?
  - Historical values? Shared experiences? British made car? Classic? Unique?
  
2. What do you think about the Mini advertisement?
  - Did you watch the Italian job? What do you think about the Mini there?
  
3. Is Mini your ideal car?
  - Do you think you have committed into Mini?
  - So, this commitment is it like fidelity?
  
4. What do you think other people think about your Mini?
  - Has anybody ever commented anything about your Mini?
  - What do they say or think?
  
5. What is so unique about your car?
  - Anything so special?
  
6. What do you think about other people's Mini?

## **Brand community**

- Have you got friends who also drive Mini car?
1. Do you join any Mini club/ organisation?
    - British Mini club or anything likes that?
    - What about Mini events?

2. Tell me about your participation in today rally?
  - Do you normally go with your friends?
  - What sort of experiences you are had with this event?
  - What do you do normally?
  - How often do you attend those events?
3. What is your feeling?
4. Do you know the people around here?
  - How do you get to know them?
5. Do you feel you are like building a Mini community?
6. Have you ever provide help or assistance to any Mini before?
7. Do you feel that you have formed the relationship with the vehicle?  
Could you explain how this happened?

### **Collecting**

1. Being a Mini enthusiast, do you collect Mini related item such as a Miniature version car model, Mini car T-shirt?
2. Please tell me your collecting experience?
  - Do you swap or trade each other?
3. Describe your feeling when you first started collecting them?
4. Who do you especially show your collection to?

5. Do you think that collecting Mini collectable helps to reinforce the relationship among the Mini community members?

### **Oppositional Brand Loyalty/ Legitimacy (Status Hierarchies)**

1. What do you think about other people who drive a different car?
2. Mini is now owned by BMW, do you have any comment on it?
  - Do you think there are any differences?
  - Do you regard them as “True Mini fan”?
  - Are there any differences?
  - How do you differentiate between them?
  - Will you accept them as part of your community?

### **Rituals and Traditions**

1. Do you do anything in particular when you see people driving Mini?
2. Do you think you will continue driving Mini?
3. Did you experience change the way you think about your Mini?

### Appendix 3

Questionnaire posted on Mini community website.

### 3rd Party Mini SURVEY FORM

Kokhooi BEH, James BSc M.Sc.

Doctoral Researcher  
Department of Marketing  
De Montfort University

Tel (44) 0116- 2556813 Ext6813

Email: [kbehdmu.ac.uk](mailto:kbehdmu.ac.uk) | <http://www.dmu.ac.uk>

What is the objective of the research?

=====

The objective of this research is to investigate and explore the Mini car community from the point of view of Mini owners and fans. Your input will contribute to the findings of my research and the successful write-up of my thesis.

How am I going to use your answer?

=====

All the answer will be treated confidentially and anonymously. Your answers are solely used for my own research purposes and for the write-up of my thesis. None of your answers will be issued to any third party and I would like to stress that this research is not funded by any organisations and therefore will not be used for any commercial or business-related purposes.

A little note for everyone

=====

This is a semi-structured qualitative questionnaire, and therefore any descriptive or narrative stories about your Mini car are very welcome. Please feel free to write as much as you like and tell me about your feelings and thoughts as you answer those questions. THANKS FOR YOUR HELP!

\*\*\*\*\*

QUESTIONNAIRE

=====

**My Name:**

**My Email Address:**

1. First, could you tell me about the Mini Car you own?

2. Did you purchase the car yourself?

YES  NO

3. How did you know or come across the Mini car?

4. Are any of your family members drives Mini cars as well?

YES  NO

5. Describe your feelings when you first drive it?



An empty text input field with a light beige background and a thin border. On the right side, there are three vertically stacked buttons: a small square with an upward arrow, a square with a downward arrow, and a square with a downward arrow. On the bottom left, there are two square buttons with left-pointing arrows, and on the bottom right, there are two square buttons with right-pointing arrows.

6. Have you got any experiences driving your Mini worth remembering?

An empty text input field with a light beige background and a thin border. On the right side, there are three vertically stacked buttons: a small square with an upward arrow, a square with a downward arrow, and a square with a downward arrow. On the bottom left, there are two square buttons with left-pointing arrows, and on the bottom right, there are two square buttons with right-pointing arrows.

7. Can you tell me what does the brand Mini mean to you?

An empty text input field with a light beige background and a thin border. On the right side, there are three vertically stacked buttons: a small square with an upward arrow, a square with a downward arrow, and a square with a downward arrow. On the bottom left, there are two square buttons with left-pointing arrows, and on the bottom right, there are two square buttons with right-pointing arrows.

8. What do you think about the Mini car itself?

An empty text input field with a light beige background and a thin border. On the right side, there are three vertically stacked buttons: a small square with an upward arrow, a square with a downward arrow, and a square with a downward arrow. On the bottom left, there are two square buttons with left-pointing arrows, and on the bottom right, there are two square buttons with right-pointing arrows.

9. What do you think other people think about your Mini?

An empty text input field with a light beige background and a thin border. On the right side, there are three vertically stacked buttons: a small square with an upward arrow, a square with a downward arrow, and a square with a downward arrow. On the bottom left, there are two square buttons with left-pointing arrows, and on the bottom right, there are two square buttons with right-pointing arrows.

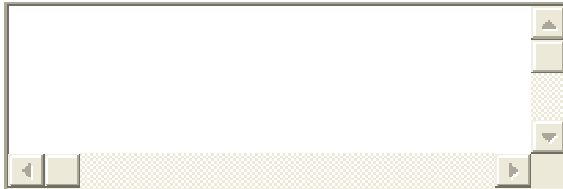
10. What do you think about other people's Mini?

An empty text input field with a light beige background and a thin border. On the right side, there are three vertically stacked buttons: a small square with an upward arrow, a square with a downward arrow, and a square with a downward arrow. On the bottom left, there are two square buttons with left-pointing arrows, and on the bottom right, there are two square buttons with right-pointing arrows.

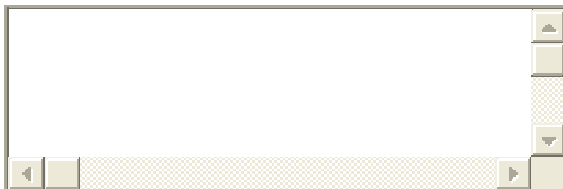
10a. Being a mini enthusiast, do you also collect mini related items such as miniature version car models, Mini car event T-shirts and etc?

YES  NO

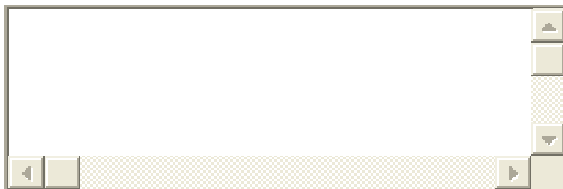
10b. Please tell me your collecting experiences? (for example, swapping or trading among other mini collectors)



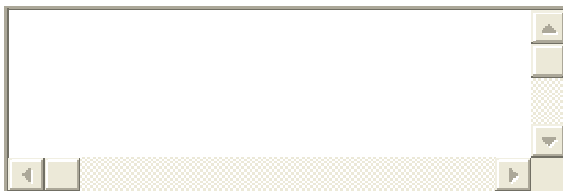
10c. Do you share any of your collecting experiences with other mini collectors?



10d. Describe your feelings when you first started collecting them?



10e. Who do you especially show your collections to?



10f. Do you think that collecting Mini collectables helps to reinforce the relationships among the Mini community members and create stronger rapport among them?

An empty text input field with a light beige background and a thin border. It features a vertical scrollbar on the right side and a horizontal scrollbar at the bottom.

11. Do you join any Mini club/ organisation?

YES  NO

12. If yes, tell me about your participation in the club/events/meetings?

An empty text input field with a light beige background and a thin border. It features a vertical scrollbar on the right side and a horizontal scrollbar at the bottom.

13. What do you think about your Mini club website?

An empty text input field with a light beige background and a thin border. It features a vertical scrollbar on the right side and a horizontal scrollbar at the bottom.

14. How do you feel about the club/events/ meetings?

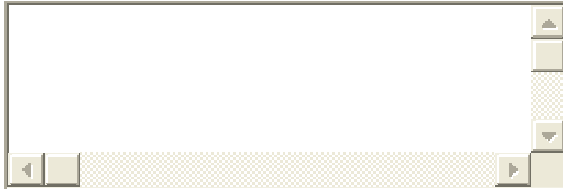
An empty text input field with a light beige background and a thin border. It features a vertical scrollbar on the right side and a horizontal scrollbar at the bottom.

15. What do you think about other people who drive a different car, for example Volkswagen

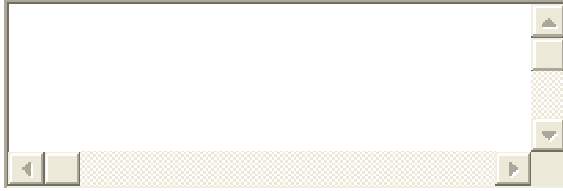
Beatle, a Saab, Jaguar etc.?

An empty text input field with a light beige background and a thin border. It features a vertical scrollbar on the right side and a horizontal scrollbar at the bottom.

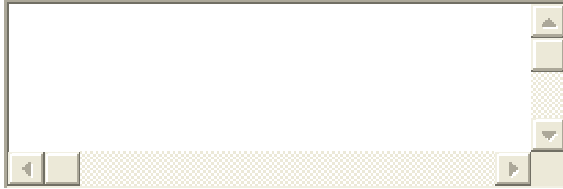
16. What about people who drive a different version / model of Mini?

An empty text input box with a light beige background and a thin black border. It features a vertical scrollbar on the right side and a horizontal scrollbar at the bottom, both with standard arrow and track icons.

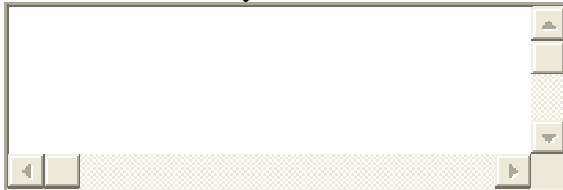
17. Are there any sorts of differentiation between a "true" Mini fan from a non-Mini member?

An empty text input box with a light beige background and a thin black border. It features a vertical scrollbar on the right side and a horizontal scrollbar at the bottom, both with standard arrow and track icons.

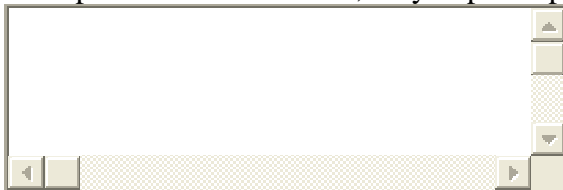
18. Do you do anything in particular when you see people driving a Mini?

An empty text input box with a light beige background and a thin black border. It features a vertical scrollbar on the right side and a horizontal scrollbar at the bottom, both with standard arrow and track icons.

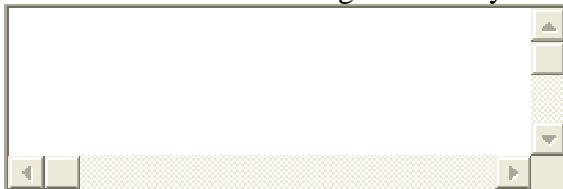
19. How much do you know about the Mini car history?

An empty text input box with a light beige background and a thin black border. It features a vertical scrollbar on the right side and a horizontal scrollbar at the bottom, both with standard arrow and track icons.

20. Apart from Mini events, do you participate or socialise with other Mini drivers?

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21. What does the Mini logo mean to you?

An empty text input box with a light beige background and a thin black border. It features a vertical scrollbar on the right side and a horizontal scrollbar at the bottom, both with standard arrow and track icons.

22. How do you feel about the advertisement of new Mini now compared to last time?

An empty text input field with a light beige background and a thin border. On the right side, there are three vertically stacked buttons: a small square with an upward arrow, a square with a downward arrow, and a square with a downward arrow. On the bottom left, there are two square buttons with left-pointing arrows, and on the bottom right, there are two square buttons with right-pointing arrows.

23. Mini car is now owned by BMW, what do you think about that?

An empty text input field with a light beige background and a thin border. On the right side, there are three vertically stacked buttons: a small square with an upward arrow, a square with a downward arrow, and a square with a downward arrow. On the bottom left, there are two square buttons with left-pointing arrows, and on the bottom right, there are two square buttons with right-pointing arrows.

24. What do you think about the New Mini by BMW?

An empty text input field with a light beige background and a thin border. On the right side, there are three vertically stacked buttons: a small square with an upward arrow, a square with a downward arrow, and a square with a downward arrow. On the bottom left, there are two square buttons with left-pointing arrows, and on the bottom right, there are two square buttons with right-pointing arrows.

25. Have you ever provide help/ assistance to any Mini driver before?

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26. Did your experience change the way you think about Mini car?

An empty text input field with a light beige background and a thin border. On the right side, there are three vertically stacked buttons: a small square with an upward arrow, a square with a downward arrow, and a square with a downward arrow. On the bottom left, there are two square buttons with left-pointing arrows, and on the bottom right, there are two square buttons with right-pointing arrows.

27. If you would like to write more about your Mini car, please do so here?

An empty text input field with a light beige background and a thin border. On the right side, there are three vertically stacked buttons: a small square with an upward arrow, a square with a downward arrow, and a square with a downward arrow. On the bottom left, there are two square buttons with left-pointing arrows, and on the bottom right, there are two square buttons with right-pointing arrows.

**Please note that the IME webmaster has placed this form on the site to assist James. The IME team does not warrant the end use of the information you submit here, if you have any doubts either confirm with James or do not provide the information**

NO FIELDS ARE COMPULSORY don't leave an email address if you don't want to!!!!

James provided us with this statement:

Dear John,

Thank you for your e-mail. Here I would like to confirm with you that the information will not be used by, transmitted to, or stored by any employee, agent or other 3rd party linked with or acting on behalf of BMW Group including Mini or any other division subsidiary or part of BMW AG or any other of its global operations

If you still have any other queries, please don't hesitate to let me know.

Thank you,

James

Kokhooi BEH, James BSc M.Sc.

Doctoral Researcher

Department of Marketing

Tel (44) 0116- 2556813 Ext6813

Email: [kbehdmu.ac.uk](mailto:kbehdmu.ac.uk)

OR  FORM

**Information recorded about your feedback form:**

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To Source Used Spares visit:

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[www.minispares.org.uk](http://www.minispares.org.uk) - The *ULTIMATE* on-line Mini Club

**Appendix 4**

Photographic recorded examples.

















