

Sandow's Followers: A Historical Case Study of Brand Community

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Over the past 20 years, marketing scholars have become increasingly interested in the notion of brand communities. A brand community is a “specialized, non-geographically bound on a structured set of social relations among admirers of a brand” (Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001, p. 412). Brand communities differ from traditional brand-consumer relations because within a brand community consumers interact and build relationships among themselves while still maintain the brand a focal point of identification (McAlexander, Schouten, & Koenig, 2002). Furthermore, brand communities have been shown to significantly affect consumer behavior (Carlson, Suter, & Brown, 2008) and brand communities enable organizations to better communicate, establish, and foster rich consumer relationships (Heere, Walker, Yoshida, Ko, Jordan, & James, 2011). Although the study of brand community and the effects of communal consumption is a relatively new trend within academia, the phenomenon described throughout the brand community literature is not exclusive to recent history. What the brand community literature is lacking, then, is the incorporation of historical research and the implementation of a historical case study.

The influential studies on brand community have focused on prominent, modern, successful brands such as Harley Davidson (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995), Jeep (McAlexander, Schouten, & Koenig, 2002) and Saab (Muñiz & O’Guinn, 2001). While these findings have produced significant implications for marketing scholars across interdisciplinary fields, the focus on modern brands presupposes that there is something uniquely “modern” about brand communities. Without the communicative advantages of the Internet and marketing strategies involving social media, one must ask whether brand communities and the markers associated with brand communities existed in earlier periods of history. This research seeks to explore exactly these questions by using historical research methods to analyze whether the modern markers of brand community were present within one of the great international physical culture entrepreneurs of the early twentieth century and his various enterprises: Eugene Sandow.

Eugene Sandow, a nineteenth century European strongman and Vaudeville entertainer, built an international physical culture empire based on his individual fame and personal brand. From selling mail-order exercise programs, exercise equipment, popular physical culture magazines worldwide, and opening an extensive chain of weight training facilities bearing his name, Sandow incited hundreds of thousands of followers to participate in strength training and other types of exercises. Sandow’s rise to international fame, then, represents an ideal historic case study to analyze the markers of a brand community. Muniz and O’Guinn (2011) classified shared consciousness of kind, rituals and traditions, and a moral responsibility towards the brand as markers of brand community membership. Furthermore, Underwood, Bond, and Baer (2011) highlighted group experience, history and traditions, rituals, and a physical facility as markers of brand community within a sport context. Finally, Schau, Muñiz, and Arnould (2009) developed an extensive list of behaviors (i.e., empathizing, governing), which members of brand community actively practice. Within these expected markers and behaviors, then, an analysis of the Sandow brand community can offer a historical dimension to brand community.

For the past decade sport management scholars have questioned the scope of popular research methods used in the field (Amis & Silk, 2005; Chalip, 2006) and several have called for the increased use of historical research methods in the field (Zeigler, 2005; Seifried, 2012). Despite these calls for historical action, de Wilde and Seifried (2012) concluded only three articles from four major sport management publications (i.e., European Sport Management Quarterly, Journal of Sport Management, Sport Management Review, and Sport Marketing Quarterly) between 2005 and 2009 could be classified as implanting the historical research method. The purpose of this research, in addition to adding a historical dimension to understanding brand community, is also to demonstrate the potential benefits of using historical methods in theory based research.

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A thorough analysis of the primary and secondary sources related to Eugene Sandow's rise to international fame served as a starting point for this research. Specifically, the researchers completed an extensive reading of Sandow's Magazine of Physical Culture and contemporary newspaper articles from around the world (i.e., Australia, Great Britain, United States, South Africa), in addition to books written by Sandow himself, to look for markers of brand community development and evidence of brand community practices. The most useful sources discovered were the open forum sections of Sandow's magazine titled "Sandow Magazine Readers' Club" and "Notes of the Month," both of which featured consumer-to-consumer communication as the articles were written by Sandow's followers. The data were approach in a deductive method, as the potential codes and categories were compiled from the brand community research.

Preliminary results indicate the presence of several markers of brand community as well as consumer practices. Specifically, consciousness of kind was the marker most frequently coded by the researchers. Moreover, history and rituals and tradition were slightly less popular while physical facilities were hardly ever mentioned, perhaps due to the international nature of Sandow's enterprises. From a consumer behavior perspective, examples of evangelizing, badging, customizing, empathizing, and justification were all present in the data. For instance, several readers spoke proudly of their experiences at Sandow Schools and with various Sandow products. One consumer wrote to Sandow's Magazine of Physical Culture, "I purchased one of Sandow's Developers and used it gently for six months and I improved wonderfully." He continued, "I also bought a pair of Grip Dumb-bells...I am making special study of his work and have got many of my friends to use his developers and dumb-bells. His system is the finest in the world" (Wood, 1901, p. 65). Examples such as this abound in the data, and strongly indicate that although Sandow's brand rose to fame long before the technological innovation and speed of information of today, the rise of brand communities followed similar pathways in the nineteenth century.

Despite a number of rival strongmen and physical culturists, Eugen Sandow's brand was arguably the most well known. Hundreds of thousands (Sandow claimed one million) of people changed their lives to follow Sandow's teachings and exercise system, and adopted the Sandow brand as their point of social identification. These men, women, and children were dedicated to his exercise programs, purchased Sandow exercise equipment (i.e., dumbbells), read his magazine and books, recruited additional Sandow readers and followers, and even organized "Sandow Schools" (gyms that taught the Sandow system). Although other factors contributed, the data demonstrate that brand community played a major role in creating this dedicated legion of physical culturists. While the study of brand community is a relatively new trend across marketing, this research indicates that the phenomenon of brand communities has much deeper historical roots.