‘Pop Culture’: An Exploratory Study of the Consumer-Firm Relationship in the Popchips Facebook Community

by

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ABSTRACT

‘POP CULTURE’: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF THE CONSUMER-FIRM RELATIONSHIP IN THE POPCHIPS FACEBOOK COMMUNITY

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The importance of consumers’ active engagement in a firm’s online brand community in social network sites has received increasing attention from both academia and industry. The study applied a Netnography of the official Popchips Facebook community to provide a baseline understanding of the consumer-firm relationship in this type of environment. Unlike more traditional studies that focus on brand communities for niche or luxury brands, this study dealt with a convenience product called Popchips. It is also one of the brands that utilized a strong social media strategy to communicate to its consumers. Findings suggested four classifications of a fan signifying their relationships with the company: ‘pending relationship status’, ‘it’s complicated’, ‘in a relationship’ and ‘married’. This study provides useful managerial implications for marketers who want to tap into this new marketing communication tool and medium, for the purpose of building stronger relationships with their consumers.
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Recent technology has heralded a change in the way consumers interact with one another and with marketers. Firms are deepening their connections to consumers, through engaging conversations, rather than trying to control the discussions about their own product (Martinez, 2010). The concept of brand community introduced more than a decade ago by Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001, provided support for the assumption that communities built around specific brands actualize brands as social objects, thus bonding consumers to the brand and ultimately leading them to brand loyalty and purchasing behaviour. More recently, online brand communities have allowed firms to engage in timely and direct-end consumer contact (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010).

Tools and strategies for communicating with customers have changed remarkably with the phenomenon known as social media - now both marketers and consumers can create brand communities through their respective social networking sites. Despite the strong potential of online brand communities as an effective brand building tool for marketers, there has been very little research exploring how marketers build relationships with their consumers in marketer-generated brand communities created on a social network site (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2010; Sung, Kim, Kwon & Moon, 2010). These are important issues to understand in that they may translate into stronger firm-consumer relationships leading to greater consumer loyalty. A growing interest in consumers’ increasingly active engagement in online social technologies such as blogs, or social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter (in which they discuss products and services), in particular, make this topic even more relevant.
1.1 Research Objectives and Research Context

The purpose of this research was to extend the consumer-firm relationship marketing theory of a brand community within a social networking context for a convenience, ‘healthy option’ product. To date there have been studies on brand communities formed around luxury or niche brands. This study will extend these understandings to the area of convenience products. This study will also provide an exploratory understanding of the current trend of marketer-generated online brand communities as a communication tool for building consumer-firm relationships via a social network site. The following research questions will be raised:

1. Do consumers of a convenience product in a social media context represent a different type of brand community?
2. Is the relationship between the consumer and the firm in this type of online brand community different?
3. How can we better understand the dialogue between the consumer and the marketer which helps form the consumer-firm relationship?

The social networking site specifically researched is Facebook. Facebook has become one of the world’s most visited websites and as of September 2011, has registered more than 750 million users (Orekovic, 2011). It is expected to hit the one billion user mark in August 2012 (Lyons, 2012). Moreover, members of Facebook can join virtual online brand groups based on similar interests (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007).

The brand chosen for the study is the Popchips brand. Popchips is a privately owned company launched in 2007. The product is an all-natural popped chips snack, offering a choice of nine different flavours. In 2010, Advertising Age selected Popchips as one of America’s
hottest brands (Parekh, 2010). They earned a lot of success using a hands-on approach for directing a personalized brand strategy and an engaging social media strategy. The brand also emphasizes its health benefit, describing the product as “never fried, never baked...all-natural, healthier...no fake flavours, no preservatives...0g trans fat, 0g saturated fat, fewer calories, etc.” (Popchips, 2011). In fact, one of its slogans is “less than half the fat of fried chips”.

The selected product category is of particular interest since not only does academic literature lack research on brand communities formed around convenience products, but the University of Guelph prides itself in being a global leader in the study of food and beverage. Recent research at the University examined the perceptions of consumers’ snacking (Nasser et al., 2011). Respondents reported that potato chips were one of their most popular snacks. More importantly, 84 per cent of respondents reported they would select a trans fat-free option over a product with trans fat, albeit, none of the respondents indicated that trans fat is an ingredient they look for on a food label. It is hoped that the current study will provide further insight into the perceptions that consumers have about “low fat” food products.

1.2 Research Methodology

The study utilized a qualitative research method known as netnography. This methodology was formally introduced, explained and described in the *Journal of Marketing Research* by the creator, Robert Kozinets (2002). It is described as “a specialized form of ethnography adapted to the unique computer-mediated contingencies of today’s social worlds” (Kozinets, 2010, p. 1). The methodology was developed specifically to study a type of online environment such as a social networking site. The method is both unobtrusive and
naturalistic. It is economically viable and more time-saving than other conventional techniques. It also offers greater flexibility as it can include information in threads and posts, videos, and photographs.

In brief, the consumers’ and marketers’ interactions within the Popchips Facebook fan page community were analyzed through repeated browsing and participant online observation by the researcher, and online compilations of text, photos and videos. The data were analyzed using analytical coding and hermeneutic interpretation (Kozinets, 2010). Qualitative data analysis software, NVivo, was applied.

1.3 The Popchips Company

The idea for Popchips started when entrepreneur Keith Belling found himself constantly buying unhealthy chips to snack on and feeling guilty about it afterward (Parekh, 2010). He teamed up with a manufacturing firm that could pop starchy foods, such as potatoes, using heat and pressure. Popchips were produced using this method, creating a new healthy food snack option. This connects well with consumers who are interested in healthy snack foods.

Popchips operates in a mass-market, distributing in the United States, Canada, and more recently, the United Kingdom. There are currently 51 people employed at the company. Its competition is heavy, competing with big brands in the low calorie, healthy snack market such as Frito-Lay and Sensible Portions (Petrecca, 2010). In 2011, the business made 45.7 million in annual revenue (Forbes, 2011). They had a 638 percent revenue change from 2008 to 2010 writes Forbes magazine (2011). From the outset, the company’s business activities have been strongly oriented toward innovative use of social media. At Popchips, it is generally believed
that, it can best distinguish itself from competitors by signaling its fun personality with ad campaigns like “love without the handles”.

Early on Belling answered every single email himself, emanating his enthusiastic and going-above-and-beyond attitude (Petrecca, 2010). The Popchips Facebook fan page is managed much the same. It manages its relationships with consumers by directly responding to questions and comments posted by fans, in a funny and personal way with responses such as, “we look forward to a long, delicious relationship together” and addressing the fan by name. They do this in a very quick and timely fashion. In addition, marketers post daily content on the fan page that is exciting, humorous, and interactive. Contests and games are very popular with the company. Most of the topics are oriented around healthy lifestyles, sports, celebrities and music. Some of the contests that have taken place on the fan page are for a trip to meet Bruno Mars, Snackers of the Week, creating a tagline to win a month’s supply of a new flavour, a 3-night stay in Las Vegas and a $1 coupon towards a bag of Popchips just for entering.

Success of Popchips Inc in utilizing social media and innovative marketing campaigns is well known (Vranica, 2010). Its value as a healthy snack has also been mentioned in CNN News Room by Julian Michaels, The Today Show by Lisa Lillien, The Oprah Magazine, and ‘best potato chip’ in Men’s Health Magazine to name a few (Popchips, 2010). The use of celebrities in building deeper relationships, through the applications of social media and involvement of celebrities beyond just appearing in advertisements, is one of the current marketing trends. Popchips has utilized this to its full extent. For example, the company has appointed Hollywood actor Ashton Kutcher, who has 5 million followers on Twitter, to over see its social marketing efforts (Vranica, 2010).
1.4 Overview

The paper will begin with a discussion of previous literature on the subject of brand communities, typologies of brand communities, social media communication, and relationship marketing. Based on these investigations, four research gaps were identified: understanding new forms of brand community, understanding the unique nature of Facebook, and the ‘deepening’ of the consumer-firm relationship. And finally, focusing on a brand community formed around a convenience product, which to date has not been heavily investigated.

The next section explains the methodology, detailing the netnographic research steps. First, it presents the preliminary research findings. Then the two types of data collection methods used for the study are discussed: archival and fieldnote data. Next, the paper describes the data analysis process. And finally, the sections deals with the criteria to evaluate the research and research ethics procedures.

The findings section presents the findings of the netnographic research along with examples from the Popchips Facebook Page. The section explains in detail the four classifications of fans in reference to the relationship they have with Popchips. The classifications found were: pending relationship status, it's complicated, in a relationship, and married.

In the final chapter, the discussion, conceptual and managerial contributions, and conclusion and future recommendations are put forward.
CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The literature review begins with an overview of current knowledge: defining and explaining brand communities, and moving on to investigate the developing consumer trends with the emergence of social media. Next, it will discuss how companies’ relationship marketing strategies in brand communities have progressed, followed by a look at the consumer-firm relationship. Finally, after a thorough investigation of the literature, four research gaps have been identified, which will be discussed in the last section of this chapter.

2.1 The Concept of Brand Community

The ‘brand community’ concept was first introduced and discussed by Muniz and O’Guinn (2001). Muniz and O’Guinn (2001) defined a brand community as, “a specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relationships among admirers of a brand” (p. 412). The article presented three constructs that identified the distinguishing features of these brand communities:

1. *Consciousness of kind*: a sense of belonging to an in-group or an intrinsic connection that members feel toward one another;

2. *Evidence of rituals and traditions* that surround the brand; and

3. *A sense of moral responsibility, duty or obligation* to the community and its individual members.

Hence the idea of communities built specifically around a brand - individuals voluntarily related to each other for their admiration surrounding a brand. They shared a commitment to both the brand as well as the community group.
Some studies’ findings have not satisfied Muniz and O’Guinn’s (2001) constructs of a brand community (e.g., a sense of moral responsibility, duty or obligation to the community). For instance, in the community created by the Ferrero company called, *my Nutella The Community* for fans of the mass-produced Nutella product, members were not necessarily interacting with each other (Cova & Pace, 2006). Members discussed their experience with the product in a form of self-expression in front of other members; here the relationship between members and the brand was emphasized rather than the consumer-to-consumer relationship. Ferrero recognized their consumers’ need for recognition based on the notion they described as, “I exist if I am seen” (p. 1100). They did so by creating the *my Nutella The Community*, a site for fans to create personal pages discussing the brand (e.g., narrating their daily life with Nutella) and expressing their relationship with it (e.g., posting a picture of themselves with the product).

The brand community concept was further developed by McAlexander et al. (2002) in their study with Harley Davidson clubs and Jeep communities. Success of these brands were attributed to the experience of ownership and consumption. Types of relationships were identified as those between: the customer and the brand, the customer and the firm, the customer and the product in use, and among fellow customers (Figure 1). Corresponding to this customer-centric model, brand communities strengthen consumer identification with a brand and cultivate the development of a corporate feeling (McAlexander et al., 2002).
McAlexander et al. (2002) contributed to the discussion of the literature of brand relationships, specifically, the relationships consumers have with brands as vital components of their identities. They also proposed that marketers could enhance these relationships by expediting shared customer experiences and in doing so, strengthen the relationships the firm had with its consumers. Companies could do so by creating a platform for the community and as such, the study heightened a firm’s potential for involvement in the community.

Marketers are aware that community groups are loyal followers of brands, as demonstrated by Muniz and O’Guinn (2001) with Saab, Ford and Macintosh; McAlexander et. al (2002) with Jeep and Harley-Davidson; and Belk and Tumbat (2005) with Macintosh. Belk and Tumbat (2005) dubbed the extreme devotion consumers had toward the Mac brand as a notion of a brand ‘cult’. These marketing studies have provided support for the assumption that forming relationships with like-minded consumers who share a similar interest in a particular brand will bond customers to the brand which will ultimately lead them to brand loyalty and purchase behaviour. As loyal members of brand communities, members are motivated to provide
feedback to marketers and emotionally invest in a firm’s welfare (McAlexander et al., 2002). As well, they are less likely to switch to competitors’ brands (McAlexander et al., 2002).

2.2 Online Brand Communities

Virtual communities started growing exponentially in the 1990s with the advent of the World Wide Web (Flavian and Guinaliu, 2005). As stated by Hagel and Armstrong (1997), “The notion of community has been at the heart of the Internet since its inception” (p. 134). They are established around all possible topics and shared characteristics (Hagel and Armstrong, 1997). Consumers use virtual communities to bond with other people who share a passion for the same consumption activity (e.g., drinking coffee) or for a specific brand (e.g., Diet Coke) (De Valck, 2005). Lastly, influential writers agree that relationships in communities in cyberspace are not removed or separate from ‘real life’ (Carter, 2005).

There are several variations to define the term ‘virtual community’. The scholar who was the first to introduce the term, defined a virtual community as “social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace” (Rheingold, 1993, p. 5). In 2004, Dholakia, Bagozzi, and Pearo recognized virtual communities as, “consumer groups of varying sizes that connect and interact online for the purpose of meeting personal and shared goals” (as cited in Dwyer, 2007, p. 65). Rothaermela and Sugiyama (2001) proposed a comprehensive definition for the term, defining a virtual community as “forms through an electronic communication medium and is not bound by space and time” (p. 198).
Another neighboring concept of ‘virtual community’ is ‘virtual communities of consumption’ that reflect around a consumption-relation interest (Kozinets, 1999). These groups are defined by Kozinets (1999) as “affiliative groups whose online interactions are based upon shared enthusiasm for, and knowledge of, a specific consumption activity or related group of activities”.

As online communities began to thrive on the discussion of specific products, scholars introduced the term ‘virtual brand communities’. These were known as “a specialized, non-geographically bound, online community, based on social communications and relationships among a brand’s consumers” (De Valck, 2009, p. 185). This definition may be missing other relationship types: consumer-to-brand, consumer-to-product, and consumer-to-firm. Past articles have studied these other types of relationships (Andersen, 2005; Cova & Pace, 2006; Kozinets, 1999; Thorbjørnsen, Supphellen, Nysveen & Pedersen, 2002; Szmigin, Canning, & Reppel, 2005). Also, in 2008, Sicilia and Palazon wrote that a virtual brand community is “a group of individuals with common interests in a brand [who] communicate with each other electronically in a platform provided by the company which supports the brand” (p. 257). Whereas virtual communities may have been communities structured around forms consumption, interest or help groups, or virtual worlds, ‘virtual brand communities’ are communities formed around a brand. Increasingly, marketers are creating a platform online for the brand community to be used as a marketing tool (McWilliam, 2000).

Most of these definitions suggest a type of ‘social’ community or interaction. Interestingly, Carlson, Suter and Brown (2008) introduced a type of psychological brand community which lacks any social interaction. They defined a psychological brand community
as “an unbound group of brand admirers, who perceive a sense of community with other brand admirers, in absence of social interaction” (p. 284). The authors believed that even without social interaction between members, a member would still perceive a sense of community and be committed to the brand (i.e., promote the brand to others via word-of-mouth).

2.3 Typologies of Online Communities

A brief glimpse into the development of online communities reveals that they are broad and varied. This section looks at some labels and typologies researchers have come up with to distinguish one community type from the other. Communities are distinguished by: self-presentation and consumer participation in brand communities (Schau & Muniz, 2002); the purpose for which they are organized (Hagel & Armstrong, 2005); classifications for a particular type of community - the community of consumption (Kozinets, 1999); the online context in which they occur (Kozinets, 1999) and; how consumers form relationships (Mathwick, 2002). Researchers have also suggested distinctions to the types of communities they studied. Authors have described convenience products as a classification of an online brand community. Finally, another type of classification of a community described in this section is consumer versus firm-generated, where the community is either developed by the consumer or the firm.

To begin, members may incorporate the brand community into their displayed identities. Web pages for the following niche brands: Apple computers, Harley Davidson motorcycles, Saab automobiles, singer Tom Petty, and Xena the television show revealed four distinct relationships between individual identity and community memberships (Schau & Muniz, 2002). They are: (1) subsumed identity, (2) super member, (3) community membership as identity component, and (4)
multiple memberships. The paper provided insight into how consumers affiliated themselves with these communities when they were engaging with them. The intricate interaction among members accentuated the dynamic nature of brand communities, as discussed by Schau and Muniz (2002), these are “not static, marketer controlled alliances, but rather dynamic, consumer-driven and contested” (p. 348). Furthermore, the findings exemplify brands as essential components of consumer identities and reveal that consumers may favour the opportunity to be allowed creative freedom or contribution to brand meanings from marketers.

Virtual communities are structured around a wide range of topics. Hagel and Armstrong’s (1997) typology of virtual communities distinguished them based on how they are organized. These are communities of relationships, communities of interest, communities of fantasy, and communities of transaction. Depending on the type of community, they would fulfill different individuals’ needs and goals. Thus, it would be important to consider a member’s needs and goals in order to sustain a community. Communities of relationships are formed to connect with people that are in the same situation, for example, battling an illness, where the need is for social contact and support.

There are four distinct member types in a consumption community: tourists, minglers, devotees, and insiders (Kozinets, 1999). ‘Tourists’ lack strong social ties with the group and the interest with the consumption activity is superficial or short-lived, and ‘devotees’ have few attachments to the group but exhibit a strong interest in the consumption activity (Figure 2).
Figure 2: Member Types in a Consumption Community  
Source: Kozinets (1999)

These two member types have perhaps low social motivations for joining an online community. Kozinets (1999) discusses the two member types: “the social orientation of such communications are clearly individualistic” (p. 255). This further develops the idea that members may not always join a community with the goal of forming social relationships with other members.

Another way to distinguish a community is to look at the computer-mediated context in which they occur. Kozinets (1999) identified five different types of virtual communities. These are boards, independent web-pages, lists, multi-user dungeons and chat rooms. This was discovered as a way to try to understand how people were interacting, specifically about market-oriented topics. Some of these types were structured around particular products, services or lifestyles, or emails centred around common themes, but they all allowed for consumer-to-consumer exchanges. At this point, marketers were aware of the valuable cultural information
virtual communities could provide them with and studies of this sort followed (Maclaran & Catterall, 2002; Roithaermel & Sugiyama, 2001).

One study has tried to investigate how consumers form relationships online. Mathwick (2002) developed relational profiles which were: *transactional community members, socializers, personal connectors, and lurkers*. What is understood from this study is that some individuals are more likely to produce feedback on products or services and to engage in online dialogue with other group members. Whereas, there are individuals who do not invest in any type of online relationship, rather they are there to observe. Others will participate in special interest communities (much like consumption communities) but primarily they would like to maintain contact with the people they know in the offline world. Though this study was designed before social networking sites became prevalent, the social networking site Facebook is very much designed to connect people with the individuals they know from their offline world.

Some studies looked at brand communities formed around convenience products such as Sicila and Palazon (2008) with Coca-Cola and Cova and Pace (2006) with Nutella (as previously discussed). Sicila and Palazon (2008) explained an online strategy developed by the Coca-Cola company. They discovered that the creation of a virtual community around a convenience product can act as a marketing tool to develop a group of loyal followers around a brand. The virtual community should provide three benefits to participants: *functional, social, and experiential values*. From a ‘functional’ perspective, the community should have a space where members can create content, allowing them to post messages and share information. The ‘social’ value entails having an option for establishing relationships with other members by providing room for posting personal profile information and offering the ability to meet people
with common characteristics. Lastly, there should be an entertainment value such as having an online game available. In a virtual community like this one, consumers may have different motivations and goals, for instance, satisfying social and psychological needs, whereas it was discovered in the Nutella community that their needs were based on putting themselves on display to show the brand’s role in his or her life. Here the members lacked social interaction. The Coca-Cola community was created to target young people and members were not interacting with the company directly. It was developed as a ‘social tool’ for members to build relationships with other members. Thus, depending on the type of medium, consumers may have very different goals and expectations.

Mangold and Faulds’ (2009) article discussed a lot of convenience brands that are using fun and engagement to build connections to their product. Organizations can create communities of like-minded individuals, where members can share the same interests and values. One example is Dove’s beauty products, where they launched a “Campaign for Real Beauty”. Like-minded individuals that came together were those who wanted to enhance girls’ self-esteem by establishing realistic standards of beauty. Another instance is Pepsi in 2008, engaging consumers by enabling them to redeem points for prizes. Similarly, Procter and Gamble’s Gillette brand asked online participants to create a short video showcasing their skill in a ball sport. Users could vote for their favourite videos which gave them a sense of ownership. In these examples, a sense of community is created when there is honest, open communication centred around the brand (Mangold & Faulds, 2009). Additionally, engagement is enhanced when consumers are encouraged to showcase their love for the brand.
Types of communities have been referred to as ‘consumer-generated’ (CGBCs) or ‘marketer-generated brand communities’ (MGBCs). CGBCs are “built and managed in a volunteer manner by enthusiastic consumers who are ardent about information exchange and relationship establishment among peer consumers” (Shang, Chen & Liao, 2006 as cited in Sung et al. 2010, p. 433). MGBCs are “initiated and funded by marketers in order to build relationships with current and potential consumers and to induce productive feedback” (McWilliam, 2000 as cited in Sung et al., 2010, p. 433). Sung et al. (2010) analyzed similarities and differences between consumer-generated brand communities and marketer-generated brand communities. MGBCs showed higher significant levels for joining a community for reasons such as incentive purposes (e.g., coupon and free samples), interpersonal utility (e.g., “to express myself freely”) and brand like-ability (e.g., “because this brand means a lot to me”). In contrast, consumer communities reported entertainment seeking (e.g., “to be entertained”), information seeking (e.g., “to learn how to do things”) and convenience seeking (e.g., “because I can get what I want for less effort”). Other users contributed to firm-hosted user communities for reasons such as wishing to be recognized by the firm (Jeppesen and Frederiksen, 2006). Also, this same study realized that users felt a sense of pride when the firm acknowledged their innovative ideas and knowledge about the product. Other studies have suggested that being able to interact with the company is another key reason why consumers are motivated to be in a firm sponsored community (McMillan, 2002).
2.4 Social Media Communication

Recently consumers have been resisting traditional sources of advertising efforts like television, magazines, newspaper, and radio (Mangold & Faulds, 2009). Therefore, consumers are converting to social media websites when making their product or service purchasing decisions (Lempert, 2006). These sites are perceived to be more trustworthy sources of information (Foux, 2006). The easier it is for consumers to talk to each other - the less control companies have, and thus, it is thought that managers should try to shape these conversations by engaging customers using their own networking platforms (Mangold & Faulds, 2009). Since the inception of social media, there has been an increasing amount of brand communities developed by firms on social networking sites like Facebook (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Sung et al., 2010).

Mangold and Faulds (2009) referred social media to ‘consumer-generated media’. Content is created and circulated by consumers with the purpose of informing each other about products, services, brands, and issues (Blackshaw & Nazzaro, 2004). Types of social media described by Mangold and Faulds (2009) included social networking sites, video, photo and music sharing sites, user- or company-sponsored blogs, commerce communities, podcasts, and so forth. See Table 1 below for a complete list of social media types.
A social network site is defined in previous literature as an online place where a user creates a personal profile to connect with other users that they share a connection with (Boyd & Ellison, 2008; Lanhart & Maddeen, 2007). Social networking sites are otherwise described by Boyd & Ellison (2008) as:

“Web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share

Table 1: List of Social Media Types
Source: Mangold & Faulds (2009)
a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system” (p. 211).

The social networking site Facebook enables users to present themselves in an online profile, viewable to their list of friends. Their personal profiles include types of information such as photos, videos, audio files and micro-blogs (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). The profile page generally includes descriptors such as age, location, education, interests, relationship status, and a photograph of the individual (Boyd & Ellison, 2008).

Sung et al. (2010) described consumers’ social networking site as their “personal hub on the Internet, a place they regularly visit, stay long enough to maintain and update their network, and freely exchange information and experiences with close or remote connections” (p. 433). This is a distinct difference from how virtual communities have previously been described: where participants identify as they choose (Turkle, 1995). Users may identify themselves by a screen name (otherwise known as their pseudonym) which would be the only information available about them (Kozinets, 1999).

Another difference concerns who the individual is connecting with. In a social networking site, it is often not the goal of the individual to connect with strangers, rather these connections are between ‘latent ties’, friends they share an offline connection to (Boyd & Ellison, 2008). This conflicts with virtual communities where the online groups are most likely strangers whom share similar norms of behaviour (Kozinets, 1999). Social networking sites are primarily organized around people and not interests (Boyd & Ellison, 2008). This indicates a change in the organization of online communities. Earlier online communities were structured
around topics and used discussion forums. Social network sites are structured around personal
networks (Boyd & Ellison, 2008).

Users on Facebook can also become ‘fans’ of brands that are visible to their Facebook
friends in their personal profiles. Boyd and Ellison (2008) described ‘fans’ as a way to “identify
others in the system with whom they have a relationship” (p. 213). That being said, becoming a
‘fan’ of a brand may be a way of projecting one’s ‘self-image’ to one’s offline friends. Boyd and
Ellison (2008) also suggested that the public display of an individual’s connections on their page,
is a crucial component of social networking sites. Similarly, Cova and Pace (2006) suggested a
company’s role should facilitate the consumer’s self-exhibition and expression of brands. Thus,
in a social networking context, the research reveals two seemingly distinct differences when
considering these types of communities compared to previously studied online communities:

(1) The information that individuals share on their social network site is personal, and
with whom they share this information with, it is usually people they already know or are
connected to in some way.

(2) Considering the above, becoming a member of a brand community on a social
networking site is part of the information built into their personal online profiles and
therefore the brand may represent how they would like to be seen by others.

Recently, consumers have placed greater value on direct and interactive
communications that regularly occur online. Word-of-mouth discussions between consumers are
seen as the most reliable source of information and ideas about products (Hennig-Thurau et al.,
2004). Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004) looked at what motivated consumers to engage with online
communities. They considered these specific factors: venting negative feelings; concern for
other consumers; self-enhancement; advice-seeking; social benefits; economic benefits; platform assistance; and helping the company. Companies could capitalize on this by designing their communities in a way to encourage these motivations. For example, one of these motives, self-enhancement, is “driven by one’s desire for positive recognition from others” (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004, p. 43). Since online communication is public, the consumer knows that others will read their comments, which may be important to one’s self-concept. For a firm’s community development strategy, they could appeal to this motivation by encouraging users to make comments based on their own opinions.

In Facebook fan based communities, companies can talk to their customers, their customers can talk to them, and their customers can talk to each other. In this type of platform, the firm can shape the discussions and engage customers (Mangold & Faulds, 2009). Members who join these communities are interested in the brand to a certain degree (McLaughlin, 2011). Consumers benefit from joining a Facebook fan page since they receive timely and reliable information. McLaughlin (2011) suggested that the most common goal of these Facebook members was to find out more information about the brand, to have access to special promotions and deals, to support the brand, and to provide feedback to the brand. These results suggest that brand community membership on Facebook is driven by information needs, rather than entertainment or social needs proposed by previous articles on the discussion of online brand communities.

It is important to keep in mind that the format of a Facebook fan page does not encourage social interaction between members. Also, because of the ease of joining a Facebook community (i.e., there is no external search necessary and you can join with simply one click), it is more
likely that consumers with lower levels of loyalty will join (McLauglin, 2011). Past discourse on the topic of brand communities discussed a mass of ‘enthusiastic users’ (Andersen, 2005), however, as the research has shown, this is not so much the case now.

2.5 The Role of Brand Communities in Relationship Marketing

It was in wake of McAlexander et al.’s (2002) article (discussed above), adding the firm-consumer relationship as a type of relationship within a brand community, that other researchers recommended mangers form a brand community around their brands (McWilliam, 2000).

Seemingly, evolving trends in business and contemporary research demand a relationship-oriented approach to marketing. As presented by Ford, Hakansson and Johanson (1986), “success does not come solely from the manipulation of marketing mix elements but by building a long-term relationship between buyer and seller” (as cited by Zineldin & Philipson, 2007, p. 229). Gronroos (2004) believed interaction was the core of the relationship marketing process, thus substituting the product which is the core element of the transaction-oriented paradigm. Studies have suggested that the concept of an online brand community is an effective tool for building and maintaining consumer relationships (McAlexander & Schouten, 2002; Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001).

A review of relationship marketing literature reveals many attempts to define it. Some definitions are:

“The process of co-operating with customers to improve marketing productivity through efficiency and effectiveness” (Paravatiyar, 1996, as cited by Harker, 1999, p.19).

“...the process whereby a firm builds long term alliance with both prospective and current customers so that both buyer and seller work
towards a common set of specified goals” (Evans and Laskin, 1996, as cited by Harker, 1999, p.19).

“...all activities by the firm to build, maintain and develop customer relations” (Hammarkvist, Hakansson, & Mattsson, 1982 as cited by Harker, 1999, p.19).

“Relationship marketing is marketing seen as relationships, networks and interaction” (Gummesson, 1994, as cited by Harker, 1999, p.18).

“refers to all marketing activities directed toward establishing, developing and maintaining successful relational exchanges” (Morgan & Hunt, 1994, p. 22)

Among the definitions are some key consensuses. Most academics agree that relationship marketing involves companies developing close interaction with their consumers (i.e., ‘co-operating’ and ‘interaction’). The benefit of the relationship is mutual, both parties have ‘specified goals’, and it involves participation from both sides. For a firm, relationship marketing is a long-term strategy.

In the brand community literature, there has been much discourse pertaining to the benefits accruing to companies who encourage and support the spread of online brand communities created around their brands. Consumer brand loyalty due to consumers’ involvement in brand communities, as previously discussed, gives reason to why businesses’ interest in virtual communities remains strong. Consequently, from a marketing strategy standpoint, companies have begun turning to online consumers for innovation (Nambisan & Baron, 2007; Schau, Muñiz & Arnould, 2009) and product development ideas (Flavian & Guinaliu, 2005; Pitta & Fowler, 2005; Rowley, Kupiec-Teahan & Leeming, 2007), as well as sources of feedback from their customers (Andreassen & Streukens, 2009; Dwyer, 2007). Some community members act as product evangelists for the brand (Dwyer, 2007), spreading positive
messages to other consumers (Moran & Gossieaux, 2010). Ultimately these communities are seen as ‘assets’ to the firm (Flavian & Guinaliu, 2005) as they are rewarded with raised brand awareness (Flavian and Guinaliu, 2005; Moran & Gossieaux, 2010), higher consumer purchase intention (Gou-Fong, 2011), and increased sales (Campenhausen & Hauke, 2002; Dwyer, 2007; McKinsey, 2001; Rothaermel & Sugiyama, 2001).

There are other pertinent implications for marketers who can develop their own brand communities and engage with community members. Inspiring ‘co-creation’ (Rowley et al., 2007; Schau et al., 2009; Vargo, 2009) is a process involving customers as partners, rather than subjects. Rowley et al.’s (2007) paper commented on how this could allow them to gather consumer experiences associated with their products, opportunities to encourage consumers to interact with each other, offer appropriate support and advice, and introduce new products. Consumer knowledge was too valuable to be disregarded:

“focus on the engagement of customers in organizational learning, innovation and knowledge processes heralds the dawn of a new paradigm of marketing intelligence in which data and information are not simply gathered into databases and distilled to inform management decision making, but rather marketing intelligence is embedded in dynamic co-creation processes” (Rowley et al., 2007, p. 136).

This paper, however, did not consider the role of technology. The community they studied was built on the company’s website. These consumers may be more loyal to the brand since they are, in a way ‘finding’ the company by becoming a member on their website. They could in fact be missing other potential consumers with lower levels of loyalty. To commence a ‘co-creation process’ companies may need to search the websites consumers are visiting most often, such as social networking sites, and build their communities here. As Rheingold (1993)
suggests, ‘pay attention to where people are paying attention’. Using this proposed method, they could find ways to encourage communication with their consumers. For example, create a contest, fulfilling consumers’ entertainment needs, in exchange for an individual’s permission to tell the company about the product or service (Kozinets, 1999).

A central theme of relationship marketing has been involvement (Andersen, 2005; Varey, 2002) and communication (Morgan & Hunt, 1994) with customers. Szmigin et al. (2005) views that dialogue with the consumer can facilitate social bonding. This can be done through consumer engagement which encourages firms to treat their customers as partners, giving up some control of information and decision making (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2000). Brodie, Ilic, Juric, and Hollebeek (2010) conceptualized the consumer engagement process in an online brand community and developed a model (Figure 3). The first part of the model displays that triggers (e.g., need to reduce information search cost) may incline a person to join or participate in an online brand community. Next, the authors identified five consumer engagement sub-processes which were “sharing” (e.g., their own knowledge and experience), “learning” (e.g., acquisition of cognitive competencies for purchasing decisions), “co-developing” (e.g., assisting the organization in the development of products, services, brands or brand meanings), “advocating” (e.g., recommending brands), and “socializing” (e.g., developing attitudes, norms or community language). The research indicated that consumer engagement enhances loyalty, satisfaction, empowerment, connection, emotional bonding, and trust and commitment.
These sub-processes outlined in Figure 3 show that consumers have more control over how brands will be perceived. They can ‘share’ their opinions about products, services and brands to other people. The model also introduces this ‘co-developing’ process and that their customers assist the organization in developing brand meanings. It may indicate that perhaps companies may benefit from creating strategies where they can involve the customers in creating their own meanings for the brand. Cova and Pace (2006) proposed that companies should give control of a brand’s meanings to the fans saying that “producer marketing is replaced by marketing driven by a consumer who is putting himself/herself on display and exhibiting the signs and symbols that consummate the brand’s role in his/her life” (p. 1101). Their definition of a brand community included several aspects of empowerment that the brand fan now held: “A brand community is defined as any group of people that possess a common interest in a specific brand and create a parallel social universe rife with its own myths, values, rituals, vocabulary and
hierarchy” (Cova & Pace, 2006, p. 1089). As Deighton (2002) coined the phrase, “marketers offer brand ideas to the market, but those ideas are accepted, adopted, and made over afresh as part of the lives of those who use them” (p. 52). Similarly, Flavian and Guinaliu (2005) stated that “the virtual community should not be understood as merely a place where people communicate, but rather as a virtual place in which to share experiences and knowledge (e.g., news, software, images, music, videos, etc.)” (p. 407).

Scholars and practitioners of marketing both seem quite unanimous in their view of interactivity as a vital element of successful online marketing (Thorbjornsen et al., 2002). A firm’s community is not so much increasing its membership or engaging between members, as it is about creating an ongoing dialogue between the community members and the company (Rowley et al., 2007). Many consumers enjoy interacting with the marketers behind the brand (Nambison & Baron, 2007). Strategies to strengthen the relationship include customizing messages (i.e., address the individual by name) and rewarding them for their on-going support and interest (McWilliam, 2000).

Researchers have begun to understand how marketers can leverage successful brand communities. They can incorporate three factors into its community marketing efforts which are, \textit{value for customers}, \textit{highly interactive applications} and \textit{community management} (Tikkanen, Hietanen, Henttonen & Rokka, 2009). Creating value for the customer is described, for example, as rewarding them for talking about your brand, then representatives can communicate with customers and develop relationships with them. Finally, the firm should seek ways to try to understand the community they are engaging with.
2.6 The Consumer-Firm Relationship: A Closer Look

The development of consumer-firm relationship has been an important dimension to brand community theory. McAlexander, Schouten, & Koenig’s (2002) research emphasized the value of establishing real relationships between a company and its consumer to strengthen a brand community. Contemporary marketing conveys that consumers in brand communities are not passive recipients of a marketer’s communication but rather active creators in the relationship (Wu & Fang, 2010). In fact, online technologies present opportunities for social expression by the consumer, thus complicating the consumer-marketer relationship and shifting power to the consumer (Kozinets, 1999). Szmigim, Canning and Reppel (2005) propose social bonding results from the opportunities of these technologies - dialogue, shared understanding and meaning-making.

Academic authors have discussed seemingly different perspectives in regards to the consumer-firm relationship in a brand community context. While most agree it is crucial to keep a discussion regarding the product (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2002), ask members for suggestions about the product, satisfy their needs, and encourage interaction among them (Casalo Flavian & Guinaliu, 2007), some suspect marketers should take a less active role. Ouwersloot and Odekerken-Schroder (2008) thought that members were not connected to the organization. It would be more effective for the community sponsor to refrain from too active of a role as it could run the risk of inhibiting discussion if members see the interaction as being solely self-serving (Flavian & Guinaliu, 2005; Pitter & Fowler, 2005). Cova and Pace’s (2006) opinion was to fine-tune brand management that only acknowledged encouraging self-exposure. These conclusions did not inspire companies to have ‘deeper’ relational exchanges.
On the contrary, other authors have suggested that consumers like to interact directly with the people behind that brand as it brings them closer to the product (McAlexander et al., 2002; Nambisan & Baron, 2007). Firms should go beyond relationship marketing and focus on community creation, and do this by creating on-going dialogues between members and the company (Rowley et al., 2007; Tikkanen et al., 2009) and establishing linkages to devoted users of the product (Andersen, 2005). A sense of community is also created when there is honest, and open communication, and consumers are more likely to talk about companies when they feel they know a lot about them (Mangold & Faulds, 2009). Szimigim et al. (2005) described the idea that a conversation in the supplier-customer exchange would created ‘social bonding’, which is the concept of community. These findings see a benefit in firms taking a more active role.

Perhaps the concept of a brand community is changing because of the technologies, such as social media, that allow the role of the firm to have more direct and personal relationships with consumers. Managing relationships can mean customizing messages, addressing individuals by name and easily rewarding individuals for their support (McWilliam, 2000). All these can lead to stronger relationships and provide foundations for online brand communities. Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) recommends firms on social network sites to not be afraid to make mistakes as it’s more about participation, sharing and collaboration. In other words, be interesting, give them reasons to engage and find out what they like to talk about. Mangold and Faulds (2009) say, “products that are fun, intriguing, highly visible, easy to use, and which engage the emotions are more likely to stimulate conversations than products that do not meet these criteria” (p. 363). The qualities fare quite similar to how humans use and interact on a
social network site, in other words, perhaps the brand should possess such ‘human type’ qualities. Finally, Martinez (2010) writes that goals of today’s marketer are “to develop adaptability and responsiveness to change; to facilitate the free exchange of information and ideas; to remove barriers and replace them with interaction and networking; to encourage collaboration and strategic alliances; and to leverage technology and innovation.” (p. 35).

2.7 Research Gap

Based on the above literature review, some research gaps have been identified. First, there are some conflicting views on how the brand community concept has been defined or classified. Muniz and O’Guinn (2001), identified one construct of a brand community as a sense of moral responsibility duty or obligation to the community and its individual members, however, five years later Cova and Pace (2006) discovered that this construct may not always be satisfied. They found that members were not necessarily interacting with each other. In 2008, Carlson et al. introduced a type of psychological brand community which lacks any social interaction. This idea meant that consumers would perceive a sense of community even though they were not interacting with other members. This would not satisfy Muniz and O’Guinn’s (2001) original constructs as well. Even descriptions of typologies of brand communities, like Mathwick’s (2002) investigation of how consumers form online relationships, showed a different outlook. She found that one type of member known as lurkers are individuals who do not invest in any type of relationships but rather they are there to observe. Given these examples, one can see that it may not always be a brand community member’s goal to build social relationships.
with other like-minded consumers. Especially when considering the unique context of a Facebook brand community, in which individuals are connected to their offline friends.

There are some unique characteristics of Facebook that may be important to consider since this study is trying to understand a brand community within Facebook. To begin, the literature described a person’s Facebook profile page as a ‘personal hub’, which includes descriptors such as age, location, and education, as well as their fan pages. Boyd and Ellison (2008) explained that the public display of an individual’s connections on their page, meaning their fan pages, is a crucial component of social networking sites. Furthermore, Boyd and Ellison (2008) described ‘fans’ as a way to “identify others in the system with whom they have a relationship” (p. 213). And so, the individual’s Facebook ‘friends’ can see the brands they are connected to. Earlier the paper described this as projecting one’s ‘self-image’ to their friends when they connect to a brand since their friends can see that connection and this may be how they would like to be seen by others. This leads to another difference considering the unique nature of Facebook. Boyd and Ellison (2008) discussed that in a social network site it is not the goal of the individual to connect with strangers. The connections are called ‘latent ties’, friends they share an offline connection to. This might explain why members of a Facebook fan page care less about interacting with other fan members, since they are on Facebook to connect to the friends they already know, thus as we discussed in the first paragraph of this section, the construct of a brand community may be changing and may need to be more heavily explored. To add to that, in a Facebook fan page one is dealing with consumers with lower levels of loyalty (McLaughlin, 2011) since there is no external search necessary and you can join with simply one click. Past discussions on brand communities have almost always described community
members as having very high levels of brand loyalty (Belk & Tumbat, 2005; McAlexander et. al, 2002; Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001).

Next, Hennig-Thurau et al. (2010) suggested that new research “want[s] to know whether marketing activities in online communities affect relationships with existing customers” (p. 319) and to understand “consumer engaging in brand-related activities in an online community, such as...joining a group of brand fans, or supporting other customers in their use of the brand through helpful comments” (p. 320). MGBCs (marketer-generated brand communities) was recently defined by Sung et al. 2010 as “initiated and funded by marketers in order to build relationships with current and potential consumers and to induce productive feedback” (p. 433). The literature review section on relationship marketing found that encouraging communication with consumers through dialogue, engaging and co-creation are key strategies for firms to strengthen relationships with their consumers. When discussing the consumer-firm relationship, it was found that the relationship may go deeper as social media restricts barriers between a fan and the marketer, or fans may even be more attracted to this idea. This study will be the first to explore how marketers are managing their Facebook fan pages, and it is using a company heavily invested in this current trend of developing relationship marketing through dialogue, engaging and co-creation. One example of how Popchips is doing this is allowing co-developing (Brodie et al., 2011). Popchips allows fan members to assist the organization in developing brand meanings. And so, the study will look at the interaction between the firm and the consumers within the Popchips fan page community to better understand how this type of community functions.
Furthermore, to date there has been limited research on brand communities formed around a convenience product. The most studied brand communities have been luxury brands that operate in niche markets. These are considered brands with a rich and lengthy history, which are highly competitive, and require consumers to make major investments in time and money (Cova & Pace, 2006). Examples of these communities are Harley Davidson, Jeep, Saab and Macintosh computers. Albeit, recent research has shown that brand community management might be an option for brands offering convenience products (Sicilia & Palazon, 2008; Cova & Pace, 2006; McWilliam, 2000). The Popchips brand selected for the study is a convenience, ‘healthy’ snack product.

To conclude, based on the literature review, four gaps have been identified. The first is that the existing studies on brand communities have identified conflicting views. Second, is the unique nature of Facebook and given this context, brand community members may have different motivations and goals. Next, is exploring new consumer-firm relationship marketing theory as it has shown to be progressing. Finally, the study has chosen to focus on a convenience product which to date has not been heavily investigated.
CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

This sections begins with a discussion of the research site, the Popchips official Facebook Page. Netnography, the chosen methodology for the research, will be explained. Afterwards, the research collection processes are mentioned. This part is divided into three sub-sections. There are preliminary research, and the two types of data collection methods used for the study: archival and fieldnote data. Next, the paper describes the data analysis process, followed by criteria to evaluate the research and research ethics procedures.

3.1 Research Site

The Popchips official Facebook fan page was created by the firm for fans of the brand (See Appendix A to view the homepage of the Popchips Facebook page). Szmigim et al. (2005) describe fan clubs as “often run by a commercial organization but profit maximization is not the purpose of the community” (p. 487). They regularly offer information, interactive games and/or contests, and chat facilities associated with interests. Types of interaction include: a main homepage (where users can post content), private messaging, micro-blogging, synchronous chat and forums. The identified community meets the following criteria proposed by Kozinets (2010) when selecting a research site:

- *Relevance to the research focus:* Popchips employees communicate with fans;
- *Active (recent and regular communication):* daily postings by the firm and fan members;
- *Interactive (flow of communication between participants):* firm directly responding to fans, fans responding to other fans;
• **Substantial (critical mass of communicators and an energetic feel):** the company posts content that is fun and engaging; and

• **Heterogeneous (number of different participants):** members are of all ages and located in different places around the world.

In the Popchips group, there are approximately 267,000 fans. The company maintains very high control over its fan page and the exchanges that occur within it. For instance, it has the authority to delete a posting deemed inappropriate or fruitless. This firm typically responds directly to any posting (comment, pictures, video, etc.) communicated by the consumer, whether positive or negative. This is one way to understand relationship marketing theory using a firm in constant direct communication with their consumers.

### 3.2 Netnography

Netnography was the method adopted to explore the Popchips community. It is described as a “a specialized form of ethnography adapted to the unique computer-mediated contingencies of today’s social worlds” (Kozinets, 2010, p. 1). It was developed specifically to study the online environment, including social networking sites. Using this method requires an immersive combination of participation and observation (Kozinets, 2002). Thus, it is unobtrusive, naturalistic and observational (Kozinets, 2010). Furthermore, it is easier, quicker and less expensive than traditional ethnographic research (Kozinets, 2002). Since the current study was concerned with naturally occurring interactions of online groups and uses a qualitative research method approach, using this method provided a deeper understanding of the brand community consumer-firm relationship concept. As suggested by Kozinets (2010), a researcher can
experience the online social interactions that members are experiencing if they immerse themselves in that community. Therefore, this type of research is most effective in environments we do not know much about such as Facebook brand fan pages, which have not existed for very long. Since the research was unstructured, it lead to unpredictable and interesting findings.

In other respects, there are weaknesses associated with a netnography methodology. The research findings are not generalizable as it is a narrow focus on a specific online brand community. Also, not all fan members participate, so it may only represent a small number of participants (fan members who are engaged in the site). Others may argue that the findings are subjective to the researcher and therefore invaluable, especially if the research lacks interpretive skill. Xun and Reynolds (2010) identified the following weaknesses. Firstly, there is some ethical sensitivity since there is still much debate about what is private versus public information. The authenticity of the respondents is in question, since their identities are not always clear and they may use pseudonyms. Netnography is an underdeveloped analytical toolkit and is less developed than other system of analytical toolkits. Lastly, they have suggested that the quality of textual discourse may be poor. One assumes the participant is always paying attention when composing messages in the fan group or interpreting others, which may not always be the case.

3.3 Data Collection Processes

During data collection, the necessary data were compiled using multiple data collection stages:

- Repeated online browsing of the Popchips Facebook fan page;
• Participant online observation of the Popchips Facebook fan page for two months (researcher became a fan member), tracking inter-participant exchanges in the fan page’s relevant sections (i.e., site’s ‘Wall’); and

• Online compilation of postings, pictures and videos posted by participants (fan members and company) in the fan page’s different sections.

In doing so, the data collection included capturing two different types of data outlined by Kozinets (2010), they are: *archival* and *fieldnote* data. To begin, preliminary data were collected.

3.3.1 Preliminary Results

During the proposal stage of the research, preliminary data were collected from the Popchips official Facebook fan page community, the proposed research site. Preliminary research identified five themes of discussion occurring between the marketer and the consumer: 1) *expressions of admiration for the brand*, 2) *product inquires/concerns*, 3) *consumption habits*, 4) *co-creators of brand meanings*, and 5) *rituals and traditions (sharing language and a common set of values)* (see Appendix B for more detail). These themes are descriptive in nature; however, during the data analysis of the main study, it went beyond this, looking for patterns in the data and trying to understand why one is seeing what they are seeing. Initially, understanding these themes helped to reveal classifications of consumers in stages of relationships with the company during the data analysis phase.
3.3.2 Archival Data

Archival data is data that were directly copied from the Facebook fan page. This was done by capturing screenshots and loading them into a Pages document (MacBook iWork suite). The total amount of data included 3250 single spaced pages of 12-point font, representing 203,012 words and approximately 10,000 postings as well as significant additional amounts of visual and audiovisual data included in this total. There were approximately 1280 postings from the firm and 9230 from consumers.

The Popchips Facebook fan page began in 2008; in that year only one posting appeared from the company. There were six postings in 2009, and no postings in 2010. Therefore, it appears that the company began their social media strategy in January of 2011. In this month and up until now, Popchips posted on their fan page almost every day. They replied to consumer-initiated postings almost everyday as well. For this study, data were collected from the Facebook page for the months of May 2011 to February 2012, equaling 10 months in total.

3.3.3 Fieldnote Data

In fieldnote data, the researcher records any observations and experiences throughout the research. As a participant observer the researcher immersed them self into the community. They were a fan member and engaged by commenting on the firm’s posting, ‘liking’ postings, ‘sharing’ postings and initiating postings. ‘Liking’ a post can be done by clicking the ‘like’ button under a post posted by the company. ‘Sharing’ meant a post would appear on the user’s profile page, allowing their friends to see the post. Then the researcher posted questions directed
toward the company:

![Facebook screenshot](image)

**Figure 4: Fieldnote data from the Popchips Facebook fan page (first posting)**
(screenshot from the Popchips Facebook page)

*Research notes:* Having never posted something to a company on Facebook before and, at the time, still being quite new to the group, I felt a little uneasy at first about writing a post and I did not know what to expect. I tried to understand how others in the group were posting first. I can definitely speak for those who would rather look around at the fan page without actually engaging.

I posted my question on a Saturday to see how long the company would take to respond. They replied back Monday afternoon which is quite reasonable. At first I was a little confused about the post, “hi, big fan of popchips”; this felt at first like they were mocking me but it also showed that the employer who responded back to me had a sense of humour. I did like how they thanked me.
The second post I made was as follows:

Figure 5: Fieldnote data from the Popchips Facebook fan page (second posting) (screenshot from the Popchips Facebook page)

After the first posting I was more excited about this one. I was looking forward to see what the company would respond back with. I understood why individuals liked to repost to receive the attention of the company. I immediately wanted to post again. The chance of being recognized by the company as a true fan of the brand seemed great. I thought I might even get some free product out of it. I also really liked how the marketer addressed me by name. The response was very quick, less than two hours, which was very impressive.
3.4 Data Analysis

Using a compilation of postings, pictures, and videos directly copied from the Facebook fan site and posted by the participants - both fan members and the company - the data were analyzed using analytical coding and hermeneutic interpretation. The study also used a qualitative, analytical software toolkit called NVivo to help with the analysis.

Initially, the NVivo software was utilized to analyze the data that were downloaded and compiled into data sets. First, the data were organized into each of the 10 separate months and then divided based on whether the posting thread was a firm- or consumer-initiated thread. This produced 20 different files. A word frequency count was done, bringing about a word cloud of the most repeated words (See Appendix C for the word cloud). Words like “I” and “we” or “friends” came up frequently showing trend of how individuals liked to consume the product. The software also helped identify individuals who were constantly interacting. Another interesting discovery, when using the NVivo software, was the amount of interaction centred around various contests. These understandings helped with further analytical data analysis of the study. For instance, discussions centred around contests showed sentiments that lacked a huge passion for the brand. In essence, the software analysis was performed at the beginning of the data analysis process to assist in guiding the research. Given that the data was so large, it helped to reveal some patterns.

The netnography analytic process (Kozinets, 2010) begins with coding: the data collected in the study (postings, pictures or videos) were assigned to particular categories (like ‘product inquires’ or ‘emotions’). Noting was any other reflections in the data, usually placed on the side or in the margins by the researcher. Then the materials were sorted to identify similar sequences
or relationships. This step, called abstracting and comparing, “builds the categorized codes into higher-order, or more general, conceptual constructs, patterns or processes” (p. 119). Next, more data were collected to ‘check’ the identified constructs, patterns and processes. Generalizing tried to explain the consistences in the data. And finally, through these generalizations, a body of knowledge was formed to construct a new theory development. This last step is known as theorizing (See Appendix D for an example of the analytic process).

Through continued repeated online browsing and participant online observation of the Popchips Facebook fan page, as well as, an online compilation and pattern searching of postings, pictures and videos, four classifications of fans’ relationships with the company emerged. This study identified social and cultural tendencies also, through hermeneutic interpretations within the data. In other words, in addition to the analytical coding, the study looked at hermeneutic interpretation. The focus here was on broadening and opening the analysis (Kozinets, 2010). This interpretation sought to be open to possibilities offered by the text as opposed to conveying a predetermined system of meanings (Thompson, 1997). Thompson (1997) discusses stages of a hermeneutical framework in his article: Interpreting Consumers: A Hermeneutical Framework for Deriving Marketing Insights from the Texts of Consumers’ Consumption Stories. The researcher’s immersion in background research relevant to the domain of interest is crucial. For this study, it has been observing the consumers’ experiences in social networking sites and relationships with firms. This illustrated the context of how consumers have been discussing products online and how firms have been trying to engage with them. Consumers may express existential themes (Thompson, 1997) by which “a person’s self identity is negotiated through reflections on consumption experiences, special possessions, and consumer choices” (p. 442).
For example, this was indicated in the Popchips community by a consumer’s preference for ‘healthy products’, portraying a consumer who values a healthy lifestyle and consequently makes healthy-option purchase decisions. The hermeneutic interpretation process was able to identify specific characteristics in the conversations which essentially provided insight into the types of consumers and their connections with the brand and the company.

In the findings section to follow, names of the individuals were changed. Their mini-profile pictures, that appear beside an individual’s name for anything they post, are not displayed in the findings. The date and time of the postings have not been shown since it is very easy to trace back a posting to the individual who posted it using this information. Photos that clearly show individuals’ faces have been blurred. Next, the findings quotations display how many people have ‘liked’ (a way of engaging with the firm in Facebook) the Popchips’ initiated posting. A posting made by Popchips is indicated with ‘[popchips]’ and a posting initiated by a fan member is followed by the individual’s pseudo name. The content posted by a fan does not show the subsequent ‘like’ for ease of comprehension. All of the quoted postings are directly copied; spelling errors and grammar were not changed to give a true representation.

3.5 Criteria to Evaluate the Research

This research involves subjective interpretations made by the researcher and what emerges is contingent on their approach to extracting and interpreting the collected data. Where validity is concerned, the descriptions and explanations of the research should be internally consistent. The research will be evaluated based using Kozinets’ (2010) types of criteria for doing Netnographic research.
‘Coherence’ refers to different sets of interpretations being “free from internal contradictions and presents a unified pattern” (p. 163). In other words, the analysis must ‘hang together’ (identify a pattern) otherwise it may be contradictory and would have to be re-examined. The research will require ‘rigour’, which is adhering to the standards of netnography research. The research will not be restricted to certain pieces of data. All data must be observed and considered. The time period includes content produced on the site within a year, to give a accurate representation. A deep knowledge of the literature has been accumulated, looking at a range of disciplines and journals in ‘culture’ studies, technology and marketing. A few examples of the journals looked at include: *Consumption, Markets & Culture; Journal of Interactive Marketing; Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication; Information, Communication & Society; Journal of Business Research* and; *Journal of Consumer Marketing*. This criteria is described as ‘literacy’. As for ‘groundedness’, the links between the data and theory must be clear and convincing, in this case, relationship marketing theory in a brand community. The research will give a sense of culture members’ language through quoting online texts or displaying pictures produced by the community members. Finally, in reference to ‘innovation’ the research is extending the current knowledge of brand community in a context, like social media, that has become a new paradigm in relationship marketing. It is believed that by fulfilling these criteria, this study has extended the existing understandings and advances the knowledge of the community in question.
3.6 Research Ethics

Consensus on conducting ethical netnography is still transpiring (Kozinets, 2010). However, as more researchers do this form of research, issues are becoming more clear. One concern is the vague distinction between the private versus the public domain (Frankel and Siang, 1999). A Facebook fan page does not require a user password, nor does it ask for any information about the member before joining. Individuals who are on Facebook can simply click the ‘like’ button to be considered a member of that group. In fact, even an individual who is not a fan member can comment on the fan page. This helps address that the information being collected during the research should be considered publicly available information. Research of this type is usually exempt from being considered human subjects research (Kozinets, 2010). The Research Ethics Board (REM) at the University of Guelph did not require consent from individual postings on the fan page; however an ethics protocol which covered the research was submitted and accepted.

From what has been initially observed, the comments that community members are posting are not sensitive nor deeply ‘personal’. After all, the chosen community is formed around a consumer product as opposed to say a community of posters suffering from a common disease or ailment. Since the communication type is asynchronous, it is intended as postings for the masses (Kozinets, 2010). Another concern is ensuring confidentiality and anonymity to the informants (Kozinets, 2002). In this study, the names of the individuals were changed, especially since Facebook users predominately use their real names. In addition, the home page of the Facebook fan page site does not list any Terms of Service (TOS). If it did so, such as restricting
anyone from accessing the content generated on the page, the researcher may have had to ask the company’s permission.
CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH FINDINGS

Four classifications of fans and their stages in their relationships with the company were found:

- **Pending relationship status:**
- **It’s complicated:**
- **In a relationship; and**
- **Married**

Fans in the first group, *pending relationship status* are curious, newly interested, or may have ‘liked’ the brand in order to enter a promotion or giveaway. At this stage the company is providing a service value, like answering questions. Some may have yet to engage with the community. They have low commitment to the brand, product and other members. *It’s complicated* consumers care about boosting their social status, they want to feel associated with particular interests or lifestyles. They are attracted to interesting content, they like to engage. These fans have a small connection to the company. They have medium admiration for the brand and the product. The next group of consumers, *in a relationship*, are true fans of the brand and they want to signal their affection for it. They like to be recognized by, and communicate to, the company. They may not always want to interact with others. Their admiration for the brand and the product is strong. In the last classification, *married*, has the highest level of attachment to the brand community. These are devoted fans who go out of their way to support the company and signal their affection for the brand. They encourage others to buy the product. The interaction moves beyond relationship marketing into a sense of community being formed.
4.1 Pending Relationship Status

These fan members ‘liked’ the brand in order to either enter into a promotion or giveaway like coupons, to ask questions of the company, or to learn more about the product out of curiosity. At this status, they may not have any knowledge about the product or brand whatsoever, especially when joining only to receive freebies. On the other hand, a member may have some interest in the product and decide to join to fan page out of curiosity to learn more. These individuals may be lurkers, those who lack any sort of engagement with the fan page. Lurkers, may be avoiding engagement before they have a chance to get a feel for the community. They may choose to engage once they feel more comfortable, they may then decide to post a question directed toward the company.

The following examples show postings of consumers who do not know much about the product:

How do they taste?????? (Kayla)

What stores carry your product? (Ruth)
-
I would like to try them love baked chips but they don’t sell them here...:( (Denise)

[popchips] Denise where is here? click here & we’ll guide you to the snacklight: http://popchi.ps/findpop
-
Haven’t been able to find near me. Saw this on the highway today, so now there is hope!! (Jeannie)
In the above examples, Kayla initiates a posting asking, “How do they taste??????”. The extra question mark emphasizes her curiosity. She is on the Popchips fan page but does not know anything about the product. This also applies to Ruth and Denise. Jeannie may or may not have tried the product, she’s not sure of where she should purchase them at her local stores, although she does sound excited about possibly becoming more connected to it.

There are also lots of individuals who get excited about free stuff. Freebies might have drawn them to the fan page in the first place. Examples are shown next.

**[popchips]** knock. knock. [115 people like this.]

Who's There?Free Popchips? (Rachel)
- **[popchips]** hungry for music? get your fix from Amazon.com today!

[buy 1 case of popchips, get 5 free songs](www.amazon.com)
today's the last day to score 5 free mp3s when you buy 1 case of popchips from amazon: [http://popchi.ps/qELOJt](http://popchi.ps/qELOJt) [24 people like this.]

got my free downloads a few days ago! (Layla)
That means you have to give out 200,000 bags of pop chips...am I right? Starting with me! (Pete)

In honor of Columbus Day, tell us how you first discovered popchips. [46 people like this.]

One of your awesome coupons led me to try it. mmmmm BBQ (Ben)

Thanks for the free coupon yesterday! (Rochelle)

These examples indicated that Popchips offers various promotions for coupons, free cases of the product or other features like the Amazon promotion offering free songs. These fans enjoy receiving free product. Offering a coupon led Ben to try the chips in the first place.

The Popchips company held several large contests in the last year (previously mentioned in the introduction section). In this section a few of these contests will be discussed. The first is “the VP (vice president) of pop culture”. The contest asked participants to make videos and post them on the company’s website for a chance to win a job as Ashton Kutcher’s VP of pop culture (they would be employed by the company) with a salary of $50,000 USD a year, and a year’s supply of the product. As previously mentioned, Ashton Kutcher is considered the ‘president of pop culture’ for this company. He was a fan of the brand and acquired a minority stake in the company where he began overseeing the San Francisco firm’s social-marketing efforts back in June 2010. This contest, “the VP (vice president) of pop culture”, took place in February 2011. A number of videos were entered for this contest. An example of one video clip and its intent is shown next.
This video is about two younger guys rapping about Popchips. In the video they are at a grocery store buying Popchips. They walk out of the store eating the chips, and continue eating them while riding bikes, and sitting at their laptops. The lyrics are as follows: “very good, less body weight, all good, vacation hits, no one is topping this, neighbrohood great combo.” While it appears that these individuals are admirers of the brand as they are willing to make a video about it, they may in fact have only heard about this brand after hearing about the contest. This would be especially true for a company like Popchips since they only began the development of their social media marketing in 2011 (discussed in section 3.3.2 Archival Data) and therefore the product was only recently heavily introduced to the market. Also, judging from the lyrics, they do not seem to have a lot of knowledge of the product, hence they only know that it is “less body weight”, hinting that it is a low fat product. They call the chips “very good”, although a passionate brand-lover may use stronger associations like ‘THE BEST’ or ‘I LOVE THEM’.

Another contest had similar findings. “The Pop Up Live” began in September 2011. Popchips partnered with SPIN & ReverbNation for this contest. In this contest, participants in local bands could download their tracks, and other Popchips fan page members decide which
bands would play on the SPIN stage at Austin’s Premier Festival. The winner was determined by the band that received the most votes. During the contest, bands posted videos or pictures of their band to encourage others to vote for them. Postings related to this contest are presented below.

pop up live video from new york city
www.youtube.com
pop up live semi-finalist video. the five finalists have been chosen.
watch. vote. decide. http://popchi.ps/popuplive2 (Shawn)
-
Coffee and popchips in the morning. That's how The Brunos do it!
Vote for us pop up live! — with The Brunos. (Maya)

- [popchips] last day to rock the vote! http://popchi.ps/popuplive2

pop up live: final five
www.facebook.com
watch. vote. decide. who's gonna break big in austin: http://popchi.ps/popuplive2 [26 people like this.]
Ramona the Band!!!! (Adam)

How to put this. Even though some of the winners seem suckish, at least the artists that lost ended up getting quite a bit of new exposure. Honestly, would you have checked out any of these guys if they didn't have a free download? (Jason)

A lot of conversations taking place at this time were very contest-specific. People voted for the bands they liked, others made comments about the contest. Individuals came to the page to be involved with the contest. However, there was little conversation about Popchips.

The next example is also related to a contest. The posting below is a good example of a post that is likely to be shared to ‘friends of fans’ without much conversation about Popchips.

[popchips] pop pool: the first to predict the winner & final score of the big game wins a case of popchips!

[snack bowl, instagr.am][50 people like this.]

21-24 patriots (Josh)

[popchips] congratulations to misty for being the first to predict the outcome of the game! email your address to win@popchips.com, so that we can send your winning case!

Since the activity is fun, predicting the winner and final score of Superbowl 2011, and there’s a chance to win a case of Popchips, individuals may have commented who weren’t already Popchips fans. 268 people commented on this posting which is a very large number for a typical post on the Popchips Facebook page. It is very probable that if a fan commented on this posting, and the fan’s ‘friend’ (Facebook friend) saw that his ‘friend’ (the fan) had commented,
he may have decided to as well, especially with the opportunity to win a free case of Popchips. Facebook is designed to share information and this information can easily spread across many people quickly. This is positive for the brand because being on Facebook creates more awareness about their band. That ‘friend’ of the fan may have spent some time looking through the fan page or may even decided to ‘like’ the page, there is a chance however, he may have left a comment and chose not to become a fan.

Referring to this group of consumers as “pending relationship status” is appropriate for two reasons. 1) They may have only recently heard about the brand and are unable to say whether or not they like the product. 2) They may be unsure or still deciding whether they will become loyal fans as it appears that these fans do not have a strong admiration for the product yet. Postings in many contests relate specifically to the contests but not really to the brand itself. Lastly, some new fan members may not have posted yet and are waiting until they know more about the product, or they may want to observe how others are posting first.

4.2 It’s Complicated

These fan members have ‘liked’ the Popchips brand on Facebook to boost their social status or because they want to feel associated with particular interests or lifestyles. These fans, compared to the previous fan group, has a better sense about the Popchips brand. Additionally, fans in this group like to engage with other fans. They are attracted to interesting, exciting and smart ideas. It seems they may or may not develop into a deeper relationship with the brand and the company. Their admiration for the brand seems to be superficial or short-lived.
The following post initiated by Popchips first highlights these ideas of being attracted to interesting, exciting and smart ideas:

[popchips] "like" this if you're celebrating mardi gras in your mouth.

happy fat tuesday!

instagr.am

bah haha (Duncan)

^my comment exactly when I read that, I'm 'liking' it just for the wording. (Kevin)

I just tried the new chili lime last night and they were good. Not as great as bbq, but good. The new sweet potato was awful though and like eating cardboard. (Taylor)

[popchips] Taylor - glad to hear you like chili lime & bbq, but sorry to hear about that not-so-sweet bag you had. if you still have it, please email us the full "best by" info from the back so we can look into it & make it up to you!

The best by is end of this year. I don't think they are defective, I just don't like them. They lack flavor which appears to be a common comment on them. Every other flavor is great and I continue to recommend them to everyone.. especially people on a diet. (Taylor)

- 

[popchips] "like" this if you want to take me home tonight. via mobile [1,620 people like this.]

I want to take you home every night! (Jill)

- 

[popchips] the city never sleeps. they snack.
this is an awesome street ad, and now a geat pic and social media tool!...love me some popchips! (Allison)

- [popchips](https://www.instagram.com/p/kl7u8mD/)
  what should our dodgeball team's name be? comment with your suggestions & the name with the most "likes" by 6pm (pdt) wins a case of popchips!

- [popchips](https://www.instagram.com/p/k_xEjJU/) popchips' dodgeball team
  Pop, drop and roll! (Allison)

  [popchips](https://www.instagram.com/p/k_ag_9/c/) we have a three-way tie between pop rockers, pop, drop & roll and assault & vinegar! we'll poll for the people to decide!

  - [popchips](https://www.instagram.com/p/k_ag_9/)
    happy friday!

- [popchips](https://www.instagram.com/p/k_ag_9/)
  snack shot of the week
  denajulia's photo on instagram [71 people like this.]

  I want a happy Pop Chip! After all, if you eat a pop chip, you become happy. :) (Joe)
Duncan laughs, perhaps to draw attention. Kevin addresses Duncan, and ‘likes’ his posting. He does not mention anything on the subject of the product, he explicitly says, “I’m ‘liking’ it just for the wording”. He is drawn to funny or entertaining things. You can sense from Taylor’s response that he’s not quite a fan yet of the brand, he’s not shy about expressing his opinion, hence “was awful...like eating cardboard”. However, Taylor sees this as being a good product for those specifically on a diet. Further examination of the data confirm a trend that consumers see the brand as being a part of a healthy lifestyle in the next section. The first posting by Popchips, “‘like’ this if you want to take me home tonight”, has 1,620 comments. The second post asking fans to suggest a name for Popchips’ dodgeball team has 291 comments. Popchips has done a good job here at making interesting posts which create a lot of engagement. The last post too has a lot of comments implying that they enjoy the picture, Joe says “I want a happy Pop Chip! After all if you eat a pop chip, you become happy, :)”. The smile emoticon suggests this as well. A lot of people on Facebook like to be entertained, they enjoy an interesting idea or a fun activity. Initiating engagement keeps these types of consumers reminded of the product, it also shows the brand’s ‘fun’ side.

Another example relates to postings where Popchips emphasizes its ‘health-factor’ throughout their page. The following describes healthy-living theme and how Popchips fans relate to that.

[popchips] leftover popchips? didn't think so. [103 people like this.]

Regular and BBQ are pretty tasty! And they are low in points when it comes to Weight Watchers :) (Summer)

[popchips] in honor of columbus day, tell us how you first discovered popchips. [46 people like this.]
At Weight Watchers! They sell a WW version of the BBQ flavor and one of my fellow members said there was a BETTER version at the grocery store. I went immediately to the store and picked a few bags up, 3 points plus for one serving!!! :) (Christine)

Jillian michaels FB page I'm addicted to the original flava :) (Tessa)

There are themes of wanting to eat regret free, their personalized life meaning - healthy-living - is symbolically expressed in their narratives. At the same time, these consumers highlight an aspect about the product in a positive way, perhaps becoming more loyal fans. Some of these individuals might be trying to connect with others who are in a Weight Watchers group or who embrace healthy lifestyles. Jillian Michaels mentioned by Tessa is a healthy-living coach and celebrity. These individuals might feel a connection to others in the Popchips group for their love of making healthy lifestyle choices. They might enjoy speaking with others who have the same mindset. The Popchips company as well, accentuates the product’s health benefits, like low calories and zero trans fat.

The following examples related to Bruno Mars as endorser of the Popchips brand.

[popchips] in honor of columbus day, tell us how you first discovered popchips. [46 people like this.]

in Hawaii, I love Bruno Mars and seen a lot of his stuff on your FB page. While grocery shopping on vacation I seen the BBQ kind in the store and I bought a small bag...I went back the next day and stocked up and brought some home to Utah since we didn't have them here!! Now we have just the plain version and they are great, even my 1 year old loves them! (Katrina)

- [popchips] leftover popchips? didn't think so. [103 people like this.]

I wanted to but the cheddar ones the other day but my mom wouldn't let me :) even when I told her they sponsor BRUNO MARS!!! Lol it's ok though... I'll go pick some up later ;) (Rebecca)
- [popchips] happy birthday, Bruno Mars! hope it's all that and a bag of sour cream & onion popchips!

[bruno mars' love gone sour]
www.youtube.com
bruno & phil sing about true love backstage [328 people like this.]

♥ ♥ ♥ this video!! (Amy)

- [popchips] peace. love. popchips. [206 people like this.]

And bruno mars ~.~ (Noah)

Bruno Mars was a spokesperson for the brand during the ‘Win a Trip to Meet Bruno Mars Contest’. It is very clear that a lot of these fans are on the Popchips fan page because they are even bigger fans of Bruno Mars and want to have more access to information about the artists. For these fans Popchips is associated with Bruno Mars. As Rebecca comments, “BRUNO MARS!!” is in capital letters, there is some enthusiasm also when mentioning the brand.

4.3 In a Relationship

These fan members are true fans of the brand and want to signal their affection for it. They will display their admiration or share consumption stories on the fan page and direct this communication to the Popchips company. They wish to be recognized by the company without necessarily being forced to interact with others. These members portray a higher level of emotional connectivity to the brand compared to the previous classification groups.
The fans share their favourite flavours, what stores they buy them at, how they were introduced, or how they consume the product, in other words, a real world context is understood.

The following examples exemplify a pattern of ‘showing off’ or wanting to communicate to the marketer.

I like Pop Chips with Chicken Salad croissant sandwhiches on warm summer days. They add a flavorful, light crunch and are a healthy addition to my lunch. Yummmm! (Luke)

- as a new customer to popchips I can honestly say they are one of a kind. There are no other imitators even close to the taste. Simply put they are excellent. Thanks Cat Stone and Ashton Kutcher! I LOVE THE BBQ! (Jerome)

- We had barbecue popchips for lunch today. I ate mine with a spoon of seafood salad on each one. Yummy! (April)

- "Yumm"..I love my Pop Chips!! (Vicki)

- Never leave the Country without them! (Katy)

- Our little boy likes his cookies but LOVES him some popchips :) Happy 4th. (Judith)
awsome (Michelle)
-
Even cats enjoy Popchips! (Carolyn)
-
My husband took me on a sunset picnic ... and the sandwich shop had Popchips! Whoo hoo!! — with Tim. (Hollie)
-
Working late at desk last night w/ popchips original flave & jalapeno hummous. #heaven (Tom)
Oh please Popchips truck, please be headed to my building. I'll show you the way... (James)

Popped my first bag of Jalapeno PopChips :-) (Patrick)

Guy Comes Up With A Creative Way To Ask Girl's Hand In Marriage!

[popchips likes this.]

[popchips] now that's how you 'pop' the question!

- I have to tell you....my kids recently went camping up on Orcas Island and since the car ride to get to the ferry from our house is 4 hours, I packed popchips - bbq and cheddar - for snacks on the drive and the hour long ferry ride. They were a great hit with the kids and their new friends on that ferry ride. My daughter came home a week later and was sad that the popchips hadn't lasted until the last ferry ride back. Now I know that for next year and any future car or ferry rides, to pack more popchips :) (Lynn)

Some fans, like Lynn, share very personal stories about consuming the products in their daily lives. For her, she values the convenience aspect, she can pack them for her kids for the long ferry rides. For Hollie, it looks like Popchips are a part of a special date with her husband. Fans are also sharing their love for and special meanings the brand holds to them. The consumers have a greater appreciation for the brand compared to the last group: “a healthy addition to my lunch”, “I LOVE THE BBQ” (Jerome), and “Never leave the country without them!” (Katy). Another fan is enthusiastic about a YouTube video filming a wedding proposal, in it, the women is eating a bag of Popchips. A lot of postings like this one appear as if they are directed to the company.
Some consumers like to share the product with their friends, like Denise and Nancy.

Others see it as a secret indulgent or ‘me-time’.

Having some friends over tonight. PoPchips are ready to serve out of a skeleton bowl. That is if I’ll keep my hand out of there! (Denise)
- will be putting out POPCHIPS for a pre dinner snack or after dinner on Thanksgiving! (Nancy)
- [popchips] caption me.

Treasure trove of goodness! (Kylie)

If I sit here quietly with my stash~do you think anyone will hear me crunching? (Kimmy)

Gotta hide these from the kids! More for MEeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee (April)

And there, hidden deep inside the secret garden, lay a treasure so special, so delightful, so delicious... She couldn't resist (Janie)
- [popchips] potatoes do two things well: popchips and vodka. 🍸 via Involver [355 people like this.]

Prefer my Popchips with a good Cali wine..... (Jane)

A bag of sea salt & vinegar popchips... a nice hot bath... a glass of red wine.... what could be better? (Annie)
-
[popchips] kitchen table. between the sheets. on the desk. snackers everywhere are doing it between meals. where do you do it? [53 people like this.]

with a good book (Kelly)

[popchips] sounds like the stairway to snack heaven...enjoy!

What ‘stands out’ in these descriptions are using the product as a break from hectic lifestyles. Annie associates the product with particular activities one would do alone, it meshes well with her alone time. Enjoying the product with a glass of red wine shows an emotional connection to the brand, she holds it in high regards as red wine is something one would typical drink with a fancy meal. Other descriptions express this too, “Treasure trove of goodness” (Kylie), “hidden deep inside the secret garden, lay a treasure so special, so delightful, so delicious” (Janie) and “a good Cali wine” (Jane).

A post initiated by the firm is very often directly responded to by fans.

[popchips] for best results eat the whole bag. [174 people like this.]

Just popped one in my mouth as this post popped up on my screen! LOL (Mark)

I know I realy can not eat just one.... White Cheddar is my weakness! (Paula)

- [popchips] in honor of ask a stupid question day, we want your stupidest answers - how do you pop a chip? [43 people like this.]

by pouring root beer on it! (my favorite "pop" - or soda to some of you). =) (Liz)

- popchips and the emmy for best taste goes to... via mobile [132 people like this.]

bbq♥ (Laura)

-
[popchips] say popchips three times fast…. word of mouth advertising is the best kind. thanks. [125 people like this.]

I love, Love, LOVE, Popchips, popchips, popchips! ♥ (Stephanie)
-
[popchips] pop in the blank: i wish there was an app for _____. [28 people like this.]

to instantly shed the winter weight I gained from baking when it's cold out! Grrrrr I need to move somewhere warm! and stay away from the cookies/fudge/cakes and eat popchips more often:O) (Jenn)
-
[popchips] when the chips are down, eat some. [109 people like this.]

LOL. I keep them on stock.. I LOVE POPCHIPS.. BBQ is my favorite, kids like the jalepeno, cheddar and original, hubby likes the sour cream and chives one. =) (Loretta)

I was so bummed last week...went into Walgreen's and they are discontinuing carrying Popchips...the only good thing about it is I scored 6 bags for for 6 bucks!!! I cleared the salt and pepper row...I have never done that but for Popchips I will and did...LOL! (Katelyn)

I like the salt and vinegar. It's a nice low caloric treat if you don't eat the whole bag (Kristie)

[popchips] Kristie - with all the flavor & less than half the fat of fried chips, it's ok to eat the whole bag...and leave no crumbs behind!
-
[popchips] night owls. who's with us?

owling, popchips style
instagr.am learn more about owling: http://popchi.ps/n12G9L [106 people like this.]
Any hour of the day or night is perfect for popping PoPchips! (Pamela)
-
[popchips] does size matter?

[popchips' photo]

[popchips]

What's the point of a small bag when I can nearly eat a whole bag at one time. Bigger is better, hope we see a family size bag soon. Rock on Pop Chips! (Britt)
-
Thank u for my Valentine. I ♥ popchips. :) (Amy)

[popchips] may you always fall in love at first (and last) bite! happy valentine's day, amy!
-
I just tried them for the first time...I am totally in love with them! Completely worth all the hype...and the drive to buy them! (Rochelle)

[popchips] thanks, stacy! we look forward to a long, delicious relationship together.

Here it appears as though the fans and the company are having a one-to-one conversations. Mark sounds excited and he’s doing the suggested action, eating a bag of Popchips. Paula writes, “I know”, she can relate to ‘eating the whole bag’. She also expresses her favourite flavour to the company. In addition, Jenn responds to Popchips: “i wish there was an app for” by writing “to instantly shed the winter weight I gained from baking when it's cold out! Grrrrr I need to move somewhere warm! and stay away from the cookies/fudge/cakes and eat popchips more often:O)”. In this instance, “Thank u for my Valentine. I ♥
popchips. :)” (Amy) and Popchips, “may you always fall in love at first (and last) bite! happy valentine's day, amy!”, it sounds as if they are almost in a ‘real’ relationship together.

4.4 Married

These fans are totally devoted fans and their connection to the brand seems to be much stronger than the previous group. The data indicated that these fans will go out of their way to support and signal their affection for the brand. They are continually posting on the fan page, they know a lot about the brand and they take on a leadership role, answering questions others might have. Here one can see a manifestation into culture, the two-way conversation between the consumer and the firm enable an aspect of community.

The fans in this group are brand enthusiasts.

[popchips] london called. we answered. we’re excited to pop across the pond! http://www.popchips.co.uk/ [155 people like this.]

YES!!! We just got here last July and I've been missing them... Lol. My husband has a trip back to the states soon. We were just talking about it over lunch if they'll even let him bring some back for me on the plane. No worries now... Lol! (Amber)

- Is there PopChip shirts u can buy?:) (Wesley)


- My daughter loves Popchips so much, she dressed up like a Popchips delivery truck driver for Halloween! (complete with head & tail lights, a steering wheel & even an air horn) She got extra candy & attention at every house we went to, for creativity :D (Tammy)
Got a big box of Popchips this week -- think my husband was excited? (Kelly)

hahaha! enjoy! (Gina)

[popchips] happy wife = happy life. happy hub = wife gets foot rub? ;)

- Je t’aime POPCHIPS!! I never leave home without my Popchips...no matter where I go! (Shelly)
we'll never forget.

remembering 9/11

Lost my brother this day in the north tower. I'm sure he would have loved the chips just like I do. Rest in peace Steven Russin. (Kyle)

popchips are amazing, i will always remember the first time I had them. It was the beginning of fall, and I had forgot my lunch at home, so i decided to buy a little bit of food from ala carte, I remember that i almost grabbed a bag of fritos but then decided I wanted to try the new popchips that I had never seen before, so I bought the popchips and a juice box. After looking at the chips I didnt think they would taste to good, but I was wrong. Popchips are the most amazing snack i have ever eaten, i am completely obsessed with them. Whoever invented them is a genius. I just wish that I could find them at grocery stores in Wisconsin. (Chelsea)

Chelsea - wow, you've officially made our day...thank you! so where do you like to shop? have you tried checking our online store locator to find stores near you: http://popchi.ps/findpop ...or, you can always order all of our delicious flavors online: http://popchi.ps/popstore

want to win a month's supply of jalapeno popchips? hit us with your hottest tagline here: http://popchi.ps/ppfDDN

Well I have something to say also. I was 501 pounds a year and a half ago. I did have the Gastric Sleeve surgery and lost almost 200 pounds. It was not easy at all. I worked very, very, hard at it and was wanting a
snack like old days. CAN'T! nothing fried was offered to people that had this surgery. Chips was not even a thought. Until POPCHIPS came into my life! (thank you) I eat a few of these Popchips everyday and feel GREAT! these people thought of all the people like me and you and gave us back something I thought I would NEVER! have again. I would like to say THANK YOU POPCHIPS FOR GIVING ME THE CHANCE TO SNACK HEALTHY AGAIN ♥ GOD BLESS YOU ALL.... Oh and please, don;t ever take them away. My best to the company and all who helped people like me. (Mark)

Fans in this group will go out of there way to get the product, like Amber and her husband. Wesley may be so devoted to the brand that he’d like to wear it as a T-shirt. Megan makes a jingle up for the product she loves so much, “CRISPY CRUNCHY, CHIP-A-LIOUS, LIGHT AND AIRY POP-Chips. Grab a bag, SNAG A SNACK, A HEALTHY DELICIOUS-Wholesome potato, WhACK, heheh!” Tammy’s daughter dressing up as a Popchips’ delivery truck for Halloween shows a very strong devotion. In the second photo, the way the man is hugging closely to the box indicates a big love for the product as well. Kelly may have entered a contest or had the box shipped from Amazon. The third photo shows Shelly in front of the Effel Tower. The product is not sold in Paris and so she has taken the product with her portraying the importance for her to always have it. This groups brand love gets even stronger: “[I] am complet[ely] obsessed with them” (Chelsea), or “THANK YOU POPCHIPS FOR GIVING ME THE CHANCE TO SNACK HEALTHY AGAIN ♥ GOD BLESS YOU ALL.... Oh and please, don’’t ever take them away. My best to the company and all who helped people like me” (Marc). Marc has given a special thanks to the company.

Brand ‘leaders’ also appeared on the fan page. These were fans who commented often. They also would answer questions others had asked, indicating that they had a lot of knowledge about the product:
What stores carry your product? (Ashton)

@Ashton T- I order them from Amazon.com (Alex)

Get them in Subway (Elaine)

- I love popchips, just wish I could get them at my grocery store. They are hard to find here in Las Vegas (Lisa)

Lisa: Amazon.com delivers them by the case and you can get them on a monthly automatic delivery schedule :) (Heidi)

@Heidi, i'm on a bi-monthly delivery schedule but sometimes have to speed it up!! (Denise)

- popchips warm up your taste buds. hot news coming tomorrow. [277 people like this.]

I DO think it's spicy popchips coming! (Joan)

- i love these things! they taste sooo good and appear to be healthy. get them at Walgreen's and other places have their own like Trader Joe's (Amanda)

Just had the babeque for the first time - awesome! Ordered some of the newer flavors as few area stores carry them yet. Doing my part + bringing store managers letters to ask them to stock Pop Chips, hope to get some closer soon! (Carmen)

- popchips friends don’t let friends eat fried.

happy friendship day!

instagr.am [136 people like this.]

Happy Friendship Day! I passed on my 2 coupons for friends today. :) (Lara)
Joan knew the news that a new spicy flavour was coming out before others. The ‘leaders’ answer others questions and even encourage them to buy them in bulk. They go out of their way to support and advocate the brand. Carmen goes out of his way to ask store managers to bring Popchips to their stores and Lara passes on coupons to her friends. Amanda suggests where others can buy them. This suggest that she probably advocates the brand to her friends, spreading positive word of mouth.

Next examples indicate a manifestation of culture:

- Friends get their friends hooked on Popchips! :-D (Stacy)
- These two new flavors are PoPtastic!!!!!!!!!!! Sweet PoTato is my new favorite! (Olive)
- i got both my daughter and boyfriend addicted to the POP (Mary)
- Always super PoPlicious! The best chip ever! (Kathleen)
- mmmmmm (Michael)
- AMEN chippers (June)
- THESE THINGS R ADDICTIVE!!! I have to get every last crumb =) (Robin)

[popchips] why wait? put some super in a bowl right now.
get popped.
www.popchips.com
get snacking. but first, get popchips! [132 people like this.]

Anytime is the right time to eat popchips. (Sarah)
-
[popchips] keep your friends close. and your snacks closer. [189 people like this.]

LOVE my pop chips....reminds me that I need to make a Costco run and get my GIANT bag of BBQ Pop Chips, YUM! (Tracie)
-
[popchips] leftover popchips? didn't think so. [103 people like this.]

Never ! And when there is just small pieces and crumbs I hold the bag to my mouth tip my head back and let them slide getting the full pop affect!!!! (Rob)
-
Underwear, aspirin, soap, and popchips. Being sent overseas to my deployed husband. (Amber)

Sharing of ‘Popchips language’ with words like “PoPtastic” (Olive), “POP” (Mary), “PoPlicious” (Kathleen) or “chippers” (June). Members repeat phrases the company has posted like, “Friends get their friends hooked on Popchips!” . These phrases and words are very consistent on the Popchips Facebook fan page. Sarah posted, “Anytime is the right time to eat popchips” and Tracie posted, “my GIANT bag of BBQ Pop Chips”. There is a theme of the consumer and the firm connecting through this idea that ‘eating more is better’. Popchips and
the consumers form mutual understandings of the brand meaning, which is that it is low fat and can help you lose weight as implied by Mark’s post. Words and phrases like “I keep them on stock”, “I cleared the salt and pepper row”, “Any hour of the day or night is perfect for popping PoPchips!” or “What's the point of a small bag when I can nearly eat a whole bag at one time. Bigger is better, hope we see a family size bag soon. Rock on Pop Chips!” were also found on the page. The marketer encouraged more consumption writing “it’s ok to eat the whole bag” or various other posts by the brand such as “keep calm and snack on”, “for best results: eat the whole bag”, “why wait? put super in a bowl right now”, and “leftover popchips? didn’t think so”. The fans have caught on to this notion, they are eating more when they can and they want to tell this to the brand to gain their approval or maybe even to have the brand respond back to them. Amber has paired her Popchips with “underwear, aspirin [and] soap” which are ‘necessity items’. Popchips becomes like a ‘need’. The relationship to the product is very deep. They represent a connection to her husband. Thus, overall this group of fans seem to be totally connected to the brand as well as portraying their willingness to act on behalf of the company.

4.5 Summary of Findings

Recreating a deeper connection with consumers is an important aspect of relationship building. The Popchips company’s Facebook page provides the technology infrastructure, hosts and maintains on-going information and communication activities. Social media eliminates barriers between the company and consumers, allowing the dialogue to become two-directional. The relationship appears to consist of four levels. Fans can progress upwards as their relationship to the brand and business gets stronger. Pending relationship status, is the first,
whereby consumers ask questions or lurk before they make a contribution. The firm can offer a service, like answering questions. Here trust building begins to happen within the exchange. *It’s complicated* consumers have only begun to demonstrate signs of a relationships to the brand. In other words, the relationship between the consumer-brand and product begins to form which is an important aspect of the marketing exchange process. For instance the product values associated with the product go beyond its functional use (e.g., key to weightloss). The fans begin to feel connected to the company since they have similar values and interests. *In a relationship* level, the relationship goes even deeper. These fans show true signs of being brand lovers. The company and buyers engage in a dialogue regarding the product, its particular use, possible improvements (i.e., flavour), novel product ideas, other desires or needs for the future or brand meanings. Popchips encourages this by suggesting fans to create new slogans. The company is reinforcing interaction with viral marketing messages like fill-in-the-blanks (i.e., “me + popchips = ___”). These activities improve the possibility of nurturing and enhancing brand involvement as a mean of strengthening relationship building efforts. At the *married* level, members regularly contribute, influence others in their purchases, and begin to reflect the brand’s values. These members comments reflect the same enthusiastic and go-above-and-beyond attitude as the company. Members also feel very connected to the Popchips firm, and have similar interests in things like sports, entertainment, or even having a sense of humour.
CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

This chapter begins with a discussion section, followed by conceptual contributions and managerial implications. The last part of this chapter are the conclusions and recommendations for future research.

5.1 Discussion

Sung et al. (2010) describe a marketer-generated brand community as “initiated and funded by marketers in order to build relationships with current and potential consumers and to induce productive feedback” (p.433). The current study portrayed the phenomena by highlighting the Popchips’ fan page which was created to interact and engage with fans and to build with relationships with them. Simply put, joining a fan page like Popchips on Facebook means the fan is connecting with the Popchips company. By conducting a netnographic analysis, this study further offered details and insights of the different levels of the development of the consumer-company relationship that exist within this context. They are: (1) Pending Relationship Status, (2) It’s Complicated, (3) In a Relationship, and (4) Married. As presented in findings section, the four classifications of a fan member indicated that each of these kinds of fans may be at a different stage in regard to the relationships they hold with the Popchips company.

Fan members in the pending relationship status are new to the community, it is unclear whether they will remain a fan or leave. It seems that not everyone in a brand community needs to be a fan of the brand; Andersen (2005) found that some individuals are looking for product information or are driven by curiosity, much like the findings suggest. As for the lurkers who
have not involved themselves in the site (e.g., posting messages), their main reason for joining to begin with may be for a source of information (Evans, Wedande, Ralston & Hul, 2001). They may want to gain an understanding of the language and subject matter beforehand, as well, security may be a concern given the open nature of a fan page suggested by Mathwick (2002). The nature of Facebook makes it easy to join the fan page, there is no external search necessary and you can join with simply one click (McLaughlin, 2011), therefore consumers with lower levels of loyalty or no loyalty at all towards the brand are present.

At this stage, consumers are beginning to form relationships with the company. Since the company is offering a service, such as answering questions about the product or helping with any technical problems fans might encounter when trying to enter contests, the interpersonal relationships with employees are very important component of the overall offering (Genzi & Pelloni, 2004). The business needs to offer a value for these members, like entertainment or free items (Tikkanen et al., 2009). It may be the only thing attracting them to the fan page at this point.

In the findings, sharing amongst ‘friends of fans’ was also discussed. This study found that an interactive post may attract fans’ Facebook ‘friends’ to comment on a Popchips’ initiated post (especially if there is a value for this individual like a free case of Popchips!). The mediating technology plays a big role as to why this is the case. The Facebook infrastructure reduces barriers for interaction; one does not have to be a fan to post a comment, nor are there geographical restraints (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Social media enhances networking effects like word of mouth. Activities like contests can leverage the involvement of fans, spreading the activities to their list of friends (Andersen, 2005).
Many studies have suggested that marketers should encourage consumer-to-consumer relationships in their brand communities, as forming relationships with others, tends to draw them back in (Sicilia & Palazon, 2008). The next classification, *it’s complicated*, found that fans enjoyed interacting with other members on the fan page (methods of interacting on Facebook include posting comments, ‘sharing’ and ‘liking’). These types of members also like to be entertained. Sung et al. (2010) described ‘entertainment seeking’ as utilizing an online brand community for the pleasure of making new connections, spending time with others and playing games. Incentives like entertainment and social interaction create a sense of involvement and social identity, and increases members’ desire to be part of the community (Sicilia & Palazon, 2008). In one instance, Bruno Mars fans might have scoured the Internet for content on this specific artists, making a community of friends on the Popchips fan page who all love the singer. And so, the Popchips page organized groups around various niches of interest. This coincides with Simmons (2008) discussions that the Internet has an ability to provide consumers with the opportunity to express individuality. Postmodern consumers can discuss their opinions on anything and everything; and as this study finds, the content is not always brand (Popchips brand) specific.

The rise of social networking websites has created new opportunities for savvy marketers, such as the ability to entertain. Fan’s communication with companies in this section, also fulfills a social need as members enjoy talking with companies which may lead to discussions with other fans as well. There is still the lack of a strong connection with the company, nor do they convey an emotional or behavioral attachment to the brand (hence the name ‘it’s complicated’).
Therefore, though the connection here is not particularly deep, firm-initiated postings provide social interactions and empowerment to consumers.

Fans under the *in a relationship* classification like interacting with people behind the brand, as it brings them closer to the product (Nambisan & Baron, 2007). A setting is developed in which customers are inclined to engage in a type of dialogue where they contribute valuable product knowledge and contribute to the development of core business ideas (Andersen, 2005). Popchips develops the meaning with which it wishes to imbue the brand, based on what they choose to post, but fans are adding or redefining its meaning in their own way. The relationships with the product, brand and firm go much deeper here. For instance, the postings are longer and more personal. They are sharing their passion and love towards the brand, and the special meaning the brand holds for them (Sung et al., 2010).

These individuals have a need for recognition (Cova & Pace, 2006) or like to ‘express themselves freely’ (Sung et al., 2010) and the fan page, being organized in such a way that encourages self-exposure, is beneficial for the fans who want to proclaim their admiration. However, contrary to Cova and Pace’s (2006) suggestion of management with little involvement, the Popchips fans like to express their power, and they like to be appreciated and recognized by the company (Jeppesen & Frederiksen, 2006), not just by other members. The study’s findings revealed a sense of pleasure when communicating one-to-one with marketers. Storytelling (Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001) at this stage is an important means of creating and maintaining community and relationships. Such stories are sharing consumption stories or how they first learned about the product (the importance of the newness of the brand is evident).
Married fans are both highly committed and very loyal to the brand. They participate actively in discussions and other forms of involvement (i.e., “liking”). They are similar to ‘community leaders’ since they have primary knowledge concerning product information and are an important source of information for other members (Andersen, 2005). They are also similar to ‘insiders’ who have strong social ties and personal ties to the consumption activity (Kozinets, 1999). Sung et al. (2010) illustrates particular objectives of getting and sharing information, solving brand related problems, answering others questions (in this case the firm’s too), and influencing peer consumers, much like we’ve seen with the Popchips group. These fans like to feel special, Mangold and Faulds’ study (2009) had suggested that to make committed members feel special, a company should offer special deals that are available exclusively to a subset of consumers.

Though not all fans on the Facebook page are as loyal as this group, it is possible to distinguish a group amongst all the fans who have the highest devotion. Representations of the concepts of a brand community are more evidently revealed with these fans. A meaning of community is transmitted within the group and understood by other members of the community, as well as the company. By constantly interacting with the company, the meaning of the brand is reproduced and brand community rituals and traditions are evident (Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001). One example is members forming an association through consumption with the idea that ‘it’s okay to eat the whole bag’. These rituals involve excessive buying and eating with the recognition that it’s ‘okay’ because it’s a ‘healthy product’. In some pictures fans hold the bag upside down indicating that it’s empty, or they buy a big box of the chips that they’ve ordered from Amazon. As a mass-convenience product, the company encourages this ‘over-
consumption’ as their motivation is to sell more. Examples of the company pushing this notion are “does polishing off a bag count as spring cleaning?”, “keep calm and snack on”, “for best results: eat the whole bag”, etc. So too does the development of a language (i.e., “Poptimist”) that highlights the social construction of brand meaning. At this stage in the consumer-firm relationship, enabling these aspects of community, allows the marketer to develop bonds and a richer dialogue with consumers (Szimigim, 2005).

5.2 Conceptual Contribution

To further theory building in this field, a study of a brand’s Facebook fan page is conducted. This study examined the way fan members use the fan page, consequently leading to relationships with the company. The exploration of the consumer-firm relationship is one way of conceptualizing the nature of, and requirements for, online brand communities. In addition, the study was conducted to initiate academic discourse about marketing in a social networking site. This type of marketing is becoming very popular, or in other words necessary, for business success. It is understood from the findings that the role of the marketer and the consumer are interlinked in the context of a social network site. The types of relationships constructed in a brand community, such as consumer-brand, consumer-product, consumer-consumer, and consumer-firm are interrelated rather than separate.

This stage addresses the research questions posed at the introduction part of this paper:

1. Do consumers of a convenience product in a social media context represent a different type of brand community?
The social media revolution brings a new set of concerns and challenges for online communities in a social media context. Consumers are empowered, it is easier for them to interact freely with other consumers in the group, and it is almost effortless to share positive or negative experiences with the company and its products with their list of Facebook ‘friends’. As seen in the Facebook group, individuals do not like being advertised to, but rather they enjoyed postings that were funny and interesting that weren’t directly trying to ‘sell’ a product. As well, Popchips kept their postings very neutral. If they were too opinionated or one-sided on a specific subject, consumers respond negatively. In one example the company had to actually apologize to the group explaining that they weren’t trying to disrespect religion. For this brand community, centred around a convenience product, the fans are not part of a homogenous group. Examples of types of consumers seen in the Popchips page were mothers who liked to give a convenient snack to their kids, individuals who were making choices to be healthier and lose weight, sports fans who liked to munch the chips during games, and young people who identified with the brands fun and hip personality. Compared to a luxury and niche brand communities where individuals tend to have similar interests and lifestyle habits, a mass product like chips can appeal to a variety of different types of people, and socioeconomic backgrounds. Finally, as connections in a person’s online profile are a part of how they identify themselves, a brand having a positive value like ‘healthy-living’ or being hip and entertaining, might encourage individuals to display their attachment to these brands.

2. Is the relationship between the consumer and the firm in this type of online brand community different?
The rules of relationship marketing are in many ways being redefined. As exemplified by Popchips, consumers control most of the content. They can vent negative feelings and other consumers can support these. In another sense, they are not shy about helping the company when they feel strongly connected to it. In some instances, when consumers were saying negative things about the Popchips brand, Popchip advocates would comment back supporting the brand. In addition, barriers such as time and distance are removed, and so a company can develop stronger bonds with the consumer, much like a human relationship. When the company was responding with flare and personality, Popchips fans seemed to receive this well. For instance, they may have replied back with a joke, in an attempt to keep the two-directional conversation going.

3. How can we better understand the dialogue between the consumer and the marketer which helps form the consumer-firm relationship?

Conversations between the fan and the marketer are almost as if they are in ‘real’ relationships. Often times Popchips seemed to be personalizing the interaction, emulating a real-life friend relationship with the fan. In this sense, social media has affected consumer expectations of their relationship with an organization. Popchips does an affective job of this by sending Valentine’s Day cards (dubbed as coupons) to special fans. Many consumers responded, thanking the company for their ‘Valentine’. Consumers feel empowered or in control when they have a problem. They expect to be heard. In one example, a customer wrote a posting expressing a lot of anger, with capital letters and harsh words, writing that he was supposed to receive a box of Popchips for a contest he had won, when he actually received a $1 coupon instead. After the company apologized and provided a solution right away he seemed satisfied.
The relationship can also create a sense of community. When consumer felt they knew a lot about the company or were big fans, they would post texts and videos experiencing their love for the product. They would often receive positive recognition from other fan-lovers or the company, thus adding an extra reward for the participation. Finally, it is very easy for fans to communicate with their favourite brand page everyday since a company’s posting might appear on the fans’ Facebook homepages. This means that these fans can communicate very easily, without having to even go to the company fan page itself. This makes interactions more common, and makes members feel more connected.

These findings have lead to new understandings of relationship marketing in a social media context for a convenience mass-produced product. The table below displays recent knowledge about online brand communities’ relationship management, and how this study has contributed to our understanding of the consumer-firm relationship in the context of social media and a mass produced convenience product.
Relationship Marketing in Online Brand Communities

- Co-operating with the customer (Paravatiyar, 2006)
- Interactivity and creating ongoing dialogue between community members and the company (Rowley et al., 2007; Thorbjornsen et al., 2002)
- Marketer and consumer working toward a common set of goals (Evans & Laskin, 1996) or co-creation (Rowley et al., 2007; Schau et al., 2009; Vargo, 2009)
- Creating value for the customer (i.e., rewarding them for talking about your brand) (Tikkanen et al., 2009)

Relationship Marketing in a Social Media Context for a Convenience Mass-produced Product

- The consumer is empowered and is in control of creating the brand image and reputation
- Treating customers as unique and special individuals
- Customers tell the company their needs and wants and the company responds in a very personal way
- Consumer and fan relationship is just like human-to-human-like relationship

Table 2: Relationship Marketing in Online Brand Communities to Relationship Marketing in a Social Media Context

The study’s findings suggest that consumers are in control as they are empowered, and can easily spread positive or negative word of mouth about the brand to their list of online connections. Consumers’ expectations about the relationship have changed. In the case of Popchips fans, they demand to be heard and prefer to be made to feel ‘special’. Many of these fans wanted to communicate their needs and wants about the product without the firm having to initiate the conversation. Lastly, the personal way in which Popchips communicated with fans, was well received by members and made the experience more memorable and exciting.

By cultivating online communities, organizations have the means to develop or enhance existing relationships, but it can also increase the reach and richness of the dialogue. The consumer and firm relationship is much like a human relationship, and it can operate like any other ‘friend’ one might have on their list of social network friends. A Facebook fan page allows the development and interaction between the marketer and the fan within a community to be
taken to a new level. In other words, *brands rooted in fundamental human values will be the ultimate driver of marketing success.*

### 5.3 Managerial Contribution

This research can offer practical suggestions for marketers employing a social media strategy for their brands. A fan page supported by the firm can serve to improve the relationships between individual consumers and the company, as well as among consumers and the brand, product and other consumers. The experiences and interactions will increase emotional ties to the brand. The community has allowed consumers to share their opinions and thoughts about the brand with others more actively than ever before, and has provided social structures that extend the relationships between marketers and consumers. The study has helped to shed light on what specific motives and needs, consumers have with regard to fan pages, and how such brand communities can lead to satisfaction and reinforce the consumer-firm relationship.

As for a consumer who has been newly introduced to the brand, this might be the first time they have come in contact with the firm and as such, they would probably expect an immediate or rapid response to a question they may pose. If an individual, however, was drawn to the fan page because of a particular sweepstake (like the Ultimate Vegas Sweepstake), this may be a good opportunity to have a two-way conversation with the customer. In so doing, if the customer believes the company is delivering good customer service, the firm may begin to develop a two-way relationship with that customer which can enhance brand loyalty. One consumer entered a contest and won, but was displeased with the prize. The capital letters in his posting: “A COUPON FOR A DOLLAR OFF REALLY. WHATS UP WITH THAT” expressed
his anger and irritation. Popchips responded by apologizing and saying that they had sent this consumer the wrong prize. One can see that the consumer’s tone has changed, after the apology: “Thank you, do you need my address again Popchips”. The consumer seems to appreciate the company admitting to their mistake. First impressions might be important here, it would benefit the brand to openly admit their mistakes, display an above-and-beyond-attitude, and to respond rapidly to impress fans in general.

Marketers can try to understand the cultural ‘profile’ of different individuals. Individuals have different interests and symbols which a company can use to provide clues as to what makes consumption special for them. Bruno Mars endorses Popchips, the product is also understood as a new ‘health craze’ type product; as a consequence, ‘liking’ Popchips may make them the bigger Bruno fan or acumen to health-food trends. This could enable marketers to build long-term relationships based on increasing attention to what matters most to consumers. The maintenance of lively and interesting content for fans can attract members. They might see Popchips as an ‘interesting’, ‘entertaining’ or ‘exciting’ company. Also, for achieving social benefits, the fan page should encourage interactions amongst fans.

The Popchips company is creating a certain brand identity through what they post to their Facebook fan page. This meaning is being renegotiated and retranslated by fan members. The texts, photos and videos found on the Popchips Facebook fan page reflect very lively passions for Popchips. Most of the photos posted by consumers depict real-life situations with “real people” taking “real pictures” of their “real lives” with Popchips. They thereby attribute a special meaning to the brand and their experience with the product in their everyday lives. After achieving this level of involvement and interaction, the marketer should encourage self-
exhibition and allow the consumers to help shape the brand they love. As fans may like to talk with the employees behind the brand, it might be beneficial for the marketer to portray a ‘fun’ image to encourage fans to engage with the company more. Since, the fans want to be noticed, marketers should address the fans by name, and provide good follow up and empathetic responses when concerns are expressed. It may be beneficial to have one employee as the ‘face’ of the company. Doing so could allow the consumer to view the company more as a person with whom it is possible to bond with.

The findings can give important clues as to how the company can use the Internet to further community building and enhance interaction. Kozinets (1999) wrote that with qualitative data “it becomes possible to more thoroughly understand how consumers view the company and its products, and where the products fit into consumers’ entire lived experience. There can probably be no more insightful and solid a foundation for relationship marketing than this.” (p. 261). The language and rituals developing on the fan page present a sense of community forming among these fans. The marketer should support and encourage the formation of culture and language. “Say what you mean. mean what you say. eat what you like” is a posting by Popchips that communicates a love for eating and feeling good about ones self. They should also make members feel important, especially frequent contributors that enhance brand personality and keep other people interested. In one instance, Popchips sent a Valentine’s Day coupon to special members. Members should feel like they belong to a connected and caring family as in the case of Popchips.

In the case of a convenience product, fans are not a homogenous group. They share a commitment or interest to the brand but have widely divergent reasons to join and different needs
in order to be convinced to stay and participant. As a result, communication with members should be differentiated, depending on which stage of the relationship the fan member is in. The company could design various parts of its sites to reflect specific customer preferences, much like Popchips has done with topics on charity events, sports, weight loss, etc. To move to the highest level of loyalty, the focus should move beyond relationship marketing to community creation. Examples of ways to do this include: co-creating the eating experience, getting members to look forward to the next product release, enhancing the product experience by bringing fans together like Bruno Mars admirers, building closer ties with the Popchips employees (picture of employees doing funny things in the office), etc. These suggestions offer relevant insights for community managers on how to improve the organization and exploitation of the community via a social network site.

5.4 Conclusions and Recommendations for Future Research

The four classifications that have been described in this paper are one way of conceptualizing the different levels of relationships between the consumer and the firm in a social networking site context. The study has explored the idea that the relationship and dialogue between them has a human-like qualities. The Popchips company has found success in the exploitation of its Facebook page by: addressing individuals by name, admitting mistakes, being easily accessible, being responsive, and discovering what their fans want to talk about and posting content that reflects this. The two-directional interaction is personal, and the brand shows-off a humorous and intriguing personality that fans seem to respond to in a positive way. Consumers demand brands that are authentic, original, creative, honest and kind.
Consumers of a mass-produced convenience product are a diverse community with varying interests, needs and wants. Popchips Inc appeals to a variety of consumers with different interests such as music, sports, charities and healthy-living. As with any product, there are inevitably a large population of users with low levels of loyalty and so it may be difficult to keep all members engaged. The major opportunity here is to run communities in a creative way with the objective to connect with as many consumers as possible. The unique aspect of Facebook is that it is a user-controlled environment in which consumers spread their opinions freely. It is easy for Facebook users to share content which can make the brand more visible as long as companies produce content that consumers will want to share. Individuals on social networking sites ultimately want to be connected to brands they respect and admire. Their connections make up a part of their public identity on the Internet.

For future research, studies should look at the fan pages of other convenience products and compare them to determine if these communities function in the same way. Examples of other types of convenience products could be those in different product categories such as household items like cleaning and personal care products.

There is little doubt that online communities enabled by social media will continue to migrate to different mediums. Studies could go beyond Facebook and explore other social networking sites like Twitter and YouTube. Researchers should find ways to shed more light on new types of brand communities if they are to continue to enhance consumer-company relationships going forward.
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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Popchips Official Facebook Page

(Screen shot taken on May 28th, 2012)
Appendix B: Preliminary Research Findings

Preliminary data were collected from Popchips official Facebook fan page community, the proposed research site. Preliminary research identified five themes of discussions occurring between the marketer and the consumer. The five “themes” indicative of the interactions that took place were:

1. **Expressions of admiration for the brand**: consumer expressing their liking for the brand through text, photos or videos.

2. **Product inquires/concerns**: i.e., to salty, to expensive, “where can I buy more?”, etc. Consumers express these to the company in hopes of a response.

3. **Consumption habits**: how consumers consume the product (i.e., what foods and/or drinks they mix with it), pictures offer insight into how consumers consume. This highlights important opportunities for marketers.

4. **Co-creators of brand meanings**: consumers are expressing their own brand meanings about the product and the company is encouraging this activity (i.e., “POPCHIPS makes me do back flips!”), consumer associates the product with fun and excitement).

5. **Rituals and traditions (sharing language and a common set of values)**: company express what it values (i.e., showing respect for 911) and the consumer responds. A language is developing in the community (i.e., “PopChipper”).

The charts shown below separates the postings as either firm initiated or consumer initiated. ‘Firm initiated’ refers to an instance when the message was posted initially by the firm and ‘consumer initiated’ means that the consumer initiated the first posting. This is also indicated by the colour of the posting block. For instance, if a Popchips posting is in white, it
means the company initially began the discussion (otherwise called news feed posts) and the blue color postings are the subsequent responses to the post. Also, the names and profile pictures of the individuals, and the time and dates of the postings are hidden for confidentiality.
### Chart: Exploring Fan Pages

**Popchips Fan page - official page, marketer-generated, there are approximately 240,000 fans in this group.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Firm initiated</th>
<th>Consumer initiated</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><img src="image" alt="Firm initiated post" /></td>
<td><img src="image" alt="Consumer initiated post" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>74 comments on this thread.</td>
<td>35 comments on this thread.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full thread.</td>
<td>Full thread.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. **Expressions of admiration for the brand.**

- Consumer initiated post: "I like Popchips. I have tried the plain and barbecue flavors, but not the jalapeno flavor yet. I think they are excellent, not only because they are less greasy, but because they taste Great!"
- Consumer initiated post: "My daughter loves Popchips so much, she dressed up like a Popchips delivery truck driver for Halloween! Complete with head & tail lights, a steering wheel & even an air horn! She got extra candy & attention at every house we went to, for creativity! 😊"
2. Product inquiries/concerns.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Firm initiated</th>
<th>Consumer initiated</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>![Image 1]</td>
<td>![Image 2]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>![Image 3]</td>
<td>![Image 4]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>78 comments on this thread.</td>
<td>35 comments on this thread.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3. Consumption habits.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Firm initiated</th>
<th>Consumer initiated</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><img src="image1" alt="Image" /></td>
<td><img src="image2" alt="Image" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24 comments on this thread.</td>
<td>Full thread.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><img src="image3" alt="Image" /></td>
<td><img src="image4" alt="Image" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>101 comments on this thread.</td>
<td>Full thread.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Firm initiated</th>
<th>Consumer initiated</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>![Image](73x524 to 296x672)</td>
<td>![Image](73x443 to 296x512)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Co-creators of brand meanings.</td>
<td>Co-creators of brand meanings.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Firm initiated**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>User</th>
<th>Post</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>popchips</td>
<td>write a hot tagline for jalapeno popchips? hit us with your best shot! <a href="http://popchips.com/pdfDOC">http://popchips.com/pdfDOC</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wall Photos</td>
<td><img src="73x710" alt="Image" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><img src="73x710" alt="Image" /></td>
<td><img src="73x710" alt="Image" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><img src="73x710" alt="Image" /></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td><img src="73x710" alt="Image" /></td>
<td><img src="73x710" alt="Image" /></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

131 comments on this thread.

**Consumer initiated**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>User</th>
<th>Post</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>You ARE what you EAT!</td>
<td><img src="73x710" alt="Image" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><img src="73x710" alt="Image" /></td>
<td><img src="73x710" alt="Image" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><img src="73x710" alt="Image" /></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td><img src="73x710" alt="Image" /></td>
<td><img src="73x710" alt="Image" /></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

59 comments on this thread.

**Firm initiated**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>User</th>
<th>Post</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>popchips</td>
<td>caption me.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>popchips</td>
<td><img src="73x710" alt="Image" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><img src="73x710" alt="Image" /></td>
<td><img src="73x710" alt="Image" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><img src="73x710" alt="Image" /></td>
<td><img src="73x710" alt="Image" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><img src="73x710" alt="Image" /></td>
<td><img src="73x710" alt="Image" /></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

59 comments on this thread.
5. Rituals and traditions (sharing language and a common set of values).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Firm initiated</th>
<th>Consumer initiated</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><img src="image1.png" alt="Image" /></td>
<td><img src="image2.png" alt="Image" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20 comments on this thread.</td>
<td>5 comments on this thread. (‘PopChipper’: ‘rock out with your pop out’)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><img src="image3.png" alt="Image" /></td>
<td><img src="image4.png" alt="Image" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 people commented on this thread.</td>
<td>Full thread. (‘popup’)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix C: NVivo Software Analysis

1-10 11 12 13 2-23 27 3-30 31 4 5 6 7 8 9 about all am bag ca can ships com
coupon do don't email enter entered entering facebook find first flavor flavors from
get good great have here hey hi http i'm january
just knew like like lisa look love luck make me more my new
now one online only our please pop popchi
popchips potato prize ps see snack snacking so
sorry store sweeps sweet taste thank thanks them tried ultimate up us vancouvermom
vegas we we'll when win would www you your
Appendix D: Analytic Coding Process

Krista Cambre My mom left some in the kitchen. After that, I started a new life.

Bryan Finocchi In gift bags at Catwalk for a cure in Boston

Jason M. Bossert I was in the holiday inn in sunrise florida and had some change left and was hungry. I saw the kettle style and wanted to try it the first chip was good and I got hooked.

Trudy Bishop As a couponer we all talk about new products we have tried because of coupons...a bunch of people were talking about pop chips they tried, so I went out and bought a bag (without a coupon which never happens)haven't looked back since.

Rachel Devaney from bruno mars.

Shirleen Caban - Bruno Mars' heart heart.

Carol Beggs Broesky Jillian Michaels!!

Kerry Funk thru FB and when you sent me a gift basket....been hooked on them since...I even shared and got others hooked...would love another gift basket....lololol

Bailey Dumonceaux BRUNO MARS CONCERT!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

Peter Zenner Redbull.

Adriana Uribe Saw my friend eating them and tasted it from her bag after that can't stop buying them.

James Garrett Costco free samples...and of course, the bearded one...Brian

Wilson

Krystle Petrohovich Ashton Kucher talked about them. Do you have them in VA.

Sharon Olive Williams In Laguardia airport while searching for a healthy & yummy salty snack! I've been Poppin'em ever since!

Amy Rose Levin I was trying to find some chips in a store but instead I stumbled upon popchips and decided to land there.

Kimberlee Johnson-Rizzo It was the "Snack of the Day" At the Rachel Ray show taping I went to....

Marcie Taylor In the office vending machine! Also through Ashton on Twitter.

Dawn Anne Siskowic I'm so glad you asked....2yrs ago I was at the Grassmont Hospital Women's Center ALL NIGHT LONG as I was videoing the birth of my godson's new little baby daughter.... Well, it was a long evening of waiting & during the waiting periods that were taking place when I didn't have to be videotaping, I found 1 vending machine in the whole place. Well they had Pop Chips in there and in the course of the 14hr wait, I had 6 bags of the BBQ Pop Chips never having had them ever before. Now understand, Potato Chips are the reason I am overweight... Pop Chips have now replaced my love of the old oily potato chips... I AM HOOKED!!!

Sabrina Montoya Palmer in Hawaii, I love Bruno Mars and seen alot of his stuff on your FB page. While grocery shopping on vacation I seen the BBQ kind in the store and I bought a small bag....I went back the next day and stocked