

**DEVELOPING AND MANAGING BRAND COMMUNITIES
THROUGH EVENT MARKETING STRATEGIES**

BY

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Declaration

I hereby declare that, except where duly acknowledged and referenced, this research study is entirely my own work and has not been submitted for any degree or other qualification in the Waterford Institute of Technology or any other third level institution in Ireland or abroad.

Vasileios Charitsis

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Abstract

As the market landscape keeps evolving with a blistering pace and traditional marketing approaches are no longer effective in delivering competitive advantage there is a need for new marketing strategies to be implemented. The concept of brand communities has been attracting increasing attention as it provides a platform upon which various kinds of strong relationships centered around a brand can be established, providing a multitude of positive outcomes for brands. The purpose of this study is to explore the role of event marketing strategies in developing and managing brand communities.

The focus of the present study was placed on the higher education sector and the role of event marketing in building alumni associations. The chosen research methodology was qualitative as the primary data for this study was collected through semi-structured interviews with both alumni officers and alumni members which allowed the researcher to gain an in-depth understanding of the investigated phenomenon.

This research revealed a number of significant findings that add to previous literature and contribute to managerial practice as well. The findings indicate that event marketing strategies reinforce overall community feelings within alumni associations and can have a positive impact on alumni's referral and contributing behaviour towards the institution, on their intention to return to the institution for

further education as well as on their involvement with the institution. Based on the findings of the primary research a number of managerial recommendations were also made to enhance the effectiveness of event marketing strategies in building alumni associations.

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Chapter 1 Introduction

1.1 Chapter overview

The current study examines the role of event marketing in developing and managing brand communities. The study seeks to explore how event marketing strategies can influence the relationships developed within brand communities and more particular within alumni associations of higher education institutions. It also examines the various outcomes that derive from the influence that event marketing can have on the development of alumni associations.

This chapter serves as an introduction to the present study and provides an overview of the main components of the thesis. First the rationale for undertaking this study is explained which leads to a discussion of the research question and objectives that are subsequently outlined. The structure of the thesis is then presented and the content of each chapter is briefly discussed. Finally the limitations of the present study are noted and the benefits of this study are underlined.

1.2 Rationale for the study

The first traces of marketing can be found in ancient societies, where the trading of goods and services was a prominent social activity (Davies 1995, Zinkhan and Williams 2007). But, while marketing practices can be traced back to ancient times, it was only in

the twentieth century that these practices were accompanied by theory and supported by research so as to establish marketing as an academic discipline in its own right (Shaw and Jones 2005). During that century, the world experienced unprecedented technological and socioeconomic changes which, of course, had a major impact on the function of marketing (Wilkie and Moore 2003). Having entered the new millennium marketing faces an uncertain future (Holbrook and Hulbert 2002) as many traditional marketing approaches that were once successful, are no longer relevant (Shaw and Jones 2005, Schultz 2001). Thus, both the concept and the practice of marketing needs to be refocused (McCole 2004) in order to address and meet the needs of the modern marketplace (Schultz 2001).

In fact, over the last hundred years marketing thinking and practice has evolved from distributing products to the market, to marketing the products to the consumers, while in recent years there have been increasing attempts to engage consumers in the marketing process (Lusch 2007). But in order to achieve that, marketers need to establish meaningful relationships with consumers. Indeed, many studies over the past two decades have highlighted the role of relationship marketing in attracting and advancing customer relationships (Berry 1983; Morgan and Hunt 1994; Bejou 1997; Grönroos 1997; Harker 1999) that can enhance brand loyalty (Peters and Hollenbeck 2005). However, marketers should not only be concerned in building long lasting relationships with consumers, but they should also facilitate the development of relationships among consumers (Bhattacharya and Sen 2003, Cova and Cova 2002). Therefore, the growing popularity of brand communities in recent years represents a

golden opportunity for marketers to keep existing customers and to attract new ones as well (Prykop and Heinmann 2006).

In order to grasp that opportunity, brands have to find ways and resources to facilitate the development of brand communities. Even though some brand communities may emerge without the brand's interference, it is the marketers' responsibility to help them grow (Ferguson and Hlavinka 2006), because while some brand communities may develop and thrive on their own (Muniz and Schau 2005), not all consumption communities are self-sustaining (Achrol and Kotler 1999). However, while a significant number of studies have highlighted the benefits that can accrue to brands that manage to establish robust brand communities, little research has been conducted to explore how brands themselves can facilitate the development of brand communities (Davidson et al. 2007), or even whether every aspect of brand communities can be actually, equally and unequivocally, applied in all consumption community contexts (McAlexander et al. 2002). Additionally, the majority of recent studies have focused solely on virtual brand communities (communities developed on the Internet). But, while the internet may be an extremely useful tool in the hands of marketers, it has been suggested in the literature that brand communities that are based exclusively around the Internet exhibit certain limitations (Rocco 1998, Putnam 2000, Koh and Kim 2004, Shang et al. 2006, Rothaermel and Sugiyama 2007). Thus, there is a need to explore other approaches which could prove effective in building and managing brand communities.

One such approach that has all the attributes to play a key role in developing brand communities is event marketing. Event marketing is an experiential marketing communication strategy that, unlike traditional marketing approaches, promotes active consumer participation and provides a platform for interactive communication between marketers and consumers that encourages the formation of relationships among consumers (Wohlfeil and Whelan 2005, Whelan and Wohlfeil 2006). It could, therefore, have a significant positive impact on the main elements of brand communities.

Thus, further research that would examine the development of brand communities through event marketing strategies would not only contribute to the existing literature but could provide useful recommendations for marketing practitioners as well.

1.3 Research question and objectives

The research question is the basis of every research project. A clearly defined research question is essential as it will determine the necessary steps that need to be taken in order to address the research problem and meet the research objectives (Saunders et al. 2007). However, while in most research strategies (e.g. descriptive studies) the research question is rigidly developed from the very start of the project, in exploratory studies the research question may be subject to refinement and revision as new possibilities may emerge along the way (Ghauri 2004).

The research question for the present study is as follows:

“What is the role of event marketing strategies in building and managing brand communities?”

To address the research question a number of research objectives were formulated that outline the goals of the study:

1. To explore how event marketing can affect the relationships developed within brand communities.
2. To investigate whether event marketing strategies can have a positive impact in the development of brand communities.
3. To identify and investigate the positive managerial implications that may accrue to the brand from using event marketing strategies for managing brand communities.
4. To explore whether alumni associations of higher education institutions display characteristics of the brand communities' concept
5. To investigate whether aspects of the brand community model can be applied and promoted through event marketing strategies, in the management of alumni associations in the higher education sector.

Due to the exploratory nature of the project, a qualitative approach was deemed most suitable in order to achieve these aims and objective. The primary data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with a selected sample of alumni officers and alumni members to ascertain the views of managers as well as of consumers. The use of semi structured interviews was the chosen approach to allow for the gathering of rich and detailed data that would provide thorough insights into the role of event marketing strategies in the development of alumni associations. A detailed description and justification of the methodology used in this study is provided in Chapter 4.

1.4 Structure of the thesis

The present thesis is comprised of seven chapters. This first chapter provides a brief overview of the thesis.

Chapter 2 and Chapter 3 constitute the literature review. In Chapter 2 the concepts of brand communities and event marketing are presented and the relevant studies are critically analysed. Brand communities are defined, their characteristics are analytically described and their role and importance in modern marketing practice is discussed. The chapter continues by introducing event marketing as an innovative marketing communication strategy that is based on the experiential approach to marketing. The ability of event marketing strategies to successfully build brand communities is explored and the potential positive outcomes are discussed. Finally, based on the reviewed literature, a theoretical framework that outlines the role of event marketing in

building and managing brand communities is developed. Chapter 3 proceeds with an analysis of the development of marketing in general and relationship marketing in particular in the higher education sector. The importance of the alumni association as the institution's brand community is outlined and the role of events in developing and managing alumni associations is discussed. Finally, the theoretical framework presented in Chapter 2 is modified and set in the higher education milieu.

Chapter 4 presents the methodology employed in the primary research phase of this study. The research problem is described and the research question and objectives are outlined. The chosen research approach and data collection instrument are justified, and the interview protocol and content are discussed. The data analysis process is described and the accuracy of the findings is defended.

Chapter 5 presents the findings of the primary research. The data are presented in the order of the research propositions that were developed from the theoretical framework in Chapter 3 of the literature review. Data not directly linked to the theoretical framework are also presented as they provide valuable additional insight regarding the examined phenomenon. Chapter 6 presents a discussion of the findings. The key issues that emerged from the primary research are outlined and analysed in relation to previous relevant studies, thereby emphasising where this study has made contributions to both the literature and managerial practice, and where there are fruitful avenues of future research.

1.5 Benefits of the study

The concept of brand communities has attracted a considerable amount of interest in the last decade both from academics and marketing practitioners. However, the benefits that can accrue from brand communities will not be fully harvested unless we shed more light in certain areas that have not been thoroughly investigated. In particular, Davidson et al. (2007) suggested that we need to further examine how brand communities can be developed and consider the marketers' role in that development, as well as try to explore the applicability of brand communities in various new sectors and industries.

The present study will contribute to the literature as it provides an insight in all these three aspects of brand communities, by examining how an innovative marketing strategy like event marketing can be used in order to build and manage brand communities within the higher education sector. Moreover, the present study will not only add to the academic body of knowledge, but it will also discuss the managerial implications of the findings and provide specific recommendations to marketing practitioners.

1.6 Summary

This chapter served as an introduction to the current research study. The research question and the objectives of this study were presented, and the rationale behind his study was outlined. The chapter also gave an overview of the structure of the thesis and

summarised the benefits of this study. The next two chapters will review the literature pertinent to this study.

Chapter 2 Literature Review

Building Brand Communities through Event Marketing

2.1 Chapter Overview

The purpose of this chapter is to review and critique pertinent studies in brand community and event marketing literature in order to explore the reasons and the implications of using event marketing strategies for the development of brand communities and provide a relevant theoretical framework for this study. First, the concept of brand communities is introduced and its characteristics are discussed. After that the importance of brand communities is emphasised while possible threats and positive outcomes that derive from them are presented. Subsequently, the different ways of developing brand communities are presented and the concepts of experiential and event marketing are introduced. This is followed by a comparison between event marketing and traditional marketing approaches and an analysis of the positive influence that event marketing can have on the development of brand communities. Finally the various managerial implications are also discussed.

2.2 Introducing Brand Communities

For many years, marketers have searched for marketing communications' Holy Grail that would guarantee brand loyalty and thus perpetual profits for their companies

(McAlexander et al. 2002). In the past the function of marketing was restricted in developing, promoting and supplying products that would keep customers happy (Buttle 1996). However, as consumers nowadays expect more from brands, customer satisfaction alone is no longer enough and does not lead to brand loyalty (Oliver 1999). Therefore marketing needs to evolve and go beyond its traditional transactional role (Palmer 1997). In order to ameliorate their brand-building programs, marketers need to explore and understand the behavioural habits of consumers (Keller 2003). It has been recognised that consumers do not just buy brands because they like them or they find them useful, but because they are more interested in the social relationships that can be developed around these brands that will enhance their lives (Fournier 1998, Cova and Cova 2002, Prykop and Heitmann 2006). In fact, for the past two decades, many academics have stressed the importance of relationship marketing as an effective way to attract, maintain and enhance customer relationships (Berry 1983; Morgan and Hunt 1994; Bejou 1997; Grönroos 1997; Harker 1999). While products and even services can be copied by competitors minimizing the competitive advantage of a brand, it is impossible to duplicate long lasting relationships with customers (Buttle 1996). Therefore, in our extremely competitive times, the main aim of modern marketing practitioners is how to build strong enduring relationships with consumers (Bhattacharya and Sen 2003) but also how to facilitate the development of relationships among consumers (Cova and Cova 2002). As a result, the concept of brand communities that has been introduced and extensively studied in the last decade (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001; McAlexander et al. 2002) can become a powerful tool for marketers

who wish, not only to keep existing customers, but to attract new ones as well (Prykop and Heitmann 2006).

2.2.1 Community: A phenomenon in flux

People have been building up communities since ancient times, as in order for societies to progress, people have to engage in reciprocal relationships and build community networks (Putnam 2000). In modern societies though, individualism prevailed as the ties between people became weaker. In fact, various forms of community (family, village, religion etc.) were perceived in a negative way as the social ties that were developed within those communities were seen as a hindrance to personal freedom (Cova 1997). However there are signs that this era of individuality is coming to an end (Maffesoli 1996). One can understand that just by noticing how many times the word community is being mentioned everyday in the news. Having achieved to liberate themselves from the constraints and obligations of traditional forms of communities, people nowadays are seeking again to develop new communal types of relationships (Cova 1997). But, the meaning of the term community does not remain stable; it keeps changing as it describes a phenomenon that is changing. Many twentieth century definitions highlighted the common geographic location as one of the main features of communities (Fischer et al. 1996). For instance, Warburton (1998) argued that the two basic attributes of communities are: (a), the relationships between members of a community and (b), the relationships between members and the place in which the community is set.

Indeed, traditionally communities were developed within a restricted geographical area. A neighbourhood, a village, or a town were the common settings where communities were able to flourish (Obst et al. 2001). But the gigantic technological progress of the twentieth century and the introduction of new means of transport and communication has diminished distances and freed people from the constraints of a geographically based community. The growth of mass media has also been credited for the resurrection of community, as in a mass-mediated environment the traits of the traditional geographic communities can be replicated (Muniz and O’Guinn 2001). In fact, Anderson (1991) argued that most modern communities have to be imagined because their members will never meet or know most of the other members, but in their minds they develop a strong sense of communion with each other. Therefore, McMillan and George’s (1986) definition gives a more accurate account on communities in our times:

“a sense of community is a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members’ needs will be met through their commitment to be together” (p. 9)

This definition highlights four key features of a community:

(a) Membership: is the sense of belonging to a like-minded group of people and is defined by boundaries as it illustrates both those who are in the community and those who are outside the community

(b) Influence: refers to fact that the community matters to its members but also that each individual member is important for the well-being of the community,

(c) Integration and fulfillment: reflects the perception that the members will be able to fulfill their needs within the community, and

(d) Shared emotional connection: is the conviction that the members have common experiences and history that tie them together (McMillan and George 1986).

Thus, it becomes apparent that in modern societies the most important element for establishing and developing communities is the relationships between people (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001). While in the past community membership was not always voluntarily but unavoidable and imposed by geographic location (Pahl 1995), in our times we experience the development of what Maffesoli (1996) called the "elective sociality" as people choose the community networks that they join. Banks and Daus (2002) proclaimed that a community attachment is a psychological connection that is based on the gains that stem from cohort groups, and can in fact, be the end product of a number of diverse types of interaction. One can actually observe that in modern societies, as people develop communities based on their hobbies, work, education religious beliefs and even their consumption habits (Putnam 2000; McAlexander et al. 2002; Koh and Kim 2004).

2.2.2. Consumption as the Foundation Stone of Modern Day Communities

While Boorstin first reported the existence of consumption communities, of communities based around people's consuming behaviours, back in 1974 (McAlexander et al. 2002), it is only in the last two decades that thorough and systematic studies on these communities have been conducted. According to Achrol and Kotler (1999, p. 160) a customer community is a body of consumers who are involved with a company in a social relationship. While in their study, Achrol and Kotler (1999) underline that the main trait of customer communities is the net of relationships that are developed between members of the community, their definition fails to recognize that, as it focuses exclusively on the interaction between the consumers and the company. A more precise definition of the communities based on consumption choices came from Schouten and McAlexander in 1995. In researching the relationships developed between Harley Davidson motorcycles owners they introduced the term "subcultures of consumption" to describe "distinctive subgroups of society that self-select on the basis of a shared commitment to a particular class, brand, or consumption activity" (Schouten and McAlexander 1995, p. 43). This definition makes a clear assertion that consumption communities have two main features: a voluntary character and a sense of commonality that exists between the members. The voluntary character of consumer communities is important and distinguishes them from traditional communities. However, while Schouten and McAlexander's (1995) analysis of the Harley Davidson motorcycling community was very influential for subsequent studies, the term "subculture of consumption" itself indicated that such communities existed only on the fringes of

society and exhibited a number of characteristics that could not be found in other consumption communities. To cover that gap Muniz and O’Guinn introduced the more stylish term “brand communities” which more accurately described a wider range of consumption communities (De Burgh-Woodman and Brace-Govan 2007). In their seminal paper, Muniz and O’Guinn (2001) suggested that a brand community is

“a specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relationships among admirers of a brand” (p. 412).

The Latin school of marketing, which declines the individualistic approach of social interactions and focuses on the notion that people want to share their experiences - even their consumption experiences - with other people, adopted the term “consumer tribes” to describe “any group of people that possess a common interest in a specific brand and create a parallel social universe (subculture) rife with its own myths, values, rituals, vocabulary and hierarchy” (Cova and Pace 2006, p. 1089). Cova and Cova (2002) maintained that consumer tribes are significantly dissimilar to brand communities, with two of the main differences being that consumers tribes are more ephemeral (as the bonds among the members of the tribes are not very strong) and less commercial than brand communities. However, Pace et al. (2007) argued that although tribes and communities exhibit some differences their main traits are the same. In fact, the Latin school of marketing has acknowledged that there are no generally accepted differences between brand communities and consumer tribes, and as a consequence most authors tend to use these terms with no differentiation (Cova and Pace 2006).

Studies on consumption communities initially focused on communities developed around niche, prestigious or luxurious brands that not many people can consume like Jeep (McAlexander et al. 2002), Harley Davidson (Schouten and McAlexander 1995), or Saab (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001). Patterson and O'Malley (2006) suggested that not every brand can trigger the development of a brand community, and it is usually brands that display strong elements of religiosity, utopianism, authenticity and narratives that are more likely to establish a successful brand community. Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) claimed that it is more likely that brand communities would form around things that are consumed in public. On the other hand, they also suggested that although brand communities are most likely to form around brands with a strong and established image, a long and rich history and threatening competition, it is possible that brand communities may develop around any brand. Schouten and McAlexander (1995) on their study on subcultures of consumption were more emphatic on this point, stating that any consumer activity, no matter how ordinary or customary it may be, can encourage people to form consumption communities. If we accept that in our days even sand can be branded (Hill et al. 1998) there is no reason not to claim that the same thing can happen with brand communities. Indeed, as Sicilia and Palazon (2008) noted, more recent studies have shown that brand communities have been developed around very commonly used brands like convenience products (Cova and Pace 2006), magazines (Davidson et al. 2007) and higher education institutions (Schouten et al. 2007). McAlexander et al (2003) even claimed that evidence of brand community features can be found in the milieu of gambling casinos. As the concept of brand communities has been receiving growing attention from both academics and marketing practitioners, its

applicability has been extended to many different areas like politics (Delevan 2008), financial services (Fraering and Minor 2006) and the charity sector (Hassay and Peloza 2009). Moreover, Andersen (2005) indicated that brand communities are not restricted in a business -to- consumer context but they can also be found in business- to- business environments. Pace et al. (2007) even argued that small and medium-sized enterprises could use brand communities for their benefit allowing individual entrepreneurs to gain competitive advantages over bigger established brands. So, it can be argued that irrespective of the nature or the size of the brand, groupings of people with distinct characteristics may emerge, as consumers are getting increasingly eager to meet and form relationships with people who share their enthusiasm for the same brands.

2.2.3 Characteristics of brand communities

Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) identified three main characteristics of brand communities:

(a) Consciousness of kind: is the sense of belonging to a group of people with the same habits, lifestyles and even way of thinking. It is the mutual bond between members of the community and at the same time the common feeling of being different from those outside the community

(b) Shared rituals and traditions: communicate the crux of the brand, celebrate its history and serve to bind members of the community together, and

(c) A sense of moral responsibility: is the intrinsic feeling of commitment that members have towards the community in general and to every individual member as well. (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001)

A lot of similarities can be found between the characteristics of brand communities and those of more conventional forms of communities. Like strong traditional communities, thriving brand communities are devoted, tightly knit groups that show earnest support to their members (Banks and Daus 2002). There are three interconnected elements that constitute a brand community's consciousness of kind: first, a cognitive identification, which is the consumer's self-belief that s/he is a member of a unique and distinct brand community, second, an affective commitment that signifies the emotional sentiments and the connection to the community and third a collective self-esteem which accrues from being a member of the brand community (Bagozzi and Dholakia 2006). On the other hand, displaying a high sense of moral responsibility is paramount for the cohesion of the brand community and for taking collective action (Shaw 2007). Thus, consciousness of kind echoes the "sense of community" from McMillan and George's (1986) definition of community while the sense of moral responsibility can be traced on "the feeling that members matter to each other". Moreover, Cohen (1985) argued that there are two components that characterize a community, similarity and difference. Similarity refers to the common things that tie members of a community with each other, while difference has to do with the things that separate them from people outside the community. Therefore, the sense of community not only signifies what membership is but also what membership is not (Szmigin et al. 2003). By deciding to become

affiliated with a specific group of people, members are making a conscious choice that satisfies their need to belong but also reinforces their sense of uniqueness as they feel different from the rest of the people who do not belong to the same group (Prykop and Heitmann 2006). In a similar manner, consciousness of kind in brand communities, does not only refer to the feeling of attachment towards the other members, but also to the shared feeling of differentiation from those that do not belong to the brand community or belong to a competing brand community. Actually, for brand community members, one of the main expressions of community experience stems from opposition to competing brands and those who use these brands (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001). Thus, it is correct to claim that while a brand community is a specialized type of community because it is formed around a commercial brand, it is actually a legitimate type of community (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001). And as a genuine form of –modern day– community, the fundamental feature of a brand community is the relationships between its members.

It has already been outlined that brand communities do not consist of members who have an inherent characteristic, but they are “communities of choice” comprised of people who express a wish to join a community in order to celebrate their commitment and devotion to specific consumer behaviour. As, generally, brand communities are open group entities, each person has the option to decide with which s/he wants to be associated (Prykop and Heitmann 2006). However, it is important to note that whatever the association may be – geographical, cultural, occupational or an attachment to a brand –, the foundation of every community is a sense of commonality that exists

between its members (McAlexander et al. 2002). What connects brand community members is their common interest and affiliation for the same brand. While this affiliation is not the most vital thing in people's lives, members of a brand community find it quite important and feel it is rational to develop relationships with people who share the same passion (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001). For many people, consumption is not a trivial, necessary activity but it is something that constructs and defines their identity, and by establishing an identity people are able to relate first to themselves and then to other people (Kozinets et al. 2007). Identifying with a brand is actually an active, deliberate and selective process that results from the desire to fulfill self-definitional needs (Bhattacharya and Sen 2003). Keller (2003) argued that people associate brands with other entities like other brands, things, places or people. Moreover, Schouten and McAlexander (1995) stated that consumption communities emerge when people identify with certain consumption habits, through which they, subsequently, also identify with other people. Eventually, consciousness of kind has more to do with the relationships that members create with each other than their connection to the brand (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001). In Cova's (1997) words: The 'link' is more important than the 'thing'.

While consciousness of kind is what signifies a brand community and gives each community its unique character, the other two main characteristics, shared rituals and traditions and the sense of moral responsibility, have also an important role in the multifaceted nature of a brand community. Brands are affixed with certain meanings that are related to societal occurrences and to social ties, hence rituals present an

excellent opportunity to recount these meanings, re-affirm them or even revise them (Cova 1997). These rituals, even if they are something simple and quotidian like a handshake or a waving, reinforce community members' identification and enhance the bonds among them, propagating thus consciousness of kind (Koh and Kim 2004, Muniz and O'Guinn 2001). Celebrating the history of the brand and sharing brand stories and other similar traditions also reinforces consciousness of kind and brings the members of the community closer (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001).

On the other hand, the sense of moral responsibility contributes significantly in the development of a brand community as it creates a strong commitment among its members that may have a positive impact in integrating and retaining community members as well as providing support for the correct use of the brand (Casalo et al. 2008). For example, it has been observed that experienced community members acting out of a sense of moral responsibility can assist new members feel welcomed in the community and ease any of their anxieties about belonging (McAlexander et al. 2002). Moreover, the sense of moral responsibility is the driving force that compels members to take collective action especially in times of threat, as it is has been exhibited in abandoned brand communities (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001, Muniz and Schau 2005).

Apart from the three main attributes -consciousness of kind, shared rituals and traditions, sense of moral responsibility- most brand communities exhibit a multitude of other traits that reinforce their communal character. Schouten and McAlexander (1995) researching the Harley Davidson subculture of consumption found that the members

developed a common ethos, shared the same values and even adopted their own special language. Members' common ethos and values derive from their shared consciousness and are essential for the unity of a brand community, while adopting a common language has the function of distinguishing the members of the community from "outsiders". Their devotion to the brand community can go to such lengths that brand communities may even exhibit religious characteristics (Muniz and Schau 2005). Muniz and Schau (2005) observed that the narratives shared by the members of the Apple Newton brand community include five themes that have strong religious connotations: tales of persecution, tales of faith being rewarded, survival tales, tales of miraculous recovery and tales of resurrection. As this community is developed around a brand that has been abandoned by its creator, these narrative play a vital role in helping the members to keep –what they perceive as- the spirit of the brand alive. Transcending normal everyday life, treating motorcycles with reverence, forming brotherhood relationships are some of the religious aspects also found in the Harley Davidson subculture of consumption (Schouten and McAlexander 1995). Belk and Tumbat (2005) argued that Macintosh devotees are so obsessed with the brand that exhibit the characteristics of a cult, thus they coined the term brand cult. Moreover, Wipperfurth (2005) compared four brand communities with four different religious cults and found many similarities in the ways that they function. It becomes obvious that brands are no longer treated as mere products, but they play a significant role in the lives of many consumers. In the future, we may even have to introduce terms such as "brand-aholics" to describe people who are so obsessed with a brand that their passion and devotion can reach self-destructive proportions.

While some components of brand communities are generally accepted and can be found in all, or most brand, communities, there are some features that are more ambiguous. One of them concerns the matter of legitimacy. Whilst brand communities are usually open social groups that anyone can join, there are some unwritten rules concerning legitimacy. According to Muniz and O'Guinn (2001, p. 419), legitimacy "is the process whereby members of the community differentiate between true members of the community and those who are not, or who occupy a more marginal space". On the other hand, while the common belief is that brand communities' members are fervent admirers of the particular brands that is not always the case. Many times consumers can be active participants of a brand community without actually being fans of the brand. Curiosity or searching for information about a brand can lead them to its community and over time they may become active members (Andersen 2005). It has also been suggested that consumption communities employ hierarchical models and members attain different levels of status within the community depending on their seniority in the community, their level of knowledge regarding the brand, their active participation and commitment to both the brand and the community (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001, Cova and Pace 2006). Schouten and McAlexander (1995) provide a characteristic illustration of military style hierarchical models that can be found within the Harley Davidson Owners Group subculture of consumption: while it is usual for one biker to salute another biker on the road, a biker who attains a higher level of status in the community usually does not salute back a lower ranking member. However, while this sort of hierarchical models may be found in brand communities that are based on face-to-face interaction, communities that appear on the Internet do not generally exhibit hierarchical modes or

status differentiation among their members (Putnam 2000). Moreover, whereas Schouten and McAlexander (1995) found strong hierarchical models in an official Harley Davidson community, Bagozzi and Dholakia (2006) researching small group communities that are developed around the same brand, found, as one would probably expect, no evidence of formal hierarchical structure. Therefore, it can be argued that though a solid hierarchical structure is a vital component of some brand communities it is not necessary for all brand communities to employ hierarchical models.

Another interesting side of brand communities concerns the location (or the lack of it) where the community develops. As Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) stated brand communities are not geographically bound therefore they are not born out of a shared place but, like most modern communities, out of a shared interest (Durkheim 1964, Boorstin 1973, Koh and Kim 2004). However, while there is no need to be geographically constrained like the traditional communities of the past, sometimes brand communities are developed on a certain location, as shared interest groups can also be location-based communities (Koh and Kim 2004). In addition, McAlexander et al. (2002) argue that brand communities can be geographically condensed, scattered or even appear in the non physical world of the internet. Actually, the geographical aspect of brand communities needs to be given serious consideration from marketing practitioners. Banks and Daus (2002) although being ardent supporters of non geographically bound online communities, indicated that accessibility and proximity still play an important role for consumers regarding the communities they choose to join. Cova et al. (2007) researching the communities of the same brand in two different

countries observed significant discrepancies on the way the brand was perceived. Therefore, they suggest that brands should take these differences into consideration and implement locally customized strategies to support their communities across the world.

While some brand communities may exhibit some secondary characteristics that others do not, the three main characteristics –consciousness of kind, shared rituals and traditions, sense of moral responsibility- can be found in all brand communities. Consciousness of kind is the fundamental basis of a brand community, while rituals and traditions play a pivotal role in strengthening the members’ bonds and their commitment to the community and thus reinforcing their moral responsibility towards the other members and to the brand community in general. As a result, the development of a robust brand community can, potentially, become a significant asset in brand management. The research findings of this study, which was focused on communities developed in the higher education sector, will present the characteristics that are exhibited in these communities and discuss the role that they have in the development of the communities.

2.2.4 Brand Communities: Brand’s Friend or Foe?

The commitment and dedication that members of brand communities’ show are apparent, but what does that really mean for the brands? Are brand communities actually capable of providing the much desired competitive advantage to brands? Can they guarantee brand loyalty? Are brand communities the solution in the search for the

Holy Grail of marketing? If the answer to these questions is a positive one, then why is the concept of brand communities not being universally implemented on a daily basis by as many brands as possible? The fact is that while there are several and substantial benefits that can be expected from brand communities, which will be discussed in detail in this chapter, some brands' attitude towards brand communities remain negative as many marketers feel that that brand communities can also pose some threats to their brands. However, this chapter will demonstrate that these threats are more perceived than real, as marketers' are reluctant to embrace approaches that may diminish their absolute power over the brand.

2.2.4.1 Foe? Possible Threats from Brand Communities

According to previous studies (O'Guinn and Muniz 2005, Cova and Pace 2006) some of the problems that brands may have to face from their own brand communities include:

-Oppositional brand loyalty, where the brand community's focal point is essentially its opposition to another brand and its own community.

-Marketplace legitimacy, as brand community members may perceive themselves as the only true bearers of the brand's meanings; questions are raised about who is "allowed" to consume the brand.

-Desired marginality, in a similar fashion to marketplace legitimacy, brand community members might want to keep the community and the brand small and marginal in order to retain the brand's authentic spirit.

-The polit-brand, when a brand community is based on a heavily politicized brand

-The abandoned brand community, which is a brand community that is developed around a brand that has been abandoned by the company that created it.

While these are some threats that have to be acknowledged and taken seriously into consideration, marketers should not be deterred by those issues from assisting the development of brand communities. In polit-brands, members of a brand community may associate the character of a brand very closely with a given political cause or ideology, and in doing so they push people who do not share the same beliefs away from the brand. For instance, a member of the Apple brand community is doing exactly that by proclaiming that "IBM people" are wearing suits and voting for Reagan while "Apple people" are wearing jeans and not voting for Reagan (O'Guinn and Muniz 2005). Closely related to the concept of polit-brand is that of oppositional brand loyalty. The most illustrative example of oppositional brand loyalty can be found in anti-brand communities. Like brand communities are formed by people who identify with a certain brand, anti-brand communities are developed by people who want to express their opposition to a brand. This happens because just like members of a brand community feel a sense of moral responsibility to support the brand that they love, other people feel

a sense of moral obligation to stand against the values that a brand may stand for (Hollenbeck and Zinkham 2006). Furthermore, it has already been discussed that some brand communities exhibit legitimacy issues as members have to be true admirers of the brand in order to be accepted in the community (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001). Brand community members may not only deny entry to the community to those that they feel that are not genuine fans of the brand, but in order to keep the brand as pure and original as possible may try to keep it marginalized by criticizing those who buy the brand for the wrong reasons (Cova and Pace 2006).

The common issue that all these problems raise is that while by having a strong brand community, brands may establish a pool of loyal customers, they may also dissatisfy or even alienate another significant part of the marketplace (Bhattacharya and Sen 2003). It has for example been argued that brands, especially those with a widespread appeal, may not find it beneficial to associate themselves with a specific consumer group because by doing so they face the risk of losing another group (Elsbach and Bhattacharya 2001). While this may be the case, it must be noted that as Upshaw and Taylor (2000, p. 218) explicated stated: "no one brand can or should be all things to all people". Brands, especially successful ones, will always have devoted customers and strong opponents. The Hummer vehicle is such a case, where the brand's community has some fervent and high profile admirers as its members but at the same time the brand attracts a lot of negative criticism and publicity by the actions of numerous fierce foes (Luedicke and Giesler 2007). As they say, those who will try to satisfy everyone will satisfy no one, and brands may bitterly experience that, as in trying to satisfy

everyone they can lose all those distinct elements that make them unique. For example, unconventional and alternative brands, trying to market themselves to a bigger more mainstream set of consumers entail great risks of diminishing their appeal and diluting their identity (Schoouten and McAlexander 1995).

On the other hand, the abandoned brand community reflects another issue which has to do with the ownership of the brand and which most marketers feel is the biggest threat poised by brand communities. Muniz and Schau (2005) described how the members of the Apple Newton brand community, a brand community formed around a brand that has been abandoned by marketers; act as the rightful owners of the brand as they feel that they are responsible to keep the brand alive. As a result, tasks like service, assistance, introduction of new applications, which are usually performed by the brand owners, are being carried out by the members of the community. Therefore, brand communities by showing so much dedication to the brand, may also claim ownership rights (Cova and Pace 2006). These claims of course are not economic, but have more to do with decisions affecting the evolution of the brand.

For some brand fans, brands are not privately owned by companies but they are a shared cultural property (Holt 2004, Cova and Pace 2006, Bonnemaizon et al. 2007). And while marketers may not care if the brand community overtakes the management of an abandoned brand, they can become very apprehensive if they feel that the brand community acts at its own will without following the brand's directives. Therefore, many firms are afraid of losing control are scared that by connecting their customer base

through the channels of a brand community they will trigger a power shift from the firm to the consumer (Banks and Daus 2002). For instance, if a brand community rejects a new marketing direction it has the power through its members to make it difficult to the marketers to implement their plans (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001). This may lead to the phenomenon of 'brand hijack', where consumers usurp the role of marketing professionals to decide the brand's future (Cova and Pace 2006). Wipperfurth (2005, p. 12) defines brand hijack as "the consumer's act of commandeering a brand from the marketing professionals and driving its evolution" and makes the distinction between serendipitous hijack, where brand fans take control of the image and the direction of the brand without the consent of the brand's marketers, and co-created hijack, where the brand actually welcomes consumers and communities to co-create the brand's profile in order to attract more customers. While brand hijack, especially serendipitous, may entail some risks, many recent successful brand conceptions are the result of either serendipitous (Napster, Dr. Martens) or co-created (Red Bull, The Blair With Project) brand hijack (Wipperfurth 2005). Thus, one cannot help but wonder: does brand hijack pose a real and serious threat to brand or is this actually the true role that brand communities have to play in the modern super-antagonistic market environment?

2.2.4.2 Friend: The benefits of brand communities

By becoming involved in a brand community, members of brand communities demonstrate that they are not docile puppets dancing to the tune of the marketers, but they are active consumers who have a significant role to play in modern consumption

societies. As Arvidsson (2005) states, consumers in our times can no longer be perceived as passive victims of the producer interests, as they become actively involved in the construction of the value of consumer goods and services. Actually, a growing number of scholars and marketing practitioners are acknowledging that nowadays, managing a successful brand cannot be done solely by brand representatives but it has to be a co-operative affair between brand managers and consumers (Brown et al. 2003, Wipperfurth 2005, Szmigin et al. 2005, Bagozzi and Dholakia 2006, Kozinets et al. 2007). Therefore through brand communities modern day consumer becomes a “bricoleur” (Cova et al. 2007), a “co-creator” (Prahalad and Ramaswamy 2000) of brand meanings. Thus, brand communities can play an active role in shaping and defining the brand and by doing so they can be an integral element of the identity and the history of the brand (Muniz and O’Guinn 2001).

Brands carry an array of meanings, a set of stories that make them unique. But their meaning is ever evolving by new stories added and associated to the brand (Brown et al. 2003). Products may be created in laboratories or factories, but brands are generated and developed in societies with the dynamic involvement of the consumers (Muniz and O’Guinn 2001). When people consume a product or use a service they become part of it, they alter it and give a new meaning to it (Cova et al. 2007). Brand meanings may initially be created by marketers and then conveyed to consumers, but likewise consumers add their own meanings and transmit them back to the marketers (Brown et al. 2003). In that discussion, brand communities have a crucial role to play, as they can be the means of communication between the brand and the consumers (Muniz and

O'Guinn 2001). Brand community members are eager to provide feedback to marketers (McAlexander et al. 2002). Hence they provide a great opportunity for marketers to reach and interrelate with consumers who are interested in the well-being of the brand (Schouten and McAlexander 1995). Therefore, the practice of marketing and brand management gets a new direction. It is no longer a one-way correlation, where the company shapes and defines all the parameters, but a cooperative affair, as with the advent of brand communities the consumer has a significant function to fulfil in the marketing process (Cova et al. 2007). As Wipperfurth (2005) suggests in his brand hijack manifesto, in our times brand managers have to start realizing that their brands does not belong just to them but they belong to the market as well, therefore they should allow consumers to help in shaping their brands. And what better way to do that, than by having a strong and dynamic brand community willing to give ideas, propose alternatives and engage in a constructive dialogue with marketers?

Apart from contributing to the whole image and identity of the brand, brand communities can offer a multitude of other more tangible and direct benefits. Algesheimer et al. (2005) argued that in order to measure the benefits that accrue from brand communities and be able to compare them with the positive effects of established forms of marketing like advertising, it is crucial to comprehend how consumers can be influenced by brand communities and what parameters can increase this influence. To better understand the emerging popularity that brand communities attract, it is necessary to investigate the reasons that lead people to form relationships around their most loved brands. The question that has to be answered is why are some consumers willing to

dedicate a fairly big part of their limited spare time to engage in an activity that does not seem to render any direct economic or other personal benefit for them?

In order to do that we must go back and examine the needs that people satisfy by joining consumption communities. Consumers nowadays believe that it is very natural to participate in a community that celebrates a mass-produced commercial product (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001). This is because goods are not just goods for them, but are a means in order to claim their place in the social world (Schouten and McAlexander 1995). Banks and Daus (2002) claim that people cannot be fulfilled unless both their individual and social needs are satisfied. Apart from the functional and practical needs that consumers satisfy by choosing certain brands, they also satisfy some psychological and emotional needs that are very important for them (Fournier 1998). More importantly, through identification with a brand, consumers seek to fulfil some of their main self-definitional needs: self-continuity, self-distinctiveness and self-enhancement (Bhattacharya and Sen 2003). Therefore, commercial identities are crucial to them as through them they are able to relate to themselves and to other people (Kozinets et al. 2007). While a growing number of brands are trying to build relationships with their customers (Bhattacharya and Sen 2003), they fail to recognize that what consumers primarily seek is not to establish relationships with intangible brands, but with other human beings. Actually consuming a brand is closely connected with engaging in conversations about the brand with other people (Schlosser and Shavitt 2002). According to Algesheimer et al. (2005, p. 21) community engagement refers to the positive influences of identifying with the brand community, which are defined as the

consumer's intrinsic motivation to interact and cooperate with community members. And as it has already been emphasised the vital element that cements the construction of a brand community is the links, the relationships between its members (Cova 1997). As a consequence, the stronger the links between members of brand communities become, the more concrete and substantial benefits brands can expect from them.

A strong brand community can be an additional asset for the brand and enhance its value (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001). In particular, as consumers develop into champions of the brands with whom they identify (Bhattacharya and Sen 2003), members of brand communities can act as brand missionaries relaying the brand's meaning to other consumers and communities (McAlexander et al. 2002). Therefore, brand communities become significant information repositories for consumers and can even operate as consumer agencies (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001). Moreover, by associating with a brand community and accepting its rules, rituals and traditions consumers also become interested in its success and are keen to assist the brand in order to become successful (Algesheimer et al. 2005). Community members feel the responsibility to keep supporting both the brand and the community (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001) They are also more forgiving than other customers when they encounter product malfunctions or low quality of services, and therefore are less likely to switch brands (McAlexander et al. 2002). As consumers usually do not differentiate between the brand and the company that markets it, members of a brand community become also devoted customers of the company and purchase its other products (Aggarwal 2004, Algesheimer et al. 2005). As their commitment to the brand becomes increasingly stronger, brand communities can

produce an additional revenue stream for the brands as their members are eager to purchase goods and services that go beyond the original brand conception, allowing the brand to extend itself (Banks and Daus 2002, McAlexander et al. 2002). For example Harley Davidson, which is a brand that has embraced and promoted the concept of brand communities probably better than any other brand, has managed to extend the brand to many different product categories from clothes and accessories to cosmetic products and alcoholic beverages, which generate around 5% of the company's total revenue (Hiscock 2003). The devotion that brand community members exhibit can also result in another kind of benefits for the brands. Muniz and Schau (2005) outlined how the members of the abandoned Apple Newton brand community out of necessity devised their own appliances and tools to support their favourite brand from getting obsolete. This can actually happen with existing and successful brands as well. It is what Schouten and McAlexander (1995) called the "grassroots Research and Development" phenomenon, where highly committed members come up with their own technological advancements for existing brands.

While it has been suggested that brand communities are mainly a customer retention tool and not a customer acquisition one (Algesheimer et al. 2005), there are actually many ways that brand communities can attract new customers for the brand. As it has been mentioned, brand community members are not always fans or even customers of the brand but mere curiosity about the brand may direct them to its community and subsequently they may become members as well as customers of the brand (Andersen 2005). Once they become members, people develop a sense of camaraderie with other

members as they develop strong social bonds and they may also introduce their friends and relatives to the community and thus to the brand as well (Fraering and Minor 2006). On the other hand, Schouten and McAlexander (1995) studying the Harley Davidson subculture of consumption found that events can attract a lot of positive publicity for the brand and reach a much wider audience.

2.2.4.3 The Importance of brand communities

As brands are intangible concepts rather than tangible objects it is difficult to measure their actual value. The most accepted way to evaluate the strength of a brand is by its brand equity. Aaker (1991) defined brand equity as

“a set of brand assets and liabilities linked to a brand, its name and symbol, that add to or subtract from the value provided by a product or service to a firm and/or to that firm’s customers” (p. 15).

These assets and liabilities that add or subtract value to the brand include brand loyalty, name awareness, perceived quality and brand associations (Aaker 1991, Slazer-Morling and Strannegard 2004, Nykiel 2007). As it has been demonstrated brand communities members are devoted, loyal consumers, who are keen to act as brand missionaries conveying the brand’s image to a wider pool of people, celebrate its quality and create a vast net of relationships around their favourite brand. Hence brand communities can have a positive influence on all those assets that constitute the brand equity and as a

result enhance the overall value of the brand. Moreover, as brands are seen as social entities that are socially constructed, deprived from those social links that are provided by brand communities the value of the brands will decrease in the eyes of the consumers (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001). Thus, it has been argued that in the future successful brands in the marketplace are going to be those brands that will manage to build strong brand communities as there will be a growth in the consumption of brands that can bring people together and a reduction in brands that isolate them (Ferguson and Hlavinka 2006, Cova 1997).

2.3 Building brand communities

As it has been delineated, several studies in recent years have delved into the phenomenon of brand communities highlighting its importance in the modern marketing landscape. That importance is further emphasized by marketing practitioners, as a growing number of brands are eager to leverage the benefits that derive from brand communities. However many brands fail in their attempts to develop brand communities. Therefore, it is important to investigate how brand communities can successfully develop and examine the role that the brand has to play in their development.

2.3.1 The role of the brand in building brand communities

In the past we have witnessed communities initiated by the brands themselves (Schouten and McAlexander 1995, Sicilia and Palazon 2008), communities formed by brand fans with the support of the brands (Cova et al. 2007, Bagozzi and Dholakia 2006), and communities that had no links whatsoever with the brands that they celebrated (Muniz and Schau 2005). There have even been cases where the brand took legal action against communities that were using its symbols without prior consent, like the Ferrero company did against various Nutella fans communities in the last decade (Cova and Pace 2006). On the other hand, it has been suggested that members of the brand community may react negatively when the brand has an active involvement in the community (Algesheimer et al. 2005). However, McAlexander and Schouten (2002) observed the success of Harley Davidson Owners Group rallies, and pointed out that marketers should support their brands communities by organizing brand-related events where members could communicate with each other and their relationships could grow. Cova and Cova (2002) even suggested that marketers should not just take a behind the scenes approach in those events, but get actively involved with the members of the brand community and participate in the rituals. For example, marketers should try and facilitate the integration of new members into the community (Schouten and McAlexander 1995). Thus they would be able to create honest and close links with the brand community.

Achrol and Kotler (1999) suggest that brand communities are not self-sustaining communities but require constant and significant maintenance. While brand communities may come into existence without the help of the brands, it is the marketers' task to help them grow (Ferguson and Hlavinka 2006). However, it must be noted that the role of the marketers is to support the community and not to try to control it (Cova and Cova 2002). To successfully promote the development of a brand community, marketers must have a thorough understanding of the characteristics of brand communities (Fraering and Minor 2006). Therefore, marketers must have a good knowledge of their customer base, and be able to create the right virtual as well as physical environments for the community to develop (Ferguson and Hlavinka 2006).

2.3.2 Virtual Brand Communities

While the characteristics and the benefits of brand communities have been deeply and thoroughly analyzed by many scholars, there have not been many studies that have been able to provide a comprehensive understanding of the formation and development of brand communities, which could be have a practical significance from a marketers' point of view (Davidson et al. 2007). In order to describe the way that brand communities develop there have been attempts to categorize them. For instance, Pongakornrunsilp et al. (2008) identified three types of brand communities: consumer brand communities, which are location based brand communities and the formation of the community is initiated by the consumers; virtual brand communities, again communities created by the consumers but based on the digital environment of the

internet; and brandfest communities which are based on consumers' shared experiences and are co-created by consumers and marketers. However, such a categorization is over simplistic and fails to give an accurate account of the development of brand communities for two basic reasons. First, while virtual and brandfest brand communities are mainly identified by the means that are used for their development, internet and events respectively, the first type, consumer brand community, is classified based on the instigator of the community, in this instance the consumer. There is therefore a lack of consistency on the criteria that are used for the categorization. Secondly and more importantly, the boundaries between these types of brand communities are not as clearly defined as this categorization suggests. For instance, virtual brand communities are not only initiated by consumers but can also be formed by brands (Cova and Pace 2006, Mitussis et al. 2006, Sicilia and Palazon 2008). In fact, companies have realized that with the help of the Internet they can surmount logistic difficulties and develop brand communities easily and cost-effectively (Andersen 2005). Therefore, most brands are trying to take advantage of the potentials of the Internet to create and support their communities and likewise academic research has been geared towards virtual communities (e.g., Szmigin et al. 2005, Shang et al. 2006, Casalo et al. 2008). Sicilia and Palazon (2008) have defined a virtual brand community as

'a group of individuals with common interests in a brand who communicate each other electronically in a platform provided by the company which supports the brand' (p. 257).

However, while no one can deny that the Internet has changed the way we communicate, providing easier and faster interaction between people from all over the world and thus it can be powerful arrow in the quiver of marketing practitioners, studies have shown that building brand communities only via the Internet can be problematic.

Shang et al. (2006) claimed that in virtual brand communities members do not develop strong ties with each other therefore they suggested that instead of considering them as proper brand communities that exhibit certain characteristics we should see them just as forums where strangers swap ideas and experiences. This is because although web-enhanced communication can be more honest, the lack of social cues makes it difficult for members of internet based communities to develop a sense of communality (Putnam 2000). Moreover, Rothaermel and Sugiyama (2001) claimed that live personal interaction, either vocally or face to face, cannot be entirely reproduced in virtual communities. Rocco (1998) suggested that one of the reasons for that may be the fact that in electronic environments it is difficult for people to develop trust in each other. She concluded that in order for trust to be built online some initial face-to-face interaction is required. Hence even for the development and growth of virtual brand communities, regular off-line events that would reinforce the sense of belonging between members are required (Koh and Kim 2004, Shang et al. 2006). Therefore, it is suggested that even in our era of Internet predominance, traditional physical real time events that give the consumers the opportunity to collectively experience the essence of the brand are an essential tool for marketers who want to build brand communities.

2.3.3 Experiential Marketing

Event marketing has its roots in experiential marketing, a marketing approach which has become a powerful tool in the hands of marketing practitioners in the last decade.

“Experiential marketing is a strategy that seeks to intentionally bring to life and animate the brand promise for consumers through staged experiences they have with the brand before they buy, during the buying process and at all touch points they may have with it thereafter” (Lenderman 2006, p.10).

Schmitt (1999) attributes the emergence of experiential marketing to three main causes. First, the omnipresence of information technology that not only has facilitated the way we operate but it has brought a transformation on the media with which we communicate. Second, the supremacy of the brand as everything nowadays is branded; products are not longer seen as carriers of characteristics but as a means to offer customer experiences. And third, the ubiquity of communications and entertainment as everything now acts as a stimulus for communication and entertainment. Lenderman (2006) also adds that the clutter of advertising messages has diminished the effectiveness of mass marketing pushing marketers to try and find new creative ways of reaching consumers who prefer to be connected to brands that employ innovative and outstanding communication methods. This is why branding is no longer just about providing an identifiable trademark, but it attempts to communicate clearly stated brand values that will create unique brand identities which will enable consumers to

experience a subjective contribution to their life (Whelan and Wohlfeil 2006). These experiences are extremely valuable for the customers and can play a momentous role in their future consumption behaviours, and for this reason their immense potential value has to be acknowledged by the brands (Bonnemaizon et al. 2007). The importance of experiential marketing will keep rising as marketing is becoming more and more demanding because of the fragmentation of the media, wise and fastidious customers, and the rise of the “free-thinking” and savvy consumer (McCole 2004, Tsai 2005). Actually we have entered an era that, as Pine and Gilmore (1998) have stated will be defined by an “experience economy” as companies will have to compete on staging and providing experiences to consumers, thus making the consumption experience the main element of brand differentiation (Pine and Gilmore 1998, Schmitt 1999, Ponsoby-McCabe and Boyle 2006, Lenderman 2006). However, experiential marketing, like any other approach, is not devoid of limitations and shortcomings. Caru and Cova (2003) argue that the concept of experience is not yet well defined and thus the experiential approach to marketing lacks a solid foundation.

In the experiential view, the focus is placed on the symbolic, hedonic and aesthetic nature of consumption, as it regards consumption as an act that aims at the pursuit of fantasies, feelings and fun (Holbrook and Hirschman 1982). Essentially, what experiential marketing attempts to achieve is to hit a sensitive chord - emotional, intellectual or both - in each individual consumer and thus create a strong link between the consumer and the brand through shared, but yet unique for each consumer, memorable experiences (Lenderman 2006). After all, in order to build and develop a

successful brand, marketers need to win consumers' cognitive and emotional support and dedication (Schouten et al. 2007). Therefore the role of experiential marketers' is to facilitate the hedonic nature of consumption by providing the appropriate environment that will allow consumer experiences to materialize (Schmitt 1999). In order to achieve that they should employ experiential strategies that could stimulate sensory experiences (Sense), affective experiences (Feel), creative cognitive experiences (Think), physical experiences behaviours and lifestyles (Act), and social identity experiences that derive from connecting the individual consumer to a reference group, a community (Relate), which according to Schmitt (1999) are the five strategic experiential modules. By putting these experiential modules into practise, marketers will be able to obtain an insight into the new, evolving consumer world, employ a successful experiential approach, form a brand experience that is unique and vivid, provide a platform for consumer interactions and have the opportunity to innovate constantly to enhance consumer lives (Tsai 2005).

However in order to achieve all that, marketers need to treat experiential marketing not as another means of pushing their pre-constructed messages to consumers, but experiential strategies have to be implemented in a way that gives the consumers the opportunity to obtain their own individual brand experiences as it is up to each individual consumer to acquire his/her unique experiences (Whelan and Wohlfeil 2006). Successful experiential approaches should acknowledge that each consumer is not just a mere set of eyeballs (Lenderman 2006) as while the setting in which consumer experiences will take place may be conceptualised and constructed by the brand, the

consumer has to be actively involved and engaged (Prahalad 2004). A memorable experience can take place when the brand is communicated to the consumers in an inimitable and impressive way, allowing them to have an active role as participants and not as mere spectators (Morgan 2006). Therefore, to actually be effective, an experience has to be more than an ephemeral offering, a fleeting moment, but it should have a “transformation” capability which could be achieved through the attainment of new skills and knowledge, and the development of self confidence and self image (Morgan 2006).

In contrast with traditional marketing thinking that people only make consumption choices based on the utility of products and services, experiential marketing takes a more holistic approach by acknowledging that consumers, being rational as well as emotional beings, strive to accomplish pleasurable experiences (Hirschman and Holbrook 1982, Schmitt 1999). Experiential needs have been defined as “desires for products that provide sensory pleasure, variety, and/or cognitive stimulation” (Park et al. 1986). Therefore experiential consumption derives from the intrinsic pursuit of happiness as consumers develop consumption habits that provide excitement, challenges, personal accomplishment or even fun for the sake of it (Wohlfeil and Whelan 2006). While the utility or the price of a product will always play a role in consumers’ choices, it has been suggested that an increasing number of customers want something more than mundane everyday consumption, which is why marketers should try to provide their customers with transcendent experiences (Schouten et al. 2007). Moreover, consumers nowadays consider that product and service quality are a given

and search for intriguing brands that can excite their senses, speak to their hearts and stimulate their brains (Schmitt 1999). They no longer base their consumption choices on a cost-benefit assessment but on the expected experiences that they will acquire through consumption (Firat and Shultz 1997). For example, brands like Jeep or Harley Davidson are so successful not only because of their products or their positioning but because of the experience that is associated with owning and consuming these brands (McAlexander et al. 2002). Hence, one of the main points of experiential marketing is that marketers should not just be concerned with customer satisfaction but they should strive to make the consumer emotionally involved with the brand (McCole 2004). Therefore, the traditional marketing thinking that emphasizes only on consumer satisfaction is no longer relevant in the experience economy (Tsai 2005). This stance comes to reinforce Oliver's (1999) position that while loyal customers are usually satisfied customers, satisfaction by itself does not lead to customer loyalty. Loyalty creation is actually a process driven by experience, and it is through experience that the strong connections of brand communities that lead to enhanced brand loyalty can flourish (McAlexander et al. 2003). Therefore, brand building becomes a practice that relies heavily on gaining both the cognitive and the emotional support of the consumers (Ponsonby-McCabe and Boyle 2006). This is why a growing number of companies are using experiential marketing strategies to create experiential links with their customers (Schmitt 1999). Their aim is to make the brand the medium through which their customers will be able to obtain certain consumption experiences which will lead them to forge strong emotional preferences for the brand and thus they will become loyal customers (Wohlfeil and Whelan 2005). Therefore, providing enthralling consumer

experiences is a crucial issue for achieving customer loyalty as customers who have positive brand experiences are more likely to repurchase the same brand and have positive referral behaviour towards that brand (Voss and Zomerdijk 2007).

In practical terms, experiential marketing has to deliver clear and meaningful benefits to consumers; needs to have an aura of authenticity in order to mobilize the marketplace; should employ original and creative methods to connect with consumers; must engage consumers in memorable ways; should aim at shifting power from marketers to consumers who will become champions of the brand; has to facilitate personal interactions between marketers and consumers; and should convey brand messages to consumers when and if they are willing to receive them (Lenderman 2006). Firms could facilitate consumer experience by providing special elements and resources that would add to the value of their brands, like setting up flagship stores (brand lands), or organising special events (brandfests) (Thomas 2004). There are several successful brands that have embraced and successfully implemented the concept of experience marketing. Some notable examples are Nike's Niketowns in several cities of the world and Guinness' Storehouse in Dublin in terms of brand lands, while Harley Davidson's HOG rallies and the Jeep's Camp Jeep are two of the most successful brandfests. These companies that are successful in employing experiential marketing manage to bring their brands into life through interaction, through experience and through events (McCole 2004).

2.3.4 Event Marketing

Driven by the fundamental values of experiential marketing, event marketing tries to create emotional ties through shared consumer experience by offering brand experiences, entertainment and education that will allow consumers to enhance their subjective life satisfaction (Whelan and Wohlfeil 2006). Following that notion, event marketing has been defined as

“the interactive communication of brand values by staging marketing events as 3 dimensional brand-related hyperrealities, in which consumers are actively involved on a behavioural level and which would result in their emotional attachment to the brand” (Wohlfeil and Whelan 2006).

A successful event marketing strategy has to be experience oriented, as it must focus on attracting consumers' interest by communicating the brand meanings through lived experience. Moreover, it should promote interactivity among consumers but also between consumers and marketers. These two elements, experience and interactivity, are vital as it liberates marketers from the constraints of one-way advertising communications because through interactive brand-related events the brand hyperreality can be transformed into a “real-lived” experience that appeals to consumers on a multi sensory level (Whelan and Wohlfeil 2006).

The final two elements that characterize an effective event marketing campaign are self-initiation, and dramaturgy. Self-initiation reflects the marketers' attempts to create an emotional impact on consumers by staging self-initiated marketing-events (Whelan and Wohlfeil 2006). While experiences are unique for each consumer they need extrinsic stimulation from the marketers in order to take place (Schmitt 1999, Kao et al. 2007). Dramaturgy refers to the unique, distinctive and memorable elements that have to be incorporated in an event marketing strategy, similarly to a theatre production, in order to effectively turn the brand into a lived experience (Whelan and Wohlfeil 2006). Actually, the experiential view has several times drawn parallels between the business milieu and a theatrical production. Like a theatrical production, in the marketplace companies bring into play drama, script, actors and active audience participation from the side of the consumers (Pine and Gilmore 1999). The change that has been made by the emergence of experiential marketing is that while in the past the business environment resembled that of a conventional theatrical play where every component had a clearly defined role, the companies were the actors and the consumers the passive spectators, nowadays the marketplace resembles more of the experimental theatre of the 1960's and 1970's where the audience was an active and vital element of the performance (Prahalad and Ramasway 2000, Lenderman 2006).

2.3.4.1 Differences between event marketing and traditional marketing

The main difference between event marketing and more traditional forms of marketing like advertising lies in the fact that with traditional marketing the consumer is a passive

receiver of messages that are conveyed to them through a push strategy, whereas event marketing adopts a pull strategy which allows the consumer to become actively involved in the development of brand meanings (Wohlfeil and Whelan 2006, Lenderman 2006). Furthermore, as event marketing is an offshoot of experiential marketing, it also exhibits the four basic differences that Schmitt (1999) identified between experiential marketing and traditional marketing:

(a) Traditional marketing focuses on functional features and benefits while event marketing on consumer experiences.

(b) Traditional marketing views consumers as rational decision makers while event marketing acknowledges that consumers are both rational and emotional beings.

(c) The methods and the tools that are used in traditional marketing are analytical, quantitative and verbal whereas event marketing employs eclectic methods.

(d) In traditional marketing the product category and the competition are narrowly defined while in event marketing the act of consumption is viewed as a holistic approach (Schmitt 1999).

2.3.4.2 Commonalities between event marketing and brand communities.

Various studies in the past have underlined that shared consumption experience is a decisive factor for the development of robust brand communities which will be able to provide a plethora of benefits to the brand (McAlexander et al. 2002, McAlexander et al. 2003). It is vital to further analyse the reasons why event marketing is a suitable means of promoting the development of brand communities and this can be achieved by presenting the similarities between those two, ostensibly unrelated but yet very similar, marketing concepts.

Lenderman (2006) declares that the biggest impact of experiential marketing may prove to be the empowerment of consumers, as experiential marketing is the physical medium to construct meaning and communal affinity for a brand. Actually, the use of a pull strategy in event marketing gives an opportunity to consumers to actively experience, add and alter brand meanings and thus become a co-creator of brand value and this is the first common feature between event marketing and brand communities, as brand communities also favour consumers' empowerment and their active involvement in shaping and defining the brand. It is important to note that co-creation is not about outsourcing insignificant activities to customers as some marketers would suggest. It actually entails the co-creation of value which derives from consumer experiences and personalised interactions (Lenderman 2006). On a closer inspection, one can find many other correlations, elements and factors that make event marketing a suitable and effective strategy to develop and maintain brand communities. Event marketing

facilitates interactions and encourages the formation of human relationships (Whelan and Wohlfeil 2006) which is the key feature in brand communities. As these relationships are not limited only among consumers but are also developed between consumers and marketers, event marketing; like brand communities, provides a great opportunity for marketers to build a communication channel with consumers and receive constructive feedback (Whelan and Wohlfeil 2006). Also, similar to the way brand communities can create brand missionaries (McAlexander et al. 2002) the personal, one-to one communication with consumers through event marketing can lead to the creation of brand evangelists that will relay the brand messages to other consumers and social groups (Lenderman 2006).

Looking at the bigger picture, event marketing stems from an experiential marketing approach while brand communities are more than related with relationship marketing, because as Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) claimed, building a strong brand community could be a crucial move towards bringing the concept of relationship marketing into life. And while there are some differences between the experiential and the relationship approach to marketing, these two approaches share a lot of common features as well. Both approaches attack established traditional ideas from similar angles. Relationship marketing emerged from the realisation that in modern marketplaces many traditional marketing ideas are no longer relevant, in the same way that experiential marketing was born when scholars acknowledged that marketing ignores the main attributes of consumer behaviour that have to do with hedonistic consumption and emotional involvement. Moreover, both experiential and relationship marketing criticised

particular aspects of established marketing principles. Relationship marketing confronts the model of marketing mix which has become a weak tool and an oversimplified way to explain the function of modern marketing practice. On the other hand, experiential marketing challenges traditional approaches of marketing and especially established theories of consumer behaviour and exposes their weaknesses and faults. Finally, both marketing school of thoughts not identified gaps in marketing theory and practice but attempted to expand and improve the theory in order to better reflect reality and provide more effective tools and methods for marketing practitioners (Podesta and Addis 2003). Apart from the fact that they share a common scientific origination and a mutual rejection for traditional marketing models, their correlation can also be seen clearly because as it has been suggested the aim of relationship marketing is to promote a holistic, personalised brand experience in order to cultivate strong links between the brand and the consumers (Keller et al. 2008). The crux of relationship marketing actually lies in the idea of developing relationships between the customers and the brand. However this idea has also been received with scepticism as studies have underlined the lack of reciprocity in the relationship between brands and consumers (Fournier 1998) and questioned consumers' willingness to engage in relationships with brands (Evans et al. 2004). In order to motivate consumers and compel them to engage in these kinds of relationships, there is a need for innovative brand communication strategies that will pull consumers to the brand message by supplying the setting on which their experiential needs will be met while at the same time they will become engaged with the brand on an emotional level (Whelan and Wohlfeil 2006).

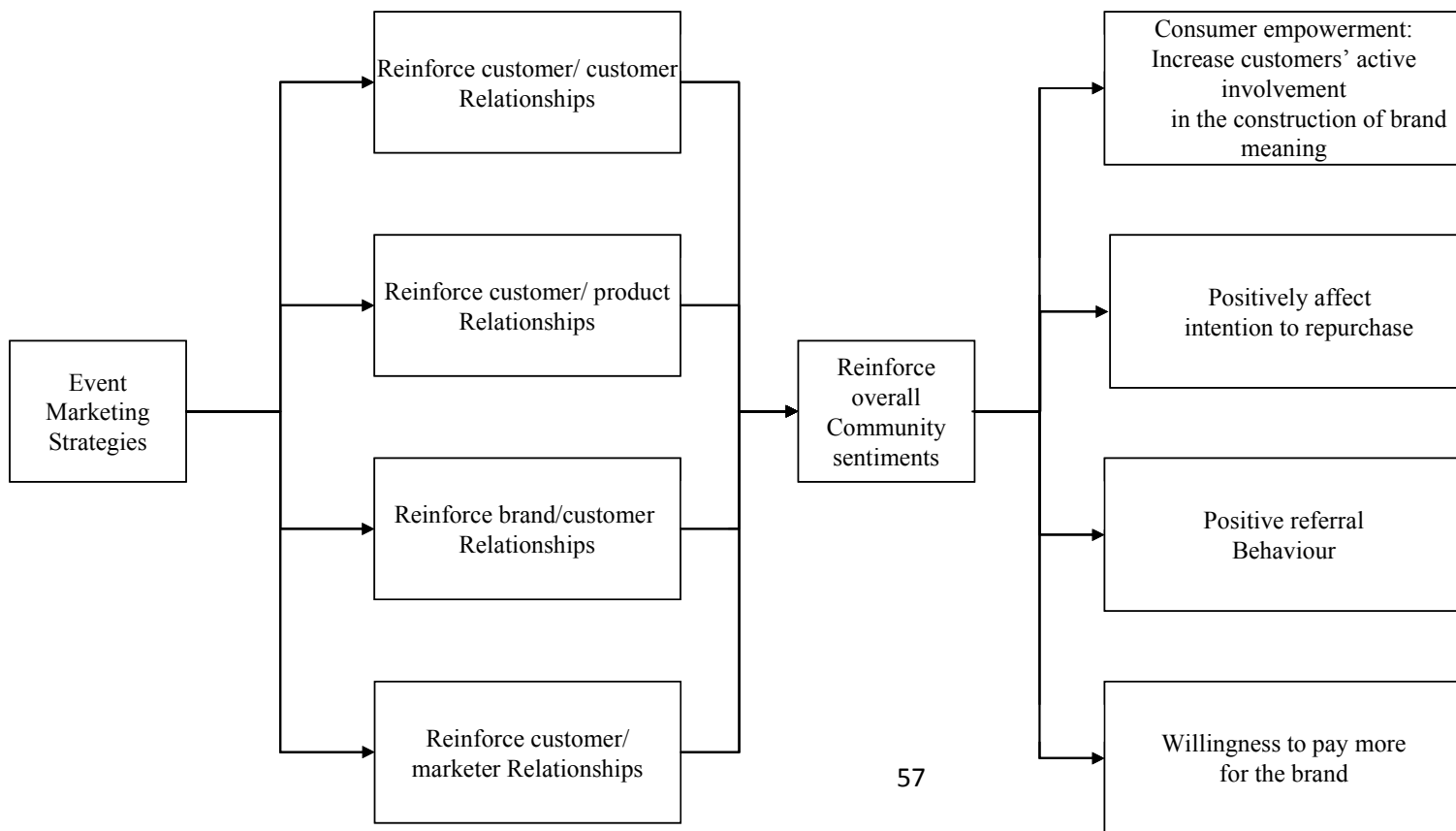
2.3.4.3. Developing brand communities through event marketing strategies

All the above lead us to the conclusion that event marketing strategies can effectively reinforce the community feelings and significantly aid in the development of a strong brand community. After all, event marketing first and foremost is about providing enriched experiences and people want to sense, feel, discuss and share these experiences with other people (Thomas 2004). In contrast with the traditional consumer-brand model, but even with the consumer-brand-consumer model proposed by Muniz and O'Guinn (2001), McAlexander et al. (2002) argued that the relationships that are developed within a brand community are more complex. Brand communities can foster relationships between consumers, between consumers and brands, between consumers and products and also between consumers and marketers. Following this approach, it is envisaged that event marketing strategies can affect positively all these relationships and therefore have an overall positive impact on community sentiments.

This can have significant positive outcomes for a brand. By utilising event marketing strategies and providing meaningful consumer experiences, brands can expect enhanced customer loyalty as customers will be expected to make repeat purchases and give positive word of mouth (Voss and Zomerdijk 2007). Therefore, by building a strong community through event marketing, a brand can expect members to be positively affected in their intention to repurchase the same brand, have positive referral behaviour towards the brand but also be willing to pay more for the brand (Peters and Hollenbeck 2005). Moreover, it is anticipated that by taking part in event marketing strategies

consumers will become more actively involved not only in the community but in the construction of the brand meanings as well (Wohlfeil and Whelan 2006). The following figure (Charitsis et al. 2008, adapted from McAlexander et al. 2002 and Peters and Hollenbeck 2005) gives an overview of how event marketing strategies can positively influence the development of brand communities and presents the various managerial implication that such influence may have.

Figure 1 (Charitsis et al. 2008 adapted from McAlexander et al. 2002; Peters and Hollbeck 2005)



2.4 Summary

As the market landscape keeps evolving with a blistering pace, the new millennium has found marketing at a crossroads as many of the theories and concepts that dominated the field in the last decades are no longer relevant (Shaw and Jones 2005; Schultz 2001). Over the years the focus of marketing thinking and practice shifted from distributing products to the market, to marketing the products to the consumers and more and more in recent times to engaging consumers in the marketing process (Lusch 2007). This chapter demonstrated that the combination of two innovative marketing concepts that are seemingly unrelated but actually share a lot of common themes can be the key for bridging the gap between marketing practitioners and consumers, enabling the latter to become actively involved with their brands of choice and thus changing the business landscape. Brand communities are heralded as one of the hallmarks of post-modern marketing and the means to actually materialize the prophecies of relationship marketing. The numerous benefits that can accrue to the brand from a strong brand community have been thoroughly analysed. It has also been explained that the concerns that some marketers raise have more to do with their fear of losing the absolute control of their brands which signifies their reluctance to leave the established but obsolete marketing processes behind and face the challenges of the future by embracing modern marketing ideas.

Whereas the bulk of academic research in the last few years has been geared towards brand communities that appear and develop in the non-physical environment of the

internet (virtual communities), and while this study does not reject nor underestimate the importance and effectiveness of the Internet as a tool for the development of brand communities, many studies (Rocco 1998, Putnam 2000, Koh and Kim 2004, Shang et al. 2006, Rothaermel and Sugiyama 2007) have presented the limitations, the deficiencies and the drawbacks that brand communities that are developed only on the Internet display. Therefore it has been argued in this chapter that in order to fully reap the benefits of brand communities, marketers need to use 3-dimensional marketing events. Event marketing strategies, being a product of the experiential marketing view, are aimed at getting the consumers emotionally connected with the brand and thus they provide a platform upon which long lasting human relationships can flourish and as it has been stressed in this chapter constitute the quintessential instrument for developing and managing brand communities.

This chapter presented and analysed the concepts of brand communities and event marketing and explained the reasons event marketing is a suitable way to develop of brand communities. It has been argued that while the first studies on brand communities suggested that these communities develop around niche brands, subsequent studies actually showed that the concept of brand communities can be applied to a wide range of brands. The next chapter will scientifically assess the applicability of brand communities in the milieu of higher education institutions through a review of the relevant literature which is the focus of the empirical research for this study.

Chapter 3 Literature Review

Building Alumni Associations through Event Marketing

3.1 Chapter overview

The previous chapter presented the theoretical framework for the development of brand communities through event marketing strategies. The aim of this chapter is to set this framework in the context of the higher education sector, and more specifically to alumni associations. First a review of marketing in the context of higher education is presented and its development is analysed. Then, the importance of relationship marketing in higher education is explored. Subsequently, this chapter focuses on alumni associations and their positive impact on academic institutions is explored. Next, event marketing is introduced as a means of building alumni communities. Finally, a theoretical framework of how events can affect the development of alumni communities is presented and a set of conceptual propositions are developed.

3.2 Marketing in higher education

3.2.1. Introducing higher education marketing

In our times, higher education institutions, facing the challenges of a highly competitive environment and a global economic crisis, more than ever have to find ingenious ways in order to draw new students and attract alternative sources of financial support. In fact,

the effects of globalization have become apparent in the higher education sector. Especially in English speaking nations, higher education institutions have to be able to compete in the international arena to attract both home-based and overseas students (Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka 2006). There are much fewer restrictions for studying and working in foreign countries than in the past, which gives the opportunity to students to choose the institution for their third level education among institutions from different countries making the competition tougher (Mai 2005). And with the higher education sector becoming more and more antagonistic it is becoming imperative for institutions to develop and implement strategic marketing plans (Angulo 2008). Indeed, while in the past most institutions were reluctant to engage in marketing activities, they have since recognised the necessity for marketing strategies and thus try to design and implement marketing campaigns (Opoku et al. 2008). However, despite the fact that its significance has been recognised, marketing has still not taken the place that it should in the strategic vision and operational plans of many higher education institutions (Maringe 2005), and at the same time academic research in the area of higher education marketing is still in its infancy (Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka 2006). One particular marketing theory that is relevant to the higher education sector is relationship marketing (Heckman and Guskey 1998, Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka 2006)

3.2.2 The development of higher education marketing

While research on education marketing is still quite limited, marketing for educational institutions is not a novel practice. In fact, it has been reported that American

institutions have been engaged in activities such as advertising, publicity, lobbying, fundraising and student recruitment since the middle of the 19th century (Kotler and Fox 1995). Academic studies on higher education marketing, mainly theoretical and based on models that had been applied on the business sector, began to emerge in the UK and US in the 1980's (Oplatka and Hemsley-Brown 2004). At the same period higher education institutions started to employ more sophisticated marketing strategies essentially by adopting approaches that were being utilised in the health care sector. (Hayes 2007). That happened because various parallels were identified between the state of things in the health care and the higher education sectors. First, demographic modifications in the 1980's made many hospitals unable to fill their beds forcing them to either close or merge with other hospitals. In a similar way, demographic patterns indicated that the number of potential students in Western countries was gradually diminishing which meant that institutions had to merge, or attract students from around the world in order to survive. Second, in order to follow the rapid technological advances health care institutions had to spend vast amounts of money to improve their facilities. Higher education institutions also had to invest heavily in computer equipments in order to enter the new computer age. Finally, many health care practitioners and providers, having a false or flawed idea about marketing, took a negative stance towards employing marketing techniques as they believed that marketing was not appropriate for the health care sector and could degrade their professions. The same attitudes were prevalent among academics who believed that marketing could dilute the nature and endanger the integrity of the institutions (Hayes 2007).

With the years, the voices of concern faded within the health care sector as marketing experienced significant growth and became a powerful tool that helped many health care institutions to successfully overcome their problems (Hayes 2007). On the other hand in higher education, marketing did not experience the same massive development as it has not been universally accepted and there is indeed significant resistance by some academics towards its implementation (Maringe 2005). However, as the higher education sector becomes increasingly competitive, the notion of employing marketing strategies is being received with more enthusiasm and support among faculty and administrators (Heckman and Guskey 1998), and there are some institutions that lead the way by successfully implementing marketing strategies (Hayes 2007).

3.2.3. Employing marketing strategies in higher education

In order to effectively apply marketing strategies in the higher education sector, institutions have to be recognised as branded organisations that provide a diversity of services and products to a broad range of customers and other stakeholders for whom the brand is meaningful (McAlexander et al. 2004). While some may not accept or support the concept of branding in the higher education section (Chapleo 2007), the notion that a higher education institution constitutes a brand has gathered increasing support in recent studies (Melewar and Akel 2005, Helmsley-Brown and Oplatka 2006, Jenons 2006, Hayes 2007, Hemsley-Brown and Goonawardana 2007, Nicolescu 2009). Gray et al. (2003) presented five dimensions that could enhance the brand position of higher education institutions. These brand positioning dimensions are: an institution's

learning environment (staff, facilities, and research resources), reputation (brand name, achievement and high standard of education), graduate career prospects (graduates' employment prospects and expected income as well as employers' views on graduates), destination image (political stability, safety and hospitality) and cultural integration (religious freedom and cultural diversity). In fact, higher education strategists are more than ever concerned about establishing a favourable image in people's minds for their institutions (Colyer 2005, Lee et al. 2008) as prospective students are highly likely to base their college choices on the brand identity of an institution (Judson et al. 2006). Brand identity has been defined as

“the essence of the way you want the public, your alumni, prospective students, parents and others to perceive your institution. It is another facet of positioning and building institution identity and clarity” (Douglas 2001, p. 140)

However while higher education institutions can be seen as branded organisations they are organisations of a special nature and role in societies. Still, some scholars claim that higher education institutions are like any other organisations and therefore their purpose is to serve the needs of their customers (Maringe 2005). But such an approach fails to paint the whole picture and it is one of the main concerns of many opponents of the use of marketing in the higher education sector (i.e. Sharrock 2000, Gibbs 2007). In fact, marketing in higher education should not be based only around customers' needs and wants as it does in other sectors. There is a need for a broader approach that would take into account consumers' needs, consumers' wants, consumers' long-term interest as

well as the interests of society (Kotler and Fox 1995). This approach, known as societal marketing orientation, holds that:

"the main task of the institution is to determine the needs, wants and interests of its consumers and to adapt the institution to deliver satisfactions that preserve or enhance the consumer's and society's well-being and long term interests" (Kotler and Fox 1995, p. 10).

By adopting a societal marketing orientation it is possible to satisfy even the fiercest opponents of the use of marketing in the higher education sector. Marketing is no longer linked with activities such as sales and advertising that evoke negative reactions from educational practitioners, but is seen as a process that can have a positive impact on both social and economic capital (Gibbs and Knapp 2002). Marketing therefore shifts from selling the institution to taking a more proactive role that will determine the strategies of the future (Redding 2005). As the result of employing well orchestrated marketing strategies, a higher education institution may expect to become more successful in fulfilling its mission, improve the overall satisfaction of its publics, become more efficient in attracting marketing resources and improve the success rate of its marketing campaigns (Kotler and Fox 1995). Furthermore, effective societal marketing programs will allow institutions to attract students from a wider access base and give the opportunity to students from underprivileged backgrounds to enter into higher education (Coates 1998). Therefore, following the spirit of societal marketing

orientation, institutions need to develop and implement marketing campaigns that are suitable for such a distinctive sector as the higher education sector.

While the societal marketing concept seems to provide an alternative approach to marketing that is based on the belief that marketing should place emphasis on promoting society's interests and not only focus on satisfying people's needs, it is not devoid of criticism. Critics of this concept maintain that in fact, societal marketing approach is not entirely different from pure marketing because while it places some interest on the greater interests of society, its main function is still to deliver value to customers (Kaczynski 2008). Crane and Desmond (2002) go even further as to suggest that societal marketing's fundamental suggestions along with its dependence on rational-instrumentalist justifications may even lead to morally dubious or even dangerous outcomes.

3.2.4 Relationship marketing in higher education marketing

One of the problems that higher education marketing faces is that it has incorporated uncritically concepts and methods from the business sector (Maringe 2005). In order for marketing to have a positive impact on the higher education sector and provide significant benefits, marketing theories and techniques that are suitable for this particular sector need to be employed.

It has been underlined that the people who are involved, one way or another, in higher education are interested in establishing educational relationships rather than transactional exchanges (Gibbs 2001). In fact, a higher education institution can foster the development of many different kinds of relationships with various parties of the educational process like students, academic and administrative staff, alumni, parents, local communities and people from other institutions. As there are so many different types of relationship that can be established around a higher education institution, the impact of applying relationship marketing can be multifold. In particular, relationship marketing should result in fewer students transferring out of the institution, more students completing their studies and having a long-term commitment to the institution even after their graduation. In relation to the groups of people from which students are mainly drawn, a relationship marketing approach could enable institutions to offer educational programs that would meet their needs. Moreover, a relationship approach to the community could improve the local area by making the institution more responsive to community needs. And there is no doubt that establishing strong relationships with the various donors, or even potential donors, would be beneficial for the institution and could lead to further donations and overall support (Gibbs and Knapp 2002). Hence, relationship marketing is an approach that can deliver meaningful and positive results to the higher education sector (Tomer 1998, Heckman and Guskey 1998, Gibbs and Knapp 2002).

In the higher education context, relationship marketing has been defined as

“a set of marketing activities or actions that attract, motivate and enhance existing and potential students’ relationships as well as students’ parents, relatives, friends, reference groups for the benefit of all sides concerned, emphasizing on retaining existing students until their graduation, and attracting further students” (Al-Alak 2006, p. 4)

While this definition acknowledges the different sides involved in the relationships established in the academic environment, it is incomplete as it fails to identify a major element of relationship marketing in the higher education sector which is the promotion and cultivation of relationships with students after their graduation through the development of alumni associations. In fact, while attempts of implementing relationship marketing strategies in the higher education sector have so far been limited and inconsistent, institutions have really focused on is the development of long-term relationships with the graduates of the institutions, their alumni members (Heckman and Guskey 1998).

3.3 Alumni associations in the higher education sector.

Historically, the first traces of alumni associations in the higher education sector can be traced back to the beginning of the nineteenth century in the USA, when university graduates were gathered together informally in order to socialize and recount stories from their college years (Fuller 1988). The first formal association was set up at Williams College in 1821, the first alumni fund was established in 1823 at Brown

University while the first alumni secretary was not appointed until 1897 at the University of Michigan (Dolbert 2002, Caboni 2003). In the twentieth century, setting up alumni organisations and providing them with the necessary human and physical resources for their development became a common practice for American institutions (Fuller 1988). As a result of the increase of alumni association, an extensive number of scholarly studies that examined the impact of alumni associations were published on American journals.

However the vast majority of these studies focused solely on the financial impact of alumni associations, in other words the donations of alumni members towards the institutions (e.g. Caboni 2003, Harrison et al. 1995, Tom and Elmer 1994, Bruggink and Siddiqui 1995, Taylor and Martin 1995, Okunade et al. 1994, Clotfeller 2001). While American institutions have been developing alumni associations for more than a century, institutions outside America took much more time to embrace the idea of alumni and establish their own associations. In Ireland for example, Ferdinard von Prondzynski (2009), the president of Dublin City University, has underlined that some institutions have just started to explore the beneficial effects of establishing relationships with their alumni. In order, though, for these relationships to be healthy and beneficial for the institutions they have to be built on a wider and mutual basis and not solely on fundraising (von Prondzynski 2009). In fact, while alumni associations have the ability to generate substantial funds they can provide a much broader and more significant support for the institution (Fuller 1988).

3.3.1 Alumni associations as brand communities

As has already been discussed, higher education institutions are branded organisations (McAlexander et al. 2004) that can be the center upon which many different relationships can be developed (Gibbs 2001, Tomer 1998, Heckman and Guskey 1998, Gibbs and Knapp 2002). The relationships that are developed with and among students, before and after their graduation, are possibly the stronger and most enduring relationships within the educational context. Hence, it has been suggested that an alumni association may be seen as a brand community based around a higher education institution (McAlexander et al. 2004, McAlexander et al. 2006). If that is the case, as with any robust brand community, alumni associations can provide a multitude of positive and beneficial outcomes for higher education institutions. In particular, apart from being an important direct source of revenue through donations, alumni can also assist institutions in attracting new students by encouraging prospective students to join their alma mater (Fuller 1988, Hartman and Schmidt 1995, Heckman and Guskey 1998, McAlexander et al. 2006). Even alumni themselves, by keeping strong ties with the institution through the alumni association are likely to return to the same institution should they wish to further their education (Rhea 1991, Heckman and Guskey 1998, McAlexander et al. 2006). Furthermore, alumni who are highly involved with the alumni association can provide various benefits and opportunities to current students such as career advice or work placements (Mael and Ashforth 1992, Hartman and Schmidt 1995, Heckman and Guskey 1998). Alumni can also play an active role in the affairs of their institutions and help their development from various capacities. For

example, active alumni can serve as members of advisory boards and advise the institution on various issues like scholarships, innovative courses in sync with the demands of the market or the development of new facilities for students (Penrose 2002, Rhea 1991, Heckman and Guskey 1998). Moreover, as alumni associations are generally large groups of people, they have considerable power in relation to important decisions that may affect the institutions (Fuller 1988). Therefore, an alumni association is in fact one of the most important resources for an institution, as its financial, strategic and social contributions can enhance the credibility and guarantee the longevity of the institution (Barnard and Rensleigh 2008).

3.3.2 Developing alumni associations

As with any brand community, alumni associations need to be supported by the institutions in order to develop and have a positive impact. In fact, it has been noted that while alumni generally hold positive feelings for their alma mater they usually remain apathetic and uninvolved (Mael and Ashforth 1992), there is thus a need to motivate alumni to become more involved with the association and contribute to the institution (Harrison et al. 1995). To corroborate this point, Huckman and Guskey (1998) suggested that alumni behaviours can be seen as discretionary collaborative behaviours which are

“behaviours performed by a customer to help a vendor, company or institution, which contribute to the effective functioning of the relationship, which are

outside formal contractual obligations, and are performed without expectation and direct reward” (p. 97)

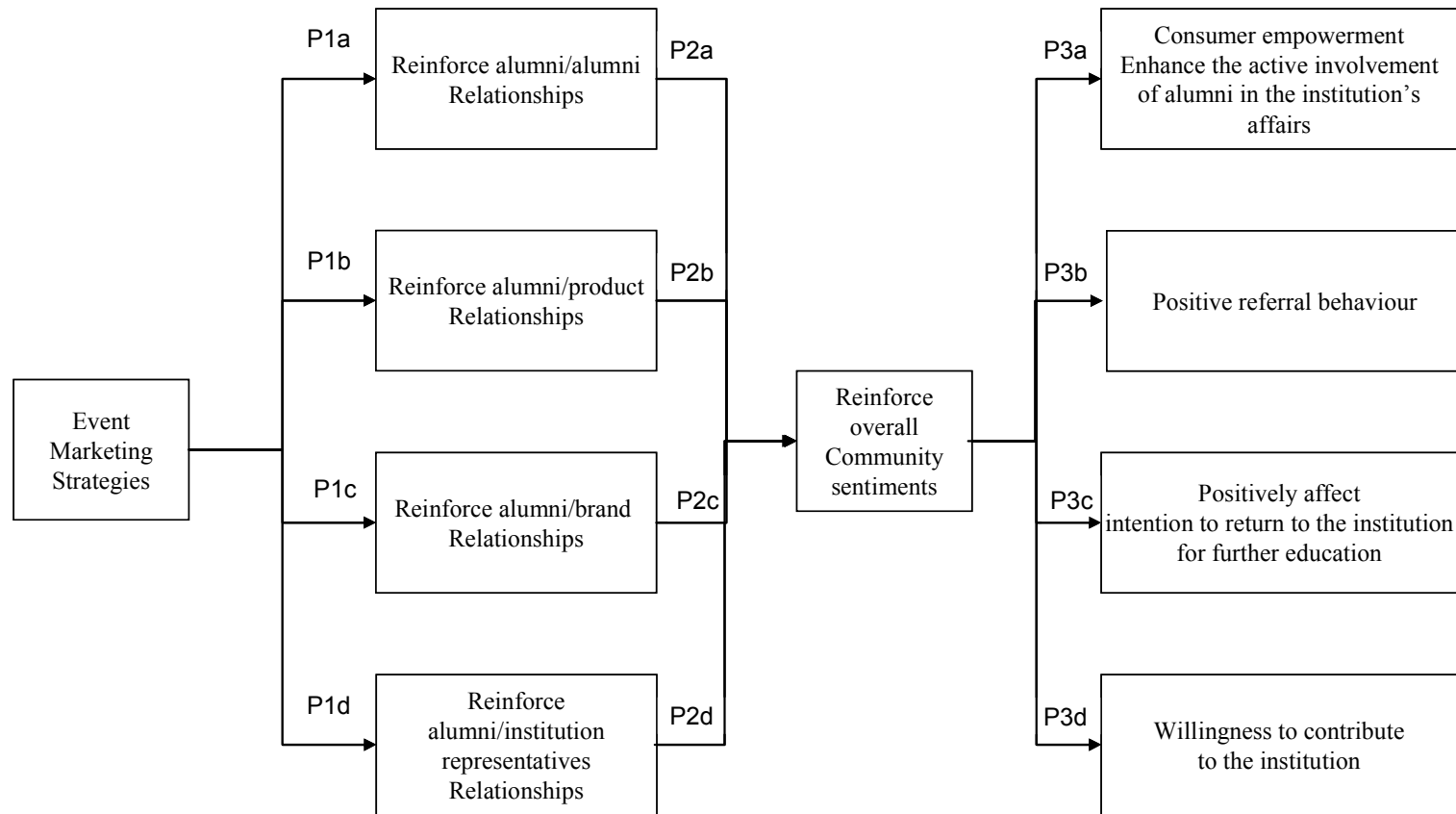
As they underlined, while these are voluntary behaviours that are carried out with no anticipation of direct personal gain, alumni have to be encouraged by the institutions in order to act in such a helpful way. Essentially alumni are doing institutions a favour by promoting, contributing and getting actively involved with the alumni association and in order to do that they must be treated in a special way; they need to feel that their links with the institution are not severed after their graduation but they are life-long members of the institution, they are part of a unique family (Albrighton and Thomas 1996).

In order to achieve that and keep the relationships with alumni alive, there is a need for frequent and constant communication. There are various ways that institutions through their alumni office can connect with their alumni. Having an alumni magazine is an effective way to reach to your alumni, although it has a drawback in that it requires a lot of commitment and can be very costly (Gibbs and Knapp 2002). Communication through the internet is also very important in our times, hence an online alumni portal or website can enhance communications with alumni and it has a number of advantages as it allows interactivity, it can be updated regularly, and it is also cost-effective (Gibbs and Knap 2002, Barnard and Rensleigh 2008).

However, any attempts that an institution makes to connect with its graduates must include face-to-face communication (Dolbert 2002). Just like the very first alumni

associations were built through gatherings and meetings of former classmates, institutions nowadays should organize special events to bring graduates back together in order to rekindle the relationships among them as well as to re-establish their connection to the institution (Fuller 1988). Therefore in accordance with the analysis of the previous chapter regarding brand communities, event marketing strategies can reinforce the relationships that are the foundation stone of alumni associations, promote their development and provide a number of positive outcomes for higher education institutions as is presented in the following conceptual framework.

Figure 2: Conceptual Framework Event Marketing- Alumni Associations (adapted from Charitsis et al. 2008 and McAlexander et al. 2006)



The above framework has been developed from the conceptual framework on event marketing and brand communities (Charitsis et al. 2008) presented on the previous chapter (see Figure 1) and the two stage model by McAlexander et al. (2006). In particular, the four kinds of relationships in brand communities (consumer/consumer, consumer/product, consumer/ brand, consumer/marketer) from Figure 1 (Charitsis et al. 2008) have been modified accordingly for alumni associations (alumni/alumni, alumni/product, alumni/brand, alumni/institution representatives) as suggested by McAlexander et al. (2006). Moreover, the outcomes “willingness to pay more for the brand” and “positively affect intention to repurchase” have been changed to “willingness to contribute to the institution” and “intention to return to the institution for further education” which reflect better the role of event marketing in the development of alumni associations. The final outcome which is about consumer empowerment has been also modified from “increase customers’ active involvement in the construction of brand meaning” to “enhance the active involvement of alumni in the institution’s affairs”.

3. 4 Research Propositions

The research propositions that are depicted in the conceptual model are presented.

Propositions 1a-1d

As it has been suggested by McAlexander (2002), brand communities are based on the relationships that customers develop with each other, with the brand, with the product and with marketers. In the context of higher education, the brand community model explores the relationships between fellow alumni (alumni-alumni), between alumni and the institution brand (alumni-brand), between alumni and the representatives of the institution (alumni-institution) and between alumni and the education that they received at their alma mater (McAlexander et al. 2006).

Therefore the propositions 1a-1d are the following:

P1a: Event marketing strategies may have a positive impact on the relationships between alumni.

P1b: Event marketing strategies may have a positive impact on alumni's feelings towards their higher education.

P1c: Event marketing strategies may have a positive impact on alumni's connection to the institution brand.

P1d: Event marketing strategies may have a positive impact on the relationships between alumni and the representative of their higher education institution.

Propositions 2a-2d

In the context of brand communities, community sentiments have been defined as “*a member's more enduring positive affect and evaluations regarding the group and its members*” (Peters and Hollenbeck 2005, p. 421). Perceived identification, group attachment, member attachment and unity are the four main characteristics that determine community sentiments (Peters and Hollenbeck 2005). This study claims that reinforcing the various relationships within a brand community through events can have a positive impact on the overall community sentiments. Hence the following propositions are proposed:

P2a: Reinforcing alumni/alumni relationships through events may have a positive impact on the overall community feelings.

P2b: Reinforcing alumni's feelings towards their higher education may have a positive impact on the overall community feelings.

P2c: Reinforcing alumni/institution relationships through events may have a positive impact on the overall community feelings.

P2d: Reinforcing alumni's connection to the institution brand through event marketing may have a positive impact on the overall community feelings.

Propositions 3a-3d

As it has been indicated by the literature on brand communities in general and on alumni organizations in particular, developing strong alumni associations should have certain positive impacts for the institution (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001, McAlexander et al. 2002, Heckman and Guskey 1998, McAlexander et al. 2006). In particular, graduates who attend alumni events are expected to have positive referral behaviour towards the institution (Fuller 1998, Hartman and Schmidt 1995, Heckman and Guskey 1998, McAlexander et al. 2006), opt to return to the same institution to further their education (Rhea 1991, Heckman and Guskey 1998, McAlexander et al. 2006) and be willing to contribute to the institution (Caboni 2003, Clotfeller 2001). Moreover, they are likely to become more actively involved with the affairs of the institution (Penrose 2002, Rhea 1991, Heckman and Guskey 1998, Fuller 1998). Therefore, propositions 3a-3d are formulated as follows:

Proposition 3a: Strong community sentiments enhanced by events may positively affect alumni referral behaviour towards the institution.

Proposition 3b: Strong community feelings enhanced by events may positively influence alumni to return to their alma mater for further education.

Proposition 3c: Strong community feelings enhanced by events may positively affect alumni's willingness to contribute to the institution.

Proposition 3d: Strong community feelings enhanced by events may enhance the active involvement of alumni in the institution's affairs.

3.5 Summary

Nowadays, institutions in the higher education sector have to face the challenge of a globalised market (Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka 2006). In order to survive with international competition it has become essential for institutions to employ marketing strategies (Angulo 2008, Opoku et al. 2008). However, the days when marketing was focused on the quality of prospectus production are long gone (Tapp et al. 2004). Today institutions have to build a unique brand identity and promote themselves through engaging communication methods (Lee et al. 2008, Judson et al. 2006). A marketing theory that could provide an array of benefits for higher education institutions is relationship marketing (Heckman and Guskey 1998). In particular, developing long term relationships with their alumni should be one of the main concerns of institutions (Barnard and Rensleigh 2008). A strong alumni association not only can provide

significant financial support (McAlexander 2006, Tom and Elmer 1994) but it can have positive contribution in many other areas as well (Barnard and Rensleigh 2008).

An alumni association is a brand community of a higher education institution and as such it can play a vital role in the welfare of the institution. However, like any brand community it needs to be supported in order to develop. Face to face interaction has been deemed vital for the cultivation of alumni relationships (Dolbert 2002, Rothaermel and Sugiyama 2001, Rocco 1998, Koh and Kim 2004, Shang et al. 2006), thus it is argued that event marketing strategies is an appropriate method to develop alumni associations. In relation to that, this chapter presented a conceptual framework that generated a set of propositions which provided the basis of the research of this study. Before presenting and analysing the findings of the research (Chapter 5), the next chapter will introduce the research methodology of this study.

Chapter 4 Methodology

4.1 Chapter Overview

The purpose of this chapter is to present and justify the research methodology used in this study. First the concept of academic research is defined and its characteristics are presented. Then, the research problem of the present study is discussed and the research question and objectives are presented. This is followed by an analysis of the research approaches. The author then proceeds to defend the choice of qualitative methods for the collection of data due to the nature of the research question and objectives. Subsequently, the available qualitative research instruments are presented and the researcher's decision to use semi-structured interviews is justified. The interview protocol and content are then outlined, and the process for the analysis of the collected data is detailed. Finally ethical considerations are discussed.

4.2 Defining research

While we may not realize it, research is part of our everyday lives. From something trivial, like choosing which movie to see on a Saturday night, to a very important issue like choosing a career path people do some sort of research before making their decisions (Hair et al. 2007). However, it is obvious that the kind of research that we do in order to make decisions about our lives is not the same thing as scientific research that people undertake in an academic environment. In fact, there are certain specific

characteristics that an investigation needs to display in order to qualify as research: it needs to contribute something new to knowledge by using accurate and valid data that have been collected and analysed in a manner which can be explained and justified and that can generate findings which can lead to generalizations (Denscombe 2002).

Thus research can be defined as

“something that people undertake in order to find out things in a systematic way, thereby increasing their knowledge” (Saunders et al. 2007).

In the business field, the systematic way of accumulating knowledge through research processes may be implemented for making well-informed managerial decisions (Ghauri and Grønhaug 2005). Therefore, business research aims to predict, describe and analyse the phenomena that constitute the ever changing business environment (Hair et al. 2007). Hence, business research is *“a systematic inquiry that provides information to guide business decisions”* (Cooper et al. 1998, p. 14).

Business research can be divided into two categories, applied and basic. Applied research aims to solve a specific problem in a certain organisation. On the other hand, basic business research is driven by a desire to better understand a phenomenon in the business environment and by doing so to contribute to the general body of knowledge in a certain business related area (Sekaran 1992, Hair et al. 2007). This study, like most academic business research studies, falls into the second category, as it aims to explore

a business related phenomenon, which is the role of event marketing in the development of brand communities.

Whatever category a particular business related project falls within, it needs to fulfil certain criteria. Denscombe (2002) suggests that a good research project needs to be able to demonstrate its relevance in relation to existing knowledge and practical needs and also show that the findings are pertinent to current issues. This study's relevance to existing knowledge has been delineated in the literature review (Chapters 2 and 3) and will be further analysed in the discussion of the findings (Chapter 6). Moreover, the literature review has also demonstrated the growing popularity of brand communities among marketing practitioners; therefore there is a real need to find effective ways to enhance their development. In terms of the timeliness of this study, both brand communities and event marketing are relatively new concepts that have attracted considerable attention in the last few years. For instance, JWT one of the biggest advertising agencies in the world placed brand communities in their list with the 80 things to watch in 2008 (Reuters 2007). Also, as Pine and Gilmore (1998) suggested we have entered the experience economy as experiences are the next step in the progression of economic value and therefore event marketing as a branch of experiential marketing will become a vital marketing method in the years to come. On the other hand, the importance of higher education marketing is nowadays recognised after years of being dismissed and neglected by scholars and institutions. This is illustrated by the fact that the Academy of Marketing has set up a special interest group and has been organising

annual conferences since 2006 that are focused exclusively on the development of marketing in the higher education sector.

Moreover, Cooper et al. (1998) present nine criteria that a research study needs to satisfy: the purpose has to be clearly defined, the research process must be detailed and documented, the research design has to be methodically planned, both the research process and the analysis of the findings must conform to ethical standards, the limitations should be honestly outlined, the managerial implications have to be adequately noted, the findings must be clearly presented, the conclusions needs to be justified and finally the researcher's experience should be reflected. This chapter will analyse the way these issues have been tackled in this study, starting by discussing the research problem and presenting the research questions and objectives which explain the purpose of this study.

4.3 The research problem

In our rapidly evolving times, traditional marketing techniques are no longer fully effective in delivering competitive advantage, making it imperative for marketers to find new ways to attract and retain customers. As it has been suggested, the internal orientation of the past, demonstrated by the 4 Ps where the marketer controls all the parameters, is no longer relevant in the interactive 21st century marketplace. Marketing should therefore shift to a network view (Schultz 2001). Furthermore as the roles, the relationships and the dynamics of the marketplace change, customers can no longer be

treated as passive buyers that will consume anything that is offered to them. In our times, customers are actually co-creators of brand meanings and they can play an important role in creating brand value (Prahalad and Ramaswamy 2000).

However, in order for customers to act as co-creators, marketers must engage with them in meaningful relationships. In fact, for the past two decades, the importance of relationship marketing has been underlined by many studies as an effective way to attract, maintain and enhance customer relationships (Berry 1983; Morgan and Hunt 1994; Bejou 1997; Grönroos 1997; Harker 1999). And the emergence of the concept of brand communities in recent years provides a golden opportunity for marketers to put the theories of relationship marketing into practice (Muniz and O’Guinn 2001). However, in order to succeed marketers should not employ traditional marketing techniques as they clash with the very crux of relationship marketing. The “push strategies” of the past where brand meanings were thrust upon consumers through advertising messages can lead to exact opposite results as consumers tend to adopt avoidance tactics towards them (Wohlfeil and Whelan 2006). Therefore, in order to assist the development of brand communities there is a need for marketing campaigns that would respect the principles of relationship marketing and encourage interactivity and active involvement on the part of consumers. Thus, event marketing has been discussed in the literature review as a suitable marketing strategy for building brand communities, as it uses a “pull strategy” that promotes active consumer participation and can also serve as a platform for personal interactive communication between marketers and consumers (Wohlfeil and Whelan 2005).

According to Hair et al. (2007) the literature review has two main objectives. The first one is to formulate and expand the research ideas. The second objective is to make the researcher familiar with all the recent developments and provide a complete understanding of the research area of interest. Kumar (2005) stresses that in addition to enhancing the knowledge on the research topic the literature review also provides a clearer view and a focus on the research problem and moreover it helps the researcher to choose an appropriate methodology as well as put the research findings into a context. Furthermore, Remenyi et al. (1998) underline that the literature review should not just present the previous relevant studies but critically evaluate them because it is through that process of critically evaluating the literature that an appropriate research question will be formulated. This chapter now proceed with a discussion of the research question and objectives for the study.

4.4 Research question and objectives

Saunders et al. (2007) emphasize that the success or failure of a research project is heavily dependent on the research question. They explain that the success of a research project is mainly judged by whether or not it presents a clear set of conclusions that are derived from the collected data, and in order to come to these conclusions the initial research question that will drive the research process must be clearly defined (Saunders et al. 2007). In fact, Jankowicz (2005) asserts that all the decisions that a researcher will make regarding the research process (methods, sampling, research design) will always

revolve around the original research question. It is also important to note though, that in exploratory studies the initial research question may subject to changes, as the research process may unveil new possibilities and avenues of research (Ghauri 2004).

The main aim of this study is to gain insight into the role of event marketing strategies in developing and managing brand communities. The literature review presented how brand communities are currently being developed and focused on the main reasons why event marketing should be effective in building brand communities. Furthermore, it discussed the various positive outcomes that should accrue from employing event marketing strategies for developing brand communities. Thus, the main research question for the current study is:

What is the role of event marketing strategies in building and managing brand communities?

As soon as a research question has been formulated, more specific research objections can be generated and presented (Kumar 2005). While the research question presents the overall aim of a study, the research objectives give a more clear and precise picture of the direction and the goals of the study (Saunders et al. 2007). The research objectives for this study are as follows:

1. To explore how event marketing can affect the relationships developed within brand communities.

2. To investigate whether event marketing strategies can have a positive impact in the development of brand communities.
3. To identify and investigate the positive managerial implications that may accrue to the brand from using event marketing strategies for managing brand communities.
4. To explore whether alumni associations of higher education institutions display characteristics of the brand communities' concept.
5. To investigate whether aspects of the brand community model can be applied and promoted through event marketing strategies, in the management of alumni associations in the higher education sector.

In order to address the research question and the research objectives of this study primary research was undertaken. The research process and the methods used in the primary research will next be detailed.

4.5 Research process - Research design

A research design has been described as “*the strategy of the study and the plan by which the strategy is to be implemented*” (Coldwell and Herbst 2004, p. 36). Easterby-Smith et al. (2002) stress that a research design involves the planning of the research activity in

such ways that the research aims will be met. Similarly, Bryman and Bell (2007) emphasize that the research design should be closely linked to the research question of the study. The selection of a suitable research design is vital in any research project in order for the researcher to be able to reach valid conclusions (Kumar 2005). Therefore, through the analysis of the research design the researcher should give a detailed account of the method chosen for the study as well as explain the reasons for that choice (Saunders et al. 2007). Following that notion, this study will first discuss the qualitative and quantitative approaches to research, and then proceed to justify and defend the selected research method.

4.6 Quantitative and qualitative approaches

In general, there are two main opposing research approaches: quantitative and qualitative. A simple way to distinguish the one approach from the other is by the way the collected data is presented. In quantitative methods the data are presented in a numerical way while in qualitative methods the data are not numerically presented (Punch 2005). More importantly, Kumar (1995) asserts that quantitative research methods are employed when the aim is to measure the variables of a certain phenomenon while qualitative methods are used in order to describe and explain phenomena. Curwin and Slater (2002) explain that measurement is an important feature of quantitative methods and therefore a quantitative approach is not suitable when the investigation focuses on elements that are not easily measured, like attitudes, behaviours or perceptions. In such cases, a qualitative research approach is considered

the most suitable means of attaining the research objectives (Hair et al. 2007). Moreover, the qualitative approach focuses on fairly small size samples that are carefully chosen in order to provide a deep, rich and profound understanding of the investigated phenomenon, while the quantitative approach usually employs large scale, randomly chosen samples so as to make secure generalisations from the sample to the population it represents (Patton 2002). For that reason, it is suggested that the difference between quantitative and qualitative approaches can be seen as a tug-of war between breadth and depth, as quantitative studies are characterised by their breadth while qualitative studies by their depth (Patton 2002, Blaxter et al. 2006). Thus, quantitative methods are described as objective methods that can generate hard, reliable data and provide generalisations to a large population, while qualitative methods are depicted as subjective that can generate rich and detailed data (Taylor and Trumbull 2005, Bryman and Bell 2007).

4.6.1 Quantitative research

Picciano (2004) defined quantitative research as research that:

“relies on the collection of numerical data which are then subjected to analysis using statistical routines” (p. 51)

Quantitative methods can provide a clear and comprehensible account of some aspects of most issues with the use of numbers which are a universal language (Coldwell and

Herbst 2004). Surveys, structured interviews, self-completion questionnaires and structured observations are some of the most common quantitative techniques (Bryman and Bell 2007). These techniques are generally organised in standardised and systematic ways which make it easy to be replicated by future studies. For that reason some scholars argue that quantitative methods are more reliable than other methods (McNeil and Chapman 2005). Quantitative methods are particularly useful for getting answers to “who”, “where” and “how many” questions (Carson et al. 2001, Robson 2002) and therefore are considered suitable for studies that seek to describe the characteristics of a population or market (McGivern 2006).

Historically, quantitative approaches to research have been seen as more rigorous, reliable and generalizable and therefore more scientific than other methods (Zoebia et al. 2007). However, quantitative methods are not devoid of limitations. Quantitative methods allow for little or no contact with the people that take part in the research (Silverman 2006), they rely on structured standardized instruments and thus they cannot provide deep insights into the investigated phenomenon where the purpose of the research is largely exploratory (McGivern 2006). Hence they are of limited value for studies of an exploratory nature and for studies such as the current one concerning innovative concepts (Grossnickle and Raskin 2000).

4.6.2 Qualitative research

Strauss and Corbin (1998) defined qualitative research as:

“any research that produces findings not arrived at by statistical procedures or any other means of quantification. It can refer to research about persons’ lives, lived experiences, behaviors, emotions and feelings as well as about organizational functioning, social movements, cultural phenomena and interactions between nations” p. 10)

Mason (1996) argues that the role of qualitative research is to generate social explanations to intellectual problems which should have a broader resonance. In essence, qualitative research seeks to observe, reflect and provide a deeper understanding on the complexity of human behaviour (Chisnall 1997). In particular, the qualitative research approach is deemed appropriate in the context of the current study because:

1. There is not much existing knowledge in the literature currently for this specific research area or problem.
2. Previous studies have partially or inadequately delved into the research problem.

3. The current knowledge base involves complex or evolving phenomena that are brand communities, and therefore there is a need to organise and simplify them in order to examine them further.

4. The researcher attempts to get a fuller understanding of the brand community phenomena and aims to clarify perceptions regarding the role of events in enhancing such brand communities, and

5. The main purpose is to propose a conceptual theoretical framework that describes a certain phenomenon and is capable of empirical investigation (Hair et al. 2007).

Observation, in-depth individual interviews, focus groups, biographical methods such as life stories and narratives and analysis of documents and texts are some of the most common qualitative methods of gathering data (Richie and Lewis 2003). Studies of an exploratory nature employ qualitative methods, and in particular interviews, in order to discover casual relationships between variables (Saunders et al. 2007). Explorations and even descriptions of phenomena cannot and should not be neutral and objective as they involve selective viewing and interpretations (Mason 1996). Hence, qualitative methods are intrinsically subjective (Chisnall 1997).

4.6.3 The approach of the present study

The analysis of the nature of qualitative and quantitative approaches led to the decision of adopting qualitative techniques for gathering the primary data for this study. This study aims to investigate the role and explore the outcomes of employing event marketing strategies for the development of brand communities. It also seeks to explore whether the concept of brand communities can be applied in the higher education sector and examine the role of event marketing in the development of alumni associations. Taking into consideration the fact that the higher education sector presents many differences from other sectors where the concept of brand communities has been long established, and also the fact that the perspectives of the parties involved in alumni associations (alumni officers and alumni members) might differ greatly, it was felt that an exploratory approach was optimal in the particular context. Given the exploratory nature of this study it was deemed that qualitative methods would be more appropriate in order to gather rich and detailed data that would provide a deep and meaningful understanding of the studied phenomenon. In fact, the suitability of qualitative methods for exploratory research has been emphasized by many authors (Grossnickle and Raskin 2000, Mason 1996, Daymon and Holloway 2002, Russel Smith and Taylor 2004, Hair et al. 2007).

On the other hand, some authors has criticised the use of qualitative research and underlined its limitations. In the past, qualitative research has been targeted for not employing systematic processes and for lack of clarity in all phases of the research

(Jankowski and Wester 2002). Bhamhra and Chaudhary (1998) mention the problems with validity and reliability that may arise in qualitative research, while Proctor's (2005) concern lie with the use of small samples that are not representative of the target population. As the researcher has a central role in qualitative research, lack of training and experience may also cause problems (Ranjan 1998). In fact, Aaker et al. (2008) claim that most of these limitations are not inherent in the nature of qualitative research per se, but they stem from the fact that the results are susceptible to misuse. Therefore, Mason (1996) suggested that a researcher may overcome these limitations by taking some necessary actions. In particular, qualitative research has to be systematically and rigorously conducted, strategically planned but also flexible and contextual, reflective and provide results that can be generalised in some way. The following discussion provides a detailed discussion of how this research study was planned, conducted and analysed.

4.7 Research Method

Once a qualitative approach was selected for this study, there was a need to decide on the specific qualitative method that would be more appropriate for this study as well as plan and execute the selected method in a way that would follow Mason's (1996) guidelines for qualitative research. This section presents the method that was used in this study and outlines all the phases of the research process.

4.7.1 The research instrument

Research instruments are the tools that are available to the researcher in order to obtain the necessary data for his or her study (Wilkinson and Birmingham 2003). As it has been already stated, the research instruments that are used in qualitative research and would be relevant for this study are observation, focus groups and interviews (Ritchie and Lewis 2003).

4.7.1.1 Observation

Observation refers to obtaining primary data by systematically observing, recording, analysing, and interpreting people's behaviour (Saunders et al. 2007). While using observation, alone or in conjunction with other methods was considered, it was not employed for various reasons. Attending alumni events with the purpose of obtaining primary data for this study presented several drawbacks. Saunders et al. (2007) suggest that capability is an important element that a researcher must take into consideration when deciding on the research method. Capability, among other things, refers to gaining access to the data needed as well as getting the data within the time restrictions of each study. Each alumni event is usually organised for specific graduates (people who graduated in a certain year or from a particular school or department) and therefore access should be granted to the researcher in order to attend these events. By talking with alumni officers it was understood that they would be unwilling to grant such access to the researcher. Thus, observation was not used as a research instrument for the

present study, although as it has been successfully demonstrated from previous studies (e.g. Schouten and McAlexander 1995, Kozinets 2002) observation can provide a deep understanding on how various consumption communities develop and operate. Therefore, a limitation of the present study is the fact that it does not include first hand data obtained directly from attending various alumni events.

4.7.1.2 Focus Groups

Wilkinson and Birmingham (2003) defined focus group research as

“a form of qualitative method used to gather rich, descriptive data in a small-group format from participants who have agreed to focus on a topic of mutual interest” (p. 90)

While using focus groups may generate rich and detailed data, this method was not chosen for this study for two main reasons. One of the limitations of focus groups is that they are difficult to organise and even if you offer some incentives, participants may still not turn up (Bryman and Bell 2007). As is further analysed in the next section, for the purposes of this study, primary research was needed to be carried out focusing on two different groups of people: alumni officers and alumni members. It would be extremely difficult to organise these focus groups, especially with alumni officers, as they are based in different locations. Moreover, the interactive nature of focus groups may have two undesirable effects. First, the answers from members of the group are not

independent from one another, which limits the generalizability of the results. And second, some members may be hesitant to express themselves freely within a group setting therefore the results obtained can be biased by a dominant opinionated member (Stewart et al. 2006). For these reasons, personal one-to-one interviews were therefore deemed as the most appropriate instrument in order to gather the necessary data for this study.

4.7.1.3 Interviews

Interviews are deemed as an effective way to obtain valid and reliable data that are pertinent to the research questions and objectives of a study (Saunders et al. 2007). In fact, interviewing is the most popular method of data collection in social research (Thorpe and Holt 2008, Kirby et al. 2000). There are three types of interviews that a researcher may use: unstructured, semi-structured and structured interviews (Coldwell and Herbst 2004).

Structured interviews employ questionnaires that are based on a predetermined and standardised set of questions therefore are also known as interviewer-administered questionnaires (Saunders et al. 2007). The same set of questions is posed to all respondents while the interaction between the interviewer and the respondent is kept to a minimum (Gray 2004). Usually in structured interviews, the questions are closed ended which means that the respondents are provided with a limited choice of possible answers (Bryman and Bell 2007). While this technique allows a high level of

comparison between interviews, and therefore a higher degree of standardisation which can easier lead to generalisations (Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2005), due to its inflexible nature this technique of interviewing is not suitable for gathering more rich and detailed data (Grix 2001). Actually, this technique is very similar to survey questionnaires (Grix 2001); hence structured interviews are used to collect data for quantitative analysis (Gray 2004).

On the other hand, unstructured interviews are the exact opposite of structured interviews. In unstructured interviews, the researcher just uses an interview guide which is a list of topics or concepts that will be discussed during the interview (Bryman and Bell 2007). The researcher allows the interviewees to talk freely about their opinions and attitudes in connection to the general topic, and therefore this technique of interviewing is called non-directive (Saunders et al. 2007). The researcher's input is basically limited to ensuring that he or she has understood correctly what the interviewee wants to say (Gray 2004). Unstructured interviews are used in order to explore in depth a general topic as it gives the researcher the opportunity to gather rich qualitative data (Saunders et al. 2007), however it is difficult to make comparisons between the responses and draw conclusions as interviews will be significantly different from one another (Grix 2001).

Like unstructured interviews, semi-structured interviews are also used in order to gather qualitative data (Gray 2004). In semi-structured interviews the researcher has a set of questions that covers the issues that need to be addressed, but he or she does not stick

strictly to a predetermined set of questions but allows the conversation to flow naturally, letting the discussion to go to new and unexpected directions (Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2005). Therefore the order of the questions asked may change in order to follow the flow of the conversation (Saunders et al. 2007, Gray 2004). Actually, as the interviewees could possess information and knowledge that the researcher may have not considered (Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2005), he or she may decide to omit some questions or add additional questions depending on the responses of each individual interviewee (Saunders et al. 2007). This flexibility is the main advantage of semi-structured interviews as it gives the researcher the freedom to investigate unexpected areas (Grix 2001). Allowing the interview to divert into areas which were not originally considered can help the researcher to meet the research objectives (Gray 2004).

Taking into consideration the above discussion, as well as the research question and objectives of this study, the researcher judged that semi-structured interviews would be the most effective way in order to gather the data for this study. The exploratory nature of this study meant that structured interviews could not provide the needed rich and detailed data. On the other hand, the researcher wanted to investigate certain issues that have derived from the literature review and are depicted in the conceptual framework and the research propositions. Hence, totally unstructured interviews were not suitable either as they would probably not provide all the needed relevant information.

Using semi-structured interviews was deemed the most appropriate choice for two reasons. Firstly because it would ensure that the main issues would be covered and data

relating to the research propositions would be gathered. And secondly because the exploratory nature of the study would be safeguarded and in depth data would be gathered as the interviewees would have the freedom to openly respond to the questions and also discuss issues that initially had not been thought of.

4.8 Data Collection Operational Procedures and Interview Protocol

While in certain studies it may be possible to collect data from an entire population, in most research projects the researcher, due to budget and time constraints and the fact that it would be impossible to study the entire population, has to collect the required data from a sample of the population (Saunders et al. 2007). There are two main different sampling techniques available to researchers: probability sampling and non-probability sampling. Probability sampling involves random selection as each element of the population has a known chance of being selected, while non probability sampling does not involve random selection as not all units of the population have the same chance of being selected (Bryman and Bell 2007). Moreover, probability sampling can be divided into simple random sampling, systematic random sampling, stratified sampling and cluster sampling whereas non probability sampling techniques include convenience sampling, snowball sampling and purposive sampling (Coldwell and Herbst 2004). According to Saunders et al. (2007) purposive sampling is

“a non probability sampling procedure in which the judgement of the researcher is used to select the cases that make up the sample” (p. 608).

There are two different groups of people that are involved with alumni events: alumni officers that are responsible for planning and organising the events, and alumni members that participate in these events. Moreover, alumni members fall into two sub-categories: regular alumni members and alumni members that are on the alumni executive boards of their institutions, and are more actively involved with their alumni associations. Alumni boards are comprised of alumni members who voluntarily take part in these boards. The role of these boards is to advise and help the alumni officers in order to develop the alumni associations more effectively. While alumni board members and especially alumni officer may have different perceptions or even motivations from regular members of alumni associations, it was decided that in order to satisfy the purposes of this study and obtain a more comprehensive set of data and holistic sense of perceptions; it was required to interview people from all these three involved parties. Hence, interviews were arranged and conducted with alumni officers, with regular alumni members, and with members of alumni boards.

As this study investigates the role of events in developing brand communities, it was imperative that the respondents would satisfy one specific criterion. They should have been involved in some capacity in alumni events. In relation to alumni officers that meant that their associations should employ events in their strategic development plan

and they should have some experience organising these events. In terms of alumni members the criterion for their selection was that they should have attended at least one alumni event in the past.

The research process was divided into two stages. First, interviews were conducted with alumni officers and then interviews were arranged with alumni members. It was decided to interview alumni officers before alumni members for two reasons. First, by interviewing alumni officers the researcher would get an insightful perspective on exactly how events are used for the development of alumni associations. Having a better understanding on the studied phenomenon, the researcher was more prepared for the interviews with alumni members and better able to stimulate a discussion that would produce in-depth detailed data. The second reason was practical. Alumni associations follow very strict data protection rules therefore they do not reveal the contact details of their members to anyone unless given permission by their members. Therefore, there was a need to develop a personal relationship with alumni officers in order to be able to contact alumni members for the purposes of this study.

In order to identify and get in contact with alumni officers the researcher did preliminary research through the Internet. The Web sites of Irish higher education institutions were examined in order to identify the institutions that have active alumni associations that employ events for their development. Fourteen higher education institutions were found that fulfilled these requirements and thus initial contact with the respective alumni officers was made by e-mail. In that initial contact the researcher

explained the nature of the study and asked each alumni officer whether he or she would be willing to participate in the research and give the researcher an interview. Two weeks after the initial contact, the researcher sent a second e-mail to those officers that had not yet replied requesting again their participation in the present study. It was made clear in both the initial and the follow up contact, that the interviews would be treated as strictly confidential as complete anonymity would be guaranteed. In some cases further contact was required in order to explicitly explain the nature of the study. In the end, alumni officers from four Irish higher education institutions agreed to participate in this study. In one case, the researcher interviewed two officers from the same institution. The first was the present alumni officer of the institution while the second was the former alumni officer who had extensive experience in the field. Hence, in total interviews with five alumni officers were conducted.

At the end of the interviews with each alumni officer the researcher enquired whether they would be willing to contact some of their members on the behalf of the researcher requesting their participation in this study. The alumni officers agreed and they contacted members of their executive boards and regular members although they stressed that it would be difficult to get their members to participate. The method of contacting their members as well as who and how many members was left to the discretion of the alumni officers, although it was emphasized that they would have to be members that have attended alumni events. Some alumni officers chose to contact only members of the executive board with whom they had a more close relationship as their

policy is not to contact their members with matters not directly related with the alumni associations.

The researcher had also prepared a letter that described the nature of the study and asked for participation in this study. The letter was given to the alumni officers that wanted to contact their members this way. Other officers chose to either contact personally some members that they knew well from previous events or by putting a brief note about the present study on their regular e-bulletin to their members and provide the researcher's contact details should anyone would be interested to participate. From that procedure seven members, all of them alumni executive board members, expressed an initial interest to participate in the study, but finally only three interviews were conducted as the rest were either unable to participate within the timeframe of this study or they decided that they did not want to participate. Using personal contacts the researcher managed to secure the participation of four more alumni members that attended events in the research. Thus, in the end conducted five interviews with alumni officers and seven interviews with alumni members were conducted; three alumni board members and four regular alumni members who have been to alumni events in the past.

The interviews were scheduled at a time and place convenient for the interviewees. In particular the interviewees with alumni officers were arranged and conducted on the campus of each institution, either in the alumni office of the institution or in one case in one of the rooms that was used for the alumni association's events. Arranging the

interviews on campus was deemed convenient for alumni officers but also gave the researcher the opportunity to conduct the interviews in the respondent's natural setting and get a better idea of the place where some of the alumni events were organised. The interviews with alumni members were also conducted on a place convenient for the interviewees which in most cases was their work place.

All interviews were conducted face to face, as this was considered the option that would produce the best result, with one exception where the respondent was based in London and thus the interview was conducted over the phone. Every alumni association has several chapters across the world as graduates from institutions may reside in various parts of the globe and a member of one of the international chapters expressed an interest to participate in this research. Due to time and distance constraints a face to face interview could not be arranged, but as it was deemed that an interview with a member of an international chapter would be valuable for this study, the decision was taken to conduct a telephone interview with that specific respondent.

Before every interview the researcher asked each participant his or her permission to tape record the interview and all participants agreed. Also, a consent form was presented to the respondents which they read and signed giving permission to the researcher to use the content of the interviews for the purposes of this study. A copy of the consent form is attached as Appendix A.

4.9 Interview Content

In semi-structured interviews there are three types of questions that the interviewer can use: open questions, probing questions and closed questions (Saunders et al. 2007). Open questions give the interviewees the opportunity to describe and explain a phenomenon by providing extensive answers. Probing questions are intended to provoke responses that are important to the research topic or can be used in order to seek explanation regarding a previous answer. Closed questions are similar to the questions used in structured interviews and are used mainly to gather specific information (Saunders et al. 2007). For this study mainly open and probing questions were asked in order to gather rich and detailed data. A limited number of closed questions were used mainly in the beginning of the interviews in order to get some necessary factual information. Also the use of closed ended questions at the beginning of the interviews were used so as not to overwhelm the interviewees with demanding questions right for the very start but give them the time to feel more comfortable with the interview process.

As it is suggested by several authors (Ghauri and Grønhaug 2005, Bryman and Bell 2007, McGivern 2006, Saunders et al. 2007) a set of questions were prepared before the interviews which served as an interview guide. However, like it usually happens in semi-structured interviews, that guide was not strictly followed but the interviews were conducted with a level of flexibility. Hence, the interviewer had the chance to rephrase and clarify certain questions that the interviewees had difficulties understanding; add

additional questions when he felt that they were needed and also allowed the respondents to talk freely about issues that they thought were important. Copies of the interview guides for the interviews with alumni officers and alumni members are attached as Appendices B and C respectively.

4. 10 Recording

The researcher used a tape recorder to record all the interviews. Audio recording the interviews of a research has many advantages as it gives the researcher the opportunity to focus entirely on the interview without having to take long notes. The researcher can listen to the interviews many times afterwards to thoroughly comprehend the responses and also improve his interviewing skills. Moreover, it allows the researcher to use direct quotes from the interviews. (Saunders et al. 2007). Thus, recording the interviews helps the researcher to obtain more complete and accurate data, however he or she must dedicate a considerable amount of time to carefully transcribe the recorder data (Jankowicz 2005).

Using recording equipments also entails certain risks as it may negatively impact the relationship between interviewee and interviewer, put added pressure on the interviewees and also there is always the risk of a technical failure or mistake (Saunders et al. 2007). In order to tackle the first two issues, the researcher at the beginning of every interview asked the interviewees' permission to use a tape recorder and also emphasized for one more time that the interviews will be strictly confidential and

anonymous. Regarding the risk of a technical failure, the researcher tested the tape recorders right before the start of every interview. In some cases when the resources were available he used two separate tape recorders to minimize the risk of a technical malfunction.

It has been suggested that the use of an audio recorder can make the interviewers complacent as thinking that all the information will be recorded they may lose their focus and stop listening carefully to the responses. For that reason taking notes can help the interviewer remain alert during the interviews (Ghauri and Grønhaug 2005). On the other hand, trying to take long extensive notes can also distract the researcher and make him pay less attention on the responses. Thus as it has been suggested the researcher took brief notes during the interviews (Ghauri and Grønhaug 2005, Saunders et al. 2007). Taking some brief notes had a dual purpose. First, it helped the researcher remain focused throughout the interviews. And second, when something interesting and unexpected was mentioned the researcher instead of interrupting the interviewee and asking him or her to further elaborate on the specific issue, he took down a note in order to return to that subject later on the interview.

4.11 Analysis

As soon as an interview was conducted the researcher started the process of transcribing it. All the interviews were transcribed verbatim. Hesse-Biber and Levy (2005) call the process of transcribing an interactive process as it gives the researcher the opportunity

to actively engage with the material by carefully listening, analysing and interpreting the data. The role of analysis is twofold: First the researcher gets familiar with the recorded data up to the point that he or she is able to identify the formulation of specific patterns. Second it allows the researcher to organise the collected data in a way that the respondents' perceptions and insights can become obvious and informative rather than hidden in the bulk of the collected data (Jankowicz 2005). In fact through the process of analysis the composite nature of the data that has been collected must be organised and categorised so as to be meaningfully analysed and produce valid results (Saunders et al. 2007).

Nowadays there are many computer assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) packages available that can facilitate the management of the collected data. For the present study, the researcher used NVivo which is the most widely accepted and used software of its kind. These software packages allow the researcher to import transcripts or other computer generated documents into the program, mark words, phrases or paragraphs with codes (nodes in the case of NVivo) and put all the relevant data into separate codes (Gray 2004). In other words, a qualitative data analysis software can do all the manual work that is involved with the coding process and relieve the researcher from the burden of having to write codes, make photocopies of transcripts, cut out all the sections from the text that are related to a code and paste them together (Bryman and Bell 2007). Fielding and Lee (1998) identified three main positive outcomes that emerge from the use of computer software in qualitative studies. First, the software can facilitate the task of data management. Second it may increase

the capabilities of the qualitative research by providing analytic possibilities that cannot be easily accomplished with traditional methods. And third, computer software like NVivo enhances the acceptability and credibility of qualitative research.

However, it must be noted that the software does not interpret the data as this is still the job of the researcher (Gray 2004, Bryman and Bell 2007). Moreover, some scholars have raised questions about the use of CAQDAS packages on qualitative studies. Ezzy (2002) claims that the linear, predictable and clearly structured methods that CAQDAS packages offer may not be the best way to carry out a qualitative data analysis. Sprenkle and Piercy (2005) identified and summarized the main points made by the critics of the use of CAQDAS, and these included the following: First, by placing so much focus on specific parts or segments of a document, the researcher may lose the larger picture of the data. Second, the use of CAQDAS can make the researcher become alienated from the research and the analysis and third, their functionality and the fact that they are comparably easy to use may attract people that do not possess the necessary skills and understanding on how to conduct rigorous research. But, when used systematically CAQDAS can provide continuity and enhance transparency and methodological rigour (Saunders et al. 2007).

4.12 Accuracy of qualitative research

Every research that seeks to produce meaningful results that add to the existing knowledge must produce findings that are accurate. In order to achieve that goal a

study must employ reliable methods in order to generate valid data (Denscombe 2002). In general, reliability evaluates the methods and the techniques used for the collection of the data (Denscombe 2002) in terms of consistency, repeatability and transparency (Suanders et al. 2007). Essentially, a research should demonstrate consistency in the use of the research techniques and transparency in the way the conclusions were derived from the collected data in such a high level that if other researchers repeated the same study with the same methods they would reach to the same conclusions. On the other hand, validity refers to the relevance of the data (Denscombe 2002) and it evaluates the extent to which the research method measures what it is supposed to measure (Saunders et al. 2007)

However, while in quantitative research the concepts of validity and reliability are well established and widely accepted, their relevance in qualitative research is still an issue of debate (Bryman and Bell 2007). As the nature of qualitative research is different from that of quantitative research, there are concepts relating to validity and reliability that have limited or no applicability in qualitative research. For instance, in contrast to the objective nature of quantitative studies, qualitative studies involve a level of subjectivity thus repeatability is more limited. Thus, some authors accept these terms as they are used in quantitative research, other claim that though validity and reliability are relevant in qualitative research their meanings need to be altered, while there are also scholars who believe that these concepts have no place in qualitative research at all. In any case, as Mason (1996) states it is important to underline that qualitative researchers should also be concerned with the overall accuracy of their studies even if that takes a

different meaning from quantitative research. She suggests that in order to achieve accuracy in qualitative studies, researchers should demonstrate the appropriateness of the used research methods in relation to the research questions and also they should be able to show that the data generation and analysis stages were conducted in a careful and honest way. In a similar way, Golafshani (2003) proposed that in qualitative research validity and reliability should be conceptualized as trustworthiness, rigour and quality.

In order to ensure the accuracy of the findings presented in this study, the researcher took several measures throughout all the stages of the research. As it has been analyzed (see sections 4.6 and 4.7) given the exploratory nature of this study a qualitative method -semi-structured interviews- was employed in order to gather in-depth and detailed data. Moreover, the research was not limited only to one demographic group of people but included all the involved parties as interviews were conducted with alumni officers, alumni board members and regular members. The anonymity of all respondents was guaranteed and it was also stressed that participation in this study would be voluntary as they retained the right to withdraw their participation at any time. All interviews were recorded, transcribed and then analysed with the assistance of the appropriate software. The whole research process, from the initial contact with the interviewees to the analysis of the data, has been described in detail in this chapter.

4.13 Ethical Considerations

According to Gray (2004):

“ethics of research concern the appropriateness of the researcher’s behaviour in relation to the subjects of the research or those who are affected by it” (p. 68)

McGivern (2006) stresses the importance of ethical standards in research environments as these standards inform all the involved parties in a research project –researchers, research participants, users of the researcher and the wider research community- about what is and what is not acceptable behaviour. Thus, researchers should not only be concerned about adopting the most appropriate research method but they should ensure that the research is conducted in a responsible and morally defensible way (Gray 2004).

The primary ethical concern in a research context is the researcher’s behaviour towards the subjects of the research, the research participants (Mc Givern 2006). There are some fundamental ethical principles that need to be followed in relation to research participants and these include: voluntary participation, no harm to the participant, informed consent, anonymity and confidentiality, transparency and not deceiving the subjects (McGivern 2006). Jankowicz (2005) also notes that it is the researcher’s ethical responsibility to keep all the collected data in a secure place.

Right from the initial contact with the –potential- research participants the researcher explained the nature of the present research project and he made clear that participation in this project is voluntary and can be withdrawn at any stage of the process. Moreover it was stressed that strict anonymity and confidentiality will be maintained. It was also emphasized to alumni officers that their institutions will not be named. Thus in the presentation of the findings the research participants are identified as AO1-5 (Alumni Officers), ABM1-3 (Alumni Board Members) and AM1-4 (Alumni Members). Also, prior to the interviews the respondents were asked to sign a consent form. Finally, the tapes of the interviews were kept locked in the researcher's work desk while the transcripts of the interviews were maintained in a password protected computer.

Two other important ethical issues that a researcher must tackle are related with the literature review and the presentation of the findings. While a researcher is expected to rely heavily and use previous relevant studies he should never present the work of other people as his or her own (Ramenyi et al. 1998). The researcher has appropriately referenced all the books and articles that he has used for the present study and the complete list of references is available at the end of this thesis. Finally, McGivern (2006) emphasizes that it is the researchers' ethical obligation to present all the research results accurately and honestly and not in a misleading way. In relation to that, an iterative process of qualitative analysis was carried out for the present study. Once the first set of interviews had been completed (interviews with alumni officers) the transcripts of the interviews were sent back to the alumni officers in order to confirm that their responses had been accurately recorded. Subsequently, the collected data were

transferred to NVivo and categorized into 33 nodes as an initial analysis of the data was performed. The purpose of that step was twofold. First, to give the researcher the opportunity to become more familiar with the software and second to identify main areas of interest and the emerging patterns from the collected data from the first set of interviews before embarking on the second round of interviews, with alumni board members and regular alumni members. After all the interviews had been completed the researcher listened carefully many times all the interviews before transcribing them and transferring the data to NVivo. The interviews with alumni officers were again carefully examined and a new set of nodes was created. The reports of all the nodes created in NVivo are attached as Appendix D. In addition handwritten notes were compiled when considered necessary that helped the researcher with the analysis process.

4.14 Summary

This chapter presented an overview of the research method employed by the researcher in this study. After the differences between qualitative and quantitative approaches were presented the researcher analysed the reasons why a qualitative method was deemed more appropriate. The exploratory nature of this study meant that in-depth data was required which could be gathered by qualitative means and more specifically by using semi-structured interviews as the research instrument. Semi-structured interviews allowed the researcher to gather rich and detailed information without straying away from the conceptual framework and the research propositions that were formulated on the previous chapter. Moreover, the interview protocol and the interview content were

discussed in detail. The use of NVivo for the analysis of the data was also explained and the management of the various ethical issues relating to the present study was defended. The following chapter presents the detailed findings of this study.

Chapter 5 Research Findings

5.1 Chapter overview

This chapter will present the primary research findings of this study. Firstly informative data about the alumni associations that participated in the study is presented. Then, the findings that relate to the conceptual framework of this study are detailed. The findings are presented in the order of the research propositions addressed in Chapter 3. Finally new and valuable insights not directly linked to the conceptual framework but worthy for inclusion are presented.

5.2 Alumni Associations

All four alumni associations that participated in this study are relatively new associations and each of the Alumni Officers (AO1 – AO4) were interviewed. The youngest association was set up in 2005 and out of the 14000 graduates of the institution, 1200 have signed online and are registered members. The second association was launched in 2003 and it has 29000 members, while the third association was established in 1997 but was re-launched three years ago and today has more than 10900 registered members. The final association has been active for more than ten years. It has been operating in its current format since 1999 and has roughly 70000 members. While in the past some alumni associations used to charge their members a membership fee,

no association employs that model today and the students are automatically considered to be members of the institution's alumni association as soon as they graduate.

According to the alumni officers, the main aims of their alumni associations are to increase interaction between the institution and the graduates and also to help graduates stay in contact with each other. By achieving that they expect to establish loyalty for the future which can have a multiple of positive outcomes for the institute and this will be further discussed later in this chapter. In order to achieve the aims, all alumni institutions employ the same three tools: the internet, the publication of a magazine, and the use of events.

All alumni associations use the internet in two ways: by having a website for the association and by sending regular e-newsletters to their members. Some alumni associations have also set up an official page on social networking sites like Facebook. Alumni officers believe that e-newsletters are very useful for contacting their members as they are no costs involved, they are quick to read and they provide an easy way to stay in touch with the members and keep them updated on the news of the association. On the other hand, one disadvantage is that they can only reach those members that they have provided the association with their current email addresses.

Using a more traditional medium like the printed magazine has also various benefits for the association. An alumni officer stated that the magazine *“is a very visual reflection of what's going on here in the alumni office and what we are all about and it gives us a*

presence in people's homes". The magazine is also found to have "*a more of an institute wide appeal*" as its content is not restricted on the activities of the alumni association and its members but also covers various issues related to the institute. Thus, as one alumni officer mentioned "*it is also used excessively as a PR tool external*" as for example it can be found in places around college and visitors can pick it up and have a look at it. All alumni officers stated that the big downside of the magazine is the enormous costs that are associated with its production and its distribution. Also, the production of such a magazine is very time consuming for alumni officers and therefore the magazine is usually published once a year. Again, the problem with the members' contact details arises, as it is not uncommon for the alumni office to have outdated addresses for many of their members and therefore a lot of the magazines remain undelivered.

The last approach that is being utilized for the development of alumni associations, and the one that is the focus of the present study, is the use of events. There are various types of events that alumni associations organize from informal events like drinks receptions, wine tasting events or golfing events to more formal events like the Alumni awards event where some members of the association are recognized for exceptional accomplishments in their careers. There are also more topical events which can either be organized in relation to a certain issue that has to do with the future of the institution, or they may be planned in connection to a current popular trend, like an event that relates to a new movie. Another common event for alumni associations is the "Christmas homecoming" which is mainly for the members of the association that are

not based in the local area of the institution; therefore they are invited back into campus when they come back for their Christmas holidays. Also three of the four associations have established chapters in various cities around the world where large numbers of their members are located. These chapters organize their own events and the alumni office provides administrative and logistical support.

The alumni office will also help any other members of the association that express their wish to organize their own small scale events, either on the institution's facilities or anywhere else. Finally, all alumni associations place great importance on reunion events. People that have graduated ten, fifteen, twenty, twenty-five, thirty or even, in the case of one association, fifty years ago from the institution are invited back to the campus in order to reconnect with their old classmates and at the same time get a first hand experience on the developments that have been made on the institution since their graduation.

Alumni officers explained that the reason for organizing many different types of events is to offer alternatives so that all members of the association can find something that would appeal to them. Every alumni association has a broad range of members, from the very young members who have just graduated from the institution and are just starting their professional careers to the much older members who have graduated many years ago and may have even retired from their jobs. Thus, an event cannot be tailored to meet the needs and expectations of all members (*"not one thing fits all"*, *"no event can capture everybody"*), but as *"different types of events appeal to different type of*

people”, alumni officers try to satisfy all their members by staging various types of events. The role of these events on the development of the alumni associations is the focus of this study; therefore the findings of the primary research will be now presented.

5.3 Proposition 1: The Impact on Relationships Developed Within Alumni Associations

First the findings that are related to propositions 1a-1d will be presented.

5.3.1 Alumni/alumni relationships (Proposition 1a)

According to alumni officers events play a vital role in strengthening the relationships between alumni. AO4 stated that the social aspect of these events, catching up with people and renewing friendships, is the main reason that graduates are eager to attend alumni events. She said:

“they would not be coming back because of the institute, they would be coming back because they would have close bonds with one another”

AO2 pointed out that once members are persuaded to attend an alumni event, the fun that they have at these events by meeting old friends and sharing stories makes it all worthwhile and it is essentially this aspect of the events that keeps them attending these events. AO3 mentioned a particular group of people that come back to the reunion day

every year in order to meet each other, and that is actually the only time of the year that they have the chance to get together. AO1 also gave an illustrative example of how events can reinforce the relationships between alumni. She spoke about three ladies that came back to celebrate their fifty years of graduation. These women had been to all stages of education together, from primary school up to third level education but when they graduated they moved to different parts of the world and lost complete contact with each other. They met after fifty years at the reunion event and have maintained contact ever since. She also gave another relevant example where she had just recently received an email from an alumni member who had met an old colleague from college at an event and wanted to stay in contact with that person but they had forgotten to exchange contact details, so he asked if the alumni office could contact that person on his behalf and pass on his contact details in order to reconnect.

While alumni officers underlined the importance of events in strengthening alumni relationships and presented several examples of such cases, the attitudes of alumni members (both regular and board members) that took part on this study were mixed on this issue, making it difficult to reach to definite conclusions. Four alumni members expressed positive attitudes on this subject as they believe that events are important in keeping in contact with other alumni. On the other hand, three alumni members claimed that events have played a minor role or no role at all in their relationships with former classmates from college. However, most respondents claimed that alumni events are, or can be, a good business networking opportunity as they can bring together people who

have attended the same institution and now work in similar industries and thus may have common business interests.

5.3.2 Alumni/product relationships (Proposition 1b)

Generally respondents did not make a direct connection between events and the degree or the level of education that graduates obtained at their institution. However, AO3 mentioned that one of the reasons that alumni are inclined to attend these events may be the fact that they feel that they would not have progressed as much in their lives had they not attended the institution. AM2 backed that assertion, as he stated that one of the reasons for attending alumni events is to see what your classmates have done since they finished college in order to

“kind of confirm to yourself, we made the right decision and we were very successful and we were right in choosing that institution”.

5.3.3 Alumni/ brand relationships (Proposition 1c)

All alumni officers professed that events can strongly reinforce alumni’s relationship with the institutional brand, mainly by giving them the opportunity to experience the institution’s progress. AO2 said that, at the time of the interview, they had not staged any events on campus yet, but they will start doing so, because based on his research people are interested in coming back to the institution and seeing how it has developed.

AO4 stated that according to her experience, alumni want to see what the institution looks like now; therefore during events they would incorporate a tour of the college to show people what is new. Similarly, AO1, AO3, and AO5 consistently revealed that they try to organize the events on campus when possible, because they want to show their alumni the developments that have been made and how the institution has evolved in recent years. For example, AO5 stated:

“Events happen on campus. They have always happened on campus. The whole point of that obviously is to get them back here, to see what has happened. The college has changed drastically but it has changed drastically in a very short space of time. Everybody that we have contacted this year will see a lot of the changes they won’t have seen before. In fact they probably won’t recognize the place when they return”.

Alumni board members expressed similar opinions. ABM3 said that alumni always want to keep themselves updated with the news of the institution, learn about the new buildings, who the new head of department is and how strong the institution has become. So by bringing them back and showing them the developments of the institution the alumni association manages to achieve that. ABM1 also stated that bringing alumni members back and giving them a tour of the college has been very successful because graduates reconnect with the institute. Some of them become so excited that when they go away from these events they contact the alumni association to ask how they can help the institute to further develop. ABM2 said that some of the

alumni events that have been organised have been successful and some of them less successful, but trying out various different kinds of events is a positive thing by itself as it puts the brand name of the institution out there, thus growing the institution and the association.

On the other hand, the responses that regular alumni members gave were, once again, mixed. Two of the members perceive alumni events as purely social events and they did not make a clear connection between these events and the institution brand while the other two members stated that events can assist in rekindling members' feeling and perceptions towards the institution. An interesting point was made by AM3 as she stated that alumni associations should not use alumni events to present only the infrastructure developments of the institutions, but more importantly to show to their members how the institutions have progressed academically.

5.3.4 Alumni/ Institution representatives relationships (Proposition 1d)

All alumni officers responded that, to a greater or lesser degree, their relationship with alumni members has been positively affected by alumni events. AO4 stated that events are important because you put a face to the name and thus it strengthens the bond. According to AO3 events help in keeping alumni members in contact with the alumni office. She said that

“to get people to attend events I find it very difficult but you know afterwards you would get a nice email back saying it was lovely to be back on campus, a lovely day, very well organized, and as a result you are getting their details which is so vital”

The fact that events play an important role in renewing the relationship with alumni members, and thus can assist in providing new updated contact details and information for the alumni office, was also raised by AO5. She explained that especially for people who have graduated many years ago the alumni office may not have had any contact with them since they graduated. Therefore events are essential to make current contact with these people and as a result gather their present contact details in order to keep in contact with them. AO1 claimed that members become more engaged with the association after attending alumni events and the alumni office strives to maintain that link by contacting and thanking people for attending an event and putting photos of the events on the association’s website. For their own part, members often send “thank you” letters and emails to the alumni office for organizing the event and sometimes even provide their own suggestions for future events.

The alumni members that took part in this study did not establish a link between events and their relationship with alumni officers, but they were more interested about the effect that events can have in reinforcing their relationships with their former lecturers and other academic faculty of the institution. Three of the alumni members stated that they see events as an opportunity to get back in touch with the lecturing staff of the

institution. Also, two alumni board members mentioned that meeting their old lecturers at these events is something that some alumni members are interested in. ABM3 suggested that though there are some graduates that may have bad memories from some lecturers, there are other graduates that are interested in meeting their old lecturers and learning their news. According to ABM1, her institution excels itself in nurturing very close relationships between students and lecturers as most lecturers would know students' names, where they come from and what their needs and wants are. Thus, graduates are delighted to meet their lecturers at alumni events and reconnect with them.

Two alumni officers also reported that an aspect of alumni events is to bring graduates and their former lecturers back together. For example, AO1 said that though it may not apply to all graduates and to all lecturers, there is no doubt that there is an interest there. He explained that because they are a small institution the bonds that students form with their lecturers are very strong, and these bonds continue to exist after students leave college as a surprising large number of graduates come back to see their lecturers for professional advice. He specifically mentioned a certain department of the institution where there are particularly solid relationships between alumni and lecturers and their events are very successful as all of the lecturers attend and alumni members enjoy greatly coming back to the institution for these events.

5.4 Overall community sentiments (Propositions 2a-2d)

In general, respondents stated that events can play a role in reinforcing the overall community sentiments within alumni associations. The physical, face-to-face interaction was singled out by most respondents as the most important aspect of alumni events as it favours the development of relationships and thus can help the development of alumni associations. As AO1 emphatically put it “*nothing at all compares to actually meeting with people*”.

Two respondents provided additional insight on the chapters of alumni associations and the importance of events for their development. ABM3 talked about how important these events can be for foreign graduates. She talked about Chinese graduates and the plans to launch a chapter in China for the graduates of the institution there. She said that unlike most of their friends in China who have graduated from a Chinese institution, they have graduated from a western institution so they have a different background. They are proud to be members of the alumni association and know that they still have links with the institution. Thus they are delighted to attend alumni events because by having attended a Western higher education institution they share a common background and a common language. AM2 also spoke about the chapters of alumni associations and how useful they can be not only for people who live in distant places but also for alumni members who visit these places. He said that the alumni association not only gives its members the opportunity to keep in touch with each other and stay up to date with the new developments of the institute, but when an alumni member travels

to a place where he might not know many people, being a member of the association ensures he/she is part of a network of people which can be very helpful. Essentially, he said, the alumni association

“offers some kind of foot in the door to kind of say that I’m still there, I’m still part of it and it keeps the relationship going”.

5.5 Implications

This section will present the findings on the implications of event strategies in developing alumni community associations (P3a-P3d).

5.5.1 Active involvement (Proposition 3a)

The responses of the interviewees suggest that alumni events can have a positive effect in members’ involvement with both the association and the institution. Two respondents claimed that events are creating strong links between the members the institution and its representatives, which can foster partnerships for the institution as alumni members may take future graduates on internships or create job opportunities for them. Three respondents also underlined the importance of alumni events in the development of the alumni association itself. A02 and A03 spoke about some “hardcore” dedicated members who strive to attend every event and they are very influential as they relay the message to other alumni bring them to events and try to get them involved with the

association. Active members who attend events may also become more involved with the institution as they may review existing courses, suggest new courses that would provide students with skills that are required in their industries, and become mentors for current students.

5.5.2 Positive referral behaviour

Alumni officers reported that their graduates can play an important role in student recruitment by referring the institute to potential students. Two alumni officers noted that the graduates of an institution are effectively its brand ambassadors, or “*unpaid army*” as one of them characteristically underlined. AO1 said that they are trying to design strategies that would allow their graduates to assist in student recruitment. She stated that, for instance, many of the institution’s graduates are teachers in schools around the country therefore they could be the perfect people to talk to prospective students positively about the institution. She explained that what is important is to educate those graduates on the progress of the institution so that they have a good perception of the current state of the institution and not the way it was back when they were students. AO3 also said that they try to get high profile graduates to go into second level schools and talk to the students about the institution. AO4 reported that there have been occasions where graduates were thinking of sending their own children to the institute but may have been reluctant because they were not familiar with the present state of the institute, so attending alumni events was a perfect opportunity for them to get a first hand experience of its development.

Two of the alumni board members also reported that the development of the alumni association through event strategies can strongly influence alumni members' referral behaviour. ABM1 stated that she has been at the inaugural event of the New York chapter of the association and talking to the people there she realized that they were contemplating sending their children back to Ireland for third level education. Thus, she argued that these events can open up whole new opportunities for alumni members which can be very beneficial for the institution. Similar views were expressed by two other alumni members. AM2 and AM3 noted that showcasing the academic progress of the institution can convince graduates to urge members of their families or other people that they know to choose that particular institute for their third level education. AM2 emphasized that the alumni association essentially consists of a pool of people who have a favourable opinion of the institution. They are champions of the institution, and they are willing to promote and actively encourage other people to come and study at the institution.

5.5.3 Intention to return to the institute (Proposition 3c)

In general, alumni officers did not make a link between the use of events for building the alumni association and alumni's intention to return to the institution for further education. However one alumni officer reported that one of the aims of the association is to bring alumni who want additional training and further education back to the college in order to refresh their memories of the college so that they will choose the institution for their further education.

Alumni members responded considerably more positively on this issue. Bar one exception, they responded that events may encourage alumni members to return to the institution for further education as they can refresh people's memories of the institution's quality and moreover give them an idea of how the institute has developed. It also gives alumni members the opportunity to talk with academics and discuss possibilities for further education.

5.5.4 Willingness to contribute (Proposition 4c)

First, it has to be noted that at the time of this study only one of the four alumni associations employed fundraising activities as part of their strategy, while another association was at the stage of research with the view of starting fundraising in the near future. The other two associations did not use or plan to use fundraising at this stage but instead stated that it is something they will look at into in the future. The reason for not using fundraising is that they are very new associations. Therefore they want first to develop the association and establish strong links with their members and then ask them for contributions. As AO2 stated "*right away it is counterproductive*" thus they are in "the friend-raising at the moment not the fundraising" as AO3 put it.

Another thing that was raised by many respondents and that is detrimental to any fundraising efforts at this time is the negative economic climate. Both alumni officers and alumni members agreed that due to the current economic crisis it would be ill-advised and most probably unsuccessful to organize any fundraising activities.

Nevertheless, respondents strongly suggested that reinforcing community sentiments through event marketing strategies can have a positive influence on alumni's intention to contribute to the institution.

AO1 reported that alumni who donate to the institution tend to be people who attend events and have strong ties to the institution. She noted that events can play an important role in getting the people to contribute to the institution as it gives the opportunity to say to the alumni members *"this is what we are. We think we are doing great, but we want to be way up here and we need you"*. AO5 suggested that people who return to the institution for alumni events are generally more interested about the institution than the other alumni members. Because they usually enjoy coming back to the institution and experiencing its progress they are more open and positive when the alumni office contacts them afterwards. Thus she said

"that is one of the angles that we will be looking at for doing fundraising to work on the groups that would say are warm, they are people that would have had contact in the last year or two they have showed an interest, that we fell we could go and say we are doing this project, are interested in fundraising and go from there".

ABM1 stated that the reunions are usually especially successful and popular among alumni, and therefore after these events, people would contact the association and say that they would love to help in the development of the institution. ABM2 and ABM3

also gave similar responses and moreover they stated that probably younger alumni who have recently graduated from the institution may not be thinking of contributing mainly because they do not have the financial strength yet. But people who have been out of college longer would probably be more able to contribute and this is one of the reasons that the reunion events are usually organized for older graduates. That was in some respects confirmed by the responses of the alumni members as the more recent graduates stated that they have not thought about contributing. AM3 could not answer whether events could make a positive impact on alumni's intention to contribute while AM1 stated categorically that events would not influence him in any way on making a contribution to the college, as he would base his decision solely on the experience that he had as a student.

On the other hand, AM4 noted that alumni events could play a role in a future decision to contribute to the institution. He explained that as relationships are formed over time, by attending events he may establish a stronger relationship with the institution and keep that relationship fresh and therefore he would probably be more inclined to contribute. AM2, while underlining that in the present economic situation personal contributions would not be possible, also suggested that the younger graduates would probably not be interested or able to contribute. However as graduates become more established in their careers they would be more willing to contribute. He especially noted that alumni may be more interested in contributing when they have their own children that may be going to college or intending going to college.

5.6 Additional Primary Research Insights: Enhancing Alumni Communities Pre-Graduation

Apart from the findings that relate to the propositions and the conceptual framework of this study, a number of other interesting issues emerged from the primary research that are worthy of presentation in this chapter.

Several respondents talked about the importance of engaging current students while they are still in the college with the alumni association as a means to enhancing community sentiments and also as a motivation to engage postgraduation. AM3 stated that most people do not really know what the alumni association is all about. When they are still students they know that the alumni association exists but they do not know much about its function, thus she said that it would be advisable to try to create awareness among students about the alumni association when they are still in college. She suggested that the alumni association should organize some events for current students in order to inform them and educate them about the association and that way the students would be inclined to get more involved and stay in contact with the association after they graduate. The same issue was raised by AM2. He noted that the people that run the alumni association need to explain exactly to the current students what the role of the association is. He suggested that maybe they should contact the final year students, either talk to them in class or send them something in order to raise awareness among students about the alumni association. ABM 1 also talked about the

importance of creating links with the students while they are still in college. She said that

“the alumni association is really creating a network for people for now and the future. The idea is to that you are trying to involve the undergraduates as well as the postgraduates before they graduate. Trying to involve them after they graduate is so much more difficult.”

She gave an example of how students can become involves with the association. The alumni board wanted to launch a new project in one of the campuses of the institution so they needed someone to make the design for that project. So it was decided to ask fourth year architecture students to prepare some ideas and make their proposals for a design. It was a very positive experience for the students and it was a way of engaging a group of undergraduates with the alumni association. ABM3 also talked about how the alumni association can engage with students. She mentioned one particular event that was organised by the institution which was an open day for all new students. The alumni association had a presence in that event with its own stand and a small present was given to the students. In order to get all the new graduates on board with the alumni association AO5 said that they prepare a postcard that is sent to the graduates along with all the information about their graduation.

ABM2 stated that even the term alumni may cause confusion as many people may have difficulty understanding what it means; therefore he suggested that an easier term would

attract more people. He also claimed that the institutions must create a sense of openness where graduates feel very welcomed to come back and tour the college and see it at any time not only at specific dates and events.

5.7 Summary

This chapter presented the findings of the primary research of this study. The findings were presented following the order of the research propositions as they were outlined in chapter 3. The findings reported represent the views of Alumni Officers, Alumni Members and Alumni Office Board Members. The next chapter will discuss the findings of this study. It aims to set the primary research findings in context, by discussing the key insights and how they are consistent with or differ to existing studies' findings from both the brand communities and event marketing literatures, thereby highlighting the contributions of this study to the literature and managerial practice.

Chapter 6 Discussion, Contribution and Recommendations

6.1 Chapter overview

The previous chapter presented the findings of the primary research that was undertaken for the purposes of this study. This chapter will discuss the key findings in detail in the context of the relevant studies in the literature. This chapter maintains the structure of the conceptual framework developed in the literature review and that followed in the findings. The findings relating to each proposition are thus discussed in turn, beginning with the discussion of how event marketing strategies can enhance the network of relationships within alumni associations. Following the discussion of the findings, the contribution of the present study to both the literature and the managerial practice is highlighted and the limitations of the current study along with recommendations for further research are presented.

6.2 Summary of key findings

Prior to the discussion, the key findings of the primary research of this study will be summarized.

From the four relationship types depicted in the conceptual framework only the alumni/product relationship was not strongly linked to alumni events. The effectiveness of alumni events in bringing alumni members closer was underlined by all respondents.

Even the interviewees who stated that events have not reinforced their relationships with their former classmates maintained that the social aspect of alumni events is the most important reason for attending these events and claimed that events provide a good opportunity to meet people who have graduated from the same institution which may also lead to the formation of business links. Both alumni officers and alumni board members reported that events can have a strong positive impact on the alumni/brand institution relationships as through events alumni are getting re-connecting with their alma mater and experience its development. Alumni members' responses were divided as two respondents perceived alumni events as just social events, while the other two respondents claimed that alumni events can play an important role in renewing alumni's connection and interest towards the institution. Finally, regarding the alumni/institution representatives relationships, alumni officers affirmed that their links with alumni members have been strengthened due to alumni events. On the other hand both alumni members and alumni board members claimed that events can greatly reinforce relationships between graduates and lecturers of the institution.

Overall, the findings indicate that the overall community feelings within alumni associations are being reinforced by alumni events, as the personal contact that takes place in these events increases participation in the association, enhances interactivity and tightens the social bonds. As a result, the findings show that the positive outcomes that can accrue to the institution are substantial. Several respondents suggested that graduates who attend alumni events become more involved with the institution and they may create partnerships with the institution, offer job opportunities for new graduates,

take the role of mentor for current students and in general help both the institution and the alumni association to develop. They are also inclined to establish favourable opinions for the institution and thus they become “ambassadors” of their alma mater encouraging other people to choose it for their third level education. Moreover, it was suggested that alumni members who become donors are usually members who attend events and for the majority of the respondents attending alumni events can be a decisive factor for alumni’s contributions towards the institution. Finally, while most alumni officers did not see alumni events as playing a role in getting graduates to return to the institution for further education, several alumni members, both regular and board members, stated that by attending alumni events, graduates re-establish their links with the institution and get a first hand experience of the institution’s progress and they are thus likely to return should they choose to further their education.

6.3 The role of event marketing strategies in reinforcing relationships within alumni associations

6.3.1 Consumer- consumer relationship

It has been noted that the most significant element of a brand community is the relationships that are developed between the members of the community. Muniz and O’Guinn (2001) in their definition of brand communities highlighted that the foundation of every brand community is the social relationships that are created among the fans of the brand. Cova (1997) supports this view when he emphasized that the “link’ is more

important than the “thing”. Therefore any attempt to develop a brand community should focus on strengthening the bonds between brand community members (Ferguson and Hlavinka 2006).

McAlexander et al. (2004) suggest that the concept of brand community may also be extended to the higher education sector as alumni associations exhibit some elements of the brand communities construct. Thus, like other more traditional forms of brand community, alumni associations are based on the relationships between their members.

Previous studies have suggested that in order for members of a brand community to establish strong relationships with one another, physical and face-to-face interaction is essential (Rocco 1998, Koh and Kim 2004, Shang et al. 2006). This is importantly supported by other studies in the literature, which have focused specifically on alumni associations and which have emphasized the importance of events in strengthening relationships among alumni members (Fuller 1988) by providing them with valuable opportunities for such personal, face to face interactions.

The findings of the current study concur with previous research that alumni events are vital for developing strong relationships between alumni members, and explores this dynamic in greater detail than previous work in the literature. All respondents agreed that the main aspect of alumni events is the social interaction between alumni members. The majority of the respondents claimed that the links that graduates have with their

former colleagues from college can be reinforced with alumni events. Alumni officers developed this idea further and presented various examples that highlighted the role of alumni in strengthening the bonds amongst alumni members. Three respondents stated that alumni events have played a minor role in their relationships with their former classmates, yet still they value the social aspect of these events, or they see them as an opportunity to meet new people that have graduated from the same institution and build a network of links that may prove beneficial from a business perspective. The issue of developing a business network by attending alumni events was raised by most respondents. One respondent noted that it is mainly specialized events that give alumni members the opportunity to meet and establish relationships with people with the same business interests. As the findings of this study suggest that alumni members see alumni events as a business networking opportunity, alumni associations should try to find ways to organize events that would not only facilitate the renewal of old friendships but events that would focus on the creation of business links between alumni members.

6.3.2 Consumer-product relationships

The consumer-brand-consumer model proposed by Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) suggested that the relationships that can be found within brand communities are those among consumers, and those between consumers and brands. McAlexander et al. (2002) study expanded that model by treating the branded product and the marketer as members of a consumer-centric community. Thus, an important component of a brand community is the relationships between consumers and the branded product. According

to McAlexander et al. (2006), in the context of the higher education sector, the consumer-product relationship can be seen as

“the individual’s perceived identity connection with her university education as one component of her integration in a university brand community”
(McAlexander et al. 2006, p. 109).

However, examining the effect that participation on events had on members’ perceptions towards their vehicles in the Jeep brand community, McAlexander et al. (2002) produced mixed results. They found that Jeep owners who felt less of a bond to their vehicles before the event expressed more positive feelings after the event. On the other hand, Jeep owners who initially felt more positive towards their vehicles demonstrated less enthusiasm about their vehicles after the event. The findings of the present study in relation to this proposition are also inconclusive, as in general, respondents did not draw a parallel between alumni events and perceptions about the education obtained at the institution. Only two respondents made that connection, with one alumni officer suggesting that graduates may attend alumni events because they feel that the education that they got has played an important role in their lives, and one alumni member stated that graduates are eager to attend alumni events in order to confirm that they had chosen then right institution and that their degree has helped them to become successful. Therefore, as no clear links can be detected between consumers and products, further more detailed research is needed. Because the relationship between the consumer and the branded product is a constituent element of every brand

community, further research should examine whether active members of alumni association have a strong connection to the education provided at the institution which would render alumni associations a legitimate form of brand community. Subsequently, further research could examine the role that events may have on that relationship.

What can be concluded however from the present study is that alumni associations should try to place more importance on events that would create links to the education provided at the institution. Events like the “Alumni Awards” that some associations organize could be a step in this direction.

6.3.3 Consumer-brand relationship

The third kind of relationship that is found within brand communities is the relationship between the consumer and the brand (McAlexander et al. 2002). It has been suggested in the literature that as a community is the foundation stone of relationships, brand communities provide a great opportunity for establishing robust relationships between consumers and brands (Muniz and O’Guinn 2001). With regard to alumni associations, the consumer-brand relationship construct relates to the personal connection that alumni members establish with the institution brand (McAlexander et al. 2006).

McAlexander et al. (2002) reported that participation in events reinforces consumer-brand relationships. The findings from the current study emphasise that, also in the higher education sector, event marketing strategies can strengthen the relationships

between consumers (alumni members) and brands (institutions). All alumni officers gave very positive responses and expressed their firm belief that events play an important role in reinforcing alumni members' connection to the institution brand as they give graduates the opportunity to experience the development of the institution.

Alumni board members concurred with this perspective, as they stated that alumni members are interested in the progress of the institution and alumni events are a great opportunity to keep themselves informed on how the institution advances. However two of the four alumni members that took part in this study did not express the same enthusiasm regarding the ability of events in strengthening alumni-institution relationships. Therefore, no definite conclusions could be made from the present study regarding the effect that event marketing strategies can have on the consumer-brand relationship within alumni associations.

However, one alumni member clearly stated that he has a very favourable perception of the institution. This is consistent with the work of McAlexander and colleagues (2002), who assert that for consumers who already feel strong brand connections, the effect of events on their relationship to the brand, though a positive one, it is less pronounced. One of the alumni members who supported the notion that events can help in strengthening alumni-institution brand relationships, made the very interesting point that in order for alumni events to be effective in that way, the focus of events should be placed on manifesting the academic progress of the institution. Alumni associations could take that into consideration and try to stage events where not only the

infrastructure development of the institution is demonstrated but the academic progress is also highlighted. After all, as Fuller (1988) suggests an institution with an enhanced brand image and position has a direct positive impact on the personal image and credentials of each alumnus, therefore alumni associations should also try to organize events and activities that would highlight this mutually beneficial relationship. Clearly though, there are further fruitful research streams which could explore these relationships in greater detail to address potential discrepancies in views from both a managerial and community member perspective.

6.3.4 Consumer- brand representatives relationships

The relationships between consumers and brand representatives constitute the final conceptual relational component of brand communities (McAlexander et al. 2002). It has been suggested that brand communities provide a platform upon which relationships between marketers and consumers can be developed (Muniz and O’Guinn 2001) and that these relationships become even more pronounced through shared consumption experiences (McAlexander et al. 2002) While in most cases brands are represented by the marketers, in the higher education sector interestingly, the representatives are the alumni officers as well as the academic staff of the institution. Thus, in order to examine the consumer-brand representatives’ relationships within alumni associations, one must explore the relationships between agents of the educational institution and the alumni members (McAlexander et al. 2006).

According to the alumni officers that participated in this study, events reinforce their relationship with alumni members. The physical contact that occurs during an alumni event strengthens the bond between alumni officers and members of the association and leads to more contact between them after the end.

While alumni officers expressed very positive attitudes, alumni members' responses were less enthusiastic as they stated that their contact with the alumni association is limited and it has not been largely affected by alumni events. Thus, another element of the brand community construct is not readily apparent within alumni associations which may put the idea that alumni associations constitute a legitimate form of brand community into question.

However, alumni members established a positive link between attending alumni events and their relationship with the academic staff of the institution. The findings of the primary research thus indicate that alumni members perceive alumni events as an opportunity to renew their relationships with the lecturers of the institution. However, from a managerial perspective that opportunity does not seem to have been greatly explored by the alumni association, as only two alumni officers stated that they try to get the academic staff of the institution to attend alumni events in order to reconnect with their old students. Thus, the findings of the current research suggest that though both alumni members and alumni officers believe that events can reinforce relationships between alumni members and agents of the educational institution, alumni associations

should try to better capitalize on the potential of events in strengthening these relationships.

6.3.5 Overall community sentiments

Overall community sentiments signify the positive feelings that a member of a brand community has towards both the other community members and the group as a whole, and they are characterised by four main attributes: perceived identification, group attachment, member attachment and unity (Peters and Hollenbeck 2005). Community sentiments are more robust and lasting than the temporary emotional attachment that derives from participation in community activities (Peters and Hollenbeck 2005), and thus can generate various positive outcomes for the brand (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001).

The findings of the current study strongly suggest that event marketing strategies can reinforce overall community sentiments and thus promote the development of robust alumni associations that will be an important asset for any institution. Respondents maintained that the physical face-to-face communication that takes place at alumni events can bring people together, increase interaction and communication, re-establish old relationships, encourage the creation and development of new relationships, cultivate feelings of pride within the association and strengthen members' ties with the association and the institution.

Algesheimer et al. (2005) reported that identifying with a brand community apart from positive outcomes such as increased community engagement may also have negative implications like normative community pressure and even reactance. The findings of the present study though do not provide any evidence that attending alumni events incite negative feelings towards the community. They are in fact consistent with McAlexander et al.'s (2002) study which concluded that participation in events leads to an increased level of integration within brand communities.

6.4 Implications

It has been suggested in the literature that various benefits may accrue to brands that manage to build strong brand communities. This study examined the effect of employing event marketing strategies for the development of alumni associations in alumni's involvement with the institution, in their referral behaviour, in their intention to return to the institution and in their contributing behaviours.

6.4.1 Active involvement

The literature indicates that in modern-day marketing, consumers are perceived as co-creators of brand meanings (Brown et al. 2003, Wipperfurth 2005, Smigin et al. 2005, Bagozzi and Dholakia 2006, Kozinets et al. 2007) and brand communities are seen as the vehicle that allows consumers to play that role (Cova et al. 2007, Muniz and O'Guinn 2001). In fact, consumers who are highly involved with a consumption

community are willing to assist the brand in order to become successful (Algesheimer 2005, Schouten and McAlexander 1995). In a similar vein, it is suggested event marketing strategies stray from traditional marketing approaches that treat consumers as passive recipient of messages as they provide them the opportunity to become actively involved in the creation of brand meanings (Wohlfeil and Whelan 2006, Lenderman 2006).

The findings of the primary research suggest that active alumni members who attend events may become more involved with the institution and/or the alumni association. Respondents argued an active alumni member may establish strong links with the institution take the role of “guest speaker” or even mentor current students, review courses, create job opportunities for new graduates, promote the goals and the aims of the institution, and also assume an active role in the affairs of the alumni associations.

Barnard and Reinsleigh (2008) investigating the role of web portals in the development of alumni associations found that alumni are interested in learning about the events that are organised in the campuses of the higher institutions and suggested that this may lead to increased involvement into the institution’s activities. Moreover, Heckman and Guskey’s (1998) study established a strong link between alumni’s involvement with their alma mater and participation at social activities sponsored by the institution. In accordance with their results, this study also indicates that actual participation in alumni events can strongly augment alumni’s involvement in the institution’s affairs and moreover it adds to the literature by examining the positive effect that alumni events

can have on the relationships developed within alumni associations which leads to their increased involvement.

6.4.2 Positive referral behaviour

It has been suggested that consumers can become champions of their favorite brands (Bhattacharya and Sen 2003) and brand community members may act as brand missionaries praising its virtues and promoting the brand to other consumers (McAlexander et al. 2002). The personal, face-to face communication that is one of the main traits of event marketing may also turn customers into brand evangelists who will convey the brand messages to other consumers (Lenderman 2006). Peters and Hollenbeck (2005) reported that participation in brand community events leads to increased community sentiments, strengthens brand relationships and results in positive referral behaviours.

The findings of the primary research indicate that the positive referral behaviour which is a characteristic of brand communities also characterizes alumni associations, and event marketing strategies seem to encourage this behaviour in alumni associations. Some respondents even used phrases such as “unpaid army”, “ambassadors” and “champions of the institution” to describe those dedicated alumni members who are willing to recommend the institution to prospective students, phrases that echo similar ones used in the academic literature .

Alumni events apart from increasing community feelings and alumni's involvement in the association which positively influences their referral behaviour, can also have a positive impact on members that have a lower level of involvement with the association. Four respondents made a direct connection between events and alumni's referral behaviour, as they stated that by getting a first hand experience of the infrastructure and academic development of the association, graduates who may have not been aware of that development can develop favourable opinions of the institution and thus refer it to other people. As McAlexander et al. (2002) suggested recent graduates are more inclined to have positive referral behaviour in comparison with graduates who have been away from the institution for a longer period. Thus, the findings of the present study indicate that as alumni events can renew the links between alumni and the institution and encourage a more active involvement with their alma mater, they can have a strong positive impact on the referral behaviour, especially of older graduates who may have severed their ties with the institution.

6.4.3 Intention to return to the institution

Brand communities are perceived as a powerful customer retention tool (Algesheimer et al. 2005), as consumers who associate with a brand community feel that they have to keep supporting the brand (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001) even if the quality of the provided products and the services diminishes (McAlexander et al. 2002). Thus, as Peters and Hollenbeck (2005) concluded, reinforcing community sentiments with event marketing can lead to repeat purchases. In the current higher education context,

alumni's loyalty was examined by their intention to return to the same institution for further education.

With only a single exception, alumni members noted that events can positively influence graduates' decision to return to institution. Previous studies suggested that satisfaction alone does not equate brand loyalty (Oliver 1999) and in fact, brand community integration can be a more decisive factor in building brand loyalty (McAlexander et al. 2003). Thus the findings of the present study indicate that these arguments are also relevant in the higher education sector. Reinforcing alumni's relationships with academic staff in particular and with the institution brand were perceived as the two important reasons why alumni events can have a positive impact on choosing to return to the institution.

However, getting graduates to return to the institution for further education was mentioned only by one alumni officer as a main aim of their association. Thus, given the positive attitudes of alumni members, it is suggested that alumni associations should place more focus on alumni's intentions to return to the college and further examine the role of events in this context.

6.4.4 Willingness to contribute

Peters and Hollenbeck (2005) found positive correlations between participation at brand community events and consumers' willingness to pay more for the brand. The financial

impact of employing event marketing strategies for the development of alumni associations can be explored by examining alumni's willingness to contribute to the institution. Heckman and Guskey (1998) reported a strong correlation between alumni's participation in alumni events and their contributing behaviour. The findings of the present study strongly suggest that event marketing strategies tighten the bonds between the institution and the graduates, making the latter more willing to donate to their alma mater. These findings are in accordance with previous research that indicated that integration in alumni associations can positively affect members' contributing behaviours (McAlexander et al. 2006).

6.5 Additional Insights

Previous studies concluded that alumni associations should not wait until after students have graduated from the institution in order to contact them. On the contrary, it is suggested that alumni associations should make their first attempts to establish relationships with students while they are still in college (Fuller 1998, McAlexander 2006). This notion was strongly supported by the responses of various alumni members who participated in this study. They stated that usually when students graduate with their degree, they do not know anything about the alumni association and thus it is extremely difficult to attract their attention and convince them to become involved with the association at that point. However, most alumni associations that took part in this study do not employ any such strategies. Thus it is recommended that event marketing

strategies should also employed be to raise the interest for alumni associations among students.

6.6 Contribution to the Literature

While the academic research on brand communities has progressed significantly in the last decade, Davidson et al. (2007) rightfully state that it is still in its rudimentary stages as there are various aspects of brand communities that have not been comprehensively explored. They have identified three main areas that need to be thoroughly studied: First, more research is needed in order to understand how brand communities are formed and developed. Second, it needs to be examined whether the concept of brand communities can be applied in new contexts and industries, especially those outside the durable goods sector. And third, further research that will examine the marketers' role in the development of brand communities is required.

However, while the concept of brand communities has been previously examined in the higher education context (McAlexander et al. 2004, McAlexander et al. 2006), no previous study has focused on examining the development of brand communities through event marketing strategies in the higher education sector despite the fact that McAlexander and colleagues (2006) posited that using events may be an effective way to establish a loyal alumni base. Thus this study makes a contribution to the literature by thoroughly exploring the role of event marketing strategies in the development of alumni associations. Specifically, this study developed an original conceptual model

based on prior work in both the brand communities and event marketing literatures to examine the impact of event marketing strategies on *all* the components that constitute the alumni association including the institution's brand community.

This framework allowed for an empirical investigation of the significant benefits that can accrue to the institutions that use events for the development of their alumni associations. The findings of the study importantly indicate that overall community feelings within alumni associations are being reinforced by alumni events, as the personal contact that takes place in these events increases participation in the association, enhances interactivity and tightens the social bonds within the community. However, the discrepancy between the responses of alumni members and alumni officers also raises some questions on the legitimacy of the notion that alumni associations represent a legitimate form of brand communities, an issue which needs to be further investigated. Moreover, the study investigated the role of the marketer – alumni officer- as a constituent member of the brand community and provided managerial recommendations which are summarized in the next section.

6.7 Contribution to Managerial Practice

This study contributes to the managerial practice by analysing the findings of the primary research in the context of the relevant reviewed literature, allowing the author to offer a number of managerial recommendations.

Firstly, according to the findings alumni members generally see the association as an opportunity not only to reconnect with old classmates but also meet new people who have a similar background and may have similar business interests as them. Thus, it is suggested that alumni officers should take that parameter into consideration and employ event marketing strategies that would facilitate the creation of business links between alumni members. This aspect, the creation not only of personal bonds among brand community members, but also of relationships that could prove beneficial from a business or other financial perspective, should also be taken into consideration by marketers of other sectors. However, before trying to implement strategies in that direction they should first carefully examine through marketing research all of the positive and negative implications in order to determine whether it would be beneficial or detrimental for their brands.

Secondly, as the consumer-product relationship is an important element of all brand communities, the findings of the present study indicate that alumni associations should try to implement event marketing strategies that would highlight to graduates the significance of their degree.

Thirdly, in order to create strong brand relationships with the graduates, alumni associations should create events that would not only exhibit the infrastructure development of the institution, but would also focus on the academic progress.

The findings of the present study also suggest that alumni associations could better exploit the opportunities that events provide in establishing relationships between alumni members and agents of the academic institution. Thus, it would be beneficial for the association and subsequently for the institution if alumni officers as well as the members of the academic staff increased their presence at alumni events and tried to raise the level of interaction with alumni members.

Another interesting finding is that alumni events could be used more effectively in order to attract graduates back to the institution for further education. Finally, and of very considerable importance is the fact that alumni associations should try to use events in order to raise awareness for the association while students are still in the institution, and crucially not wait until students have graduated. Further research is required to demonstrate the most effective methods of raising such awareness when students are attending an institution is required.

6.8 Limitations

As with any research, there are certain limitations to this study that should be noted. If time permitted and access was granted the author would have elected to use participant observation as an additional data collection technique of the present study. By doing so, this study would have adopted a more comprehensive triangulation process which would have enhanced its validity and reliability.

An additional limitation of the present study is that the primary research was limited to Irish institutions. Given that the concept of alumni associations is relatively new in Ireland limits the ability to make generalizations.

Also, all the alumni members that participated in the study were fairly recent graduates. Alumni associations have members that belong to a wide range of age groups and in fact, some of the alumni events are geared towards people who have graduated many years ago. Thus, this constitutes a further limitation of the present study.

Another limitation concerning alumni members is the fact that all the participants in the research were members of the same alumni association. The same limitation applies for alumni board members.

It must also be noted that due to the special nature of the higher education sector, the findings may not be applicable to other sectors and industries.

Moreover, although the inclusion of alumni officers and alumni board members in this study allowed the collection of more rich and representative data, at the same time they may have different motivations from regular alumni members which may posit a limitation for the present study.

Finally, the fact that negative case analysis was not performed is also a limitation of this study.

6.9 Recommendations for future research

The limitations of the present study provide opportunities for future research. First, a similar study that would employ quantitative methods using a large sample size could be undertaken. Such a study could include alumni members from various institutions and of a wider age range. It could also be performed in different countries and provide a cross-country analysis. Studies with a larger sample size would generate findings that would have a more generalizable value.

Alumni associations use various different types of events in order to communicate with their members. A study that would examine the effectiveness and the impact of each different event type on the alumni members would not only have academic value but could provide useful practical results.

As nowadays alumni associations are also established by educational institutions outside the third level sector, it would be interesting to explore the role of event marketing in building and managing alumni associations in different levels of education. Moreover, the applicability of event marketing strategies for the development of brand communities in various other business sectors would also be worthy of exploring.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

Consent Form

Building brand communities through event marketing

Business Academic Research Project

I/We agree to conduct recorded interviews with the researcher for this academic project.

The researcher may use the data from the interviews for academic purposes. However, strictly confidentiality and anonymity will be maintained throughout this project as no names will be attached to the data.

The academic outputs from this project may include conference papers and presentations, peer reviewed journal articles and research monographs for Waterford Institute of Technology.

Signed _____

Research Participant

Date _____

Signed _____

Researcher

Date _____

APPENDIX B

Interview Guide – Alumni Officers

-Could you tell me the main reasons for using events as a way to develop alumni associations? What are the benefits from events?

-What types of events do you organize? What impact do they have on your alumni members and therefore on the development of the association? Are there any differences between them?

-Why do you think alumni members are eager to participate in alumni events?

-How are alumni members involved in the decisions and the process of organizing events?

-In your experience, how events have affected the growth of your alumni association? Do you think that they are effective in strengthening relationships between alumni members?

-What impact do events have on the relationship between the alumni office (and consequently the institution) and the members of the alumni association? Are members influenced by events to become more involved with their alma mater (in what way, examples)?

-How do you measure the overall success of an alumni event?

-Apart from events what other strategies do you employ in order to engage members in the alumni association? What are the advantages and disadvantages that events have in comparison to these strategies?

APPENDIX C

Interview Guide – Alumni Members

-What are the reasons for getting involved with the alumni association? What do you think the alumni association has to offer to you as an alumnus and the institution?

-Could you recount a memorable moment of an alumni event?

-Why are you attending alumni events? (Do the relationships that you had/still have with your classmates play a role in your decision to attend an alumni event?)

- How often do you attend alumni events? What types of alumni events have you/are you most likely to attend?

-What do you expect when you attend an alumni event? Do you look forward to seeing you former classmates/ teachers? Do you see alumni events as a business networking opportunity?

-Have alumni events influenced your relationships with other alumni and in what way?

-Have alumni events changed your perception of the institution and in what way? Have you ever had a bad experience attending an alumni event? Has that influenced your involvement with the association and/or the institution?

-Are you/would you like to be involved in the decisions being taken regarding alumni events? Have you become more involved with the institution since attending alumni events and in what way?

-If you were to return to education to pursue another degree would a good/ bad experience that you had at an alumni event influence your decision on choosing the

institution? Would it/ has it influence (d) your intention to make a donation to the institution or refer the institution to prospective students?

-Usually alumni associations apart from events, use online newsletters and magazines in order to get in contact with their members? What do you think events offer that the other ways do not offer?

APPENDIX D
NVivo Reports

Node Summary Report

Project: alumni officers
Generated: 11/09/2009 13:21

academics and events		Tree Node	
Nickname		Words Coded	379
Created	03/02/2009 16:32	Paragraphs	3
Modified	04/02/2009 16:15	Coding	3
		Sources Coded	3
		Cases Coded	0

aims of alumni associations		Tree Node	
Nickname		Words Coded	37
Created	03/02/2009 16:07	Paragraphs	1
Modified	04/02/2009 16:07	Coding	1
		Sources Coded	1
		Cases Coded	0

alumni awards		Tree Node	
Nickname		Words Coded	38
Created	03/02/2009 16:23	Paragraphs	1
Modified	03/02/2009 16:23	Coding	1
		Sources Coded	1
		Cases Coded	0

ball - black tie event		Tree Node	
Nickname		Words Coded	75
Created	04/02/2009 14:57	Paragraphs	2
Modified	04/02/2009 16:11	Coding	3
		Sources Coded	2
		Cases Coded	0

business network		Tree Node	
Nickname		Words Coded	306
Created	04/02/2009 14:52	Paragraphs	4
Modified	04/02/2009 16:22	Coding	3
		Sources Coded	2
		Cases Coded	0

chapters			Tree Node	
Nickname			Words Coded	155
Created	03/02/2009 16:26		Paragraphs	3
Modified	04/02/2009 14:56		Coding	3
			Sources Coded	2
			Cases Coded	0
christmas homecoming			Tree Node	
Nickname			Words Coded	6
Created	04/02/2009 14:57		Paragraphs	1
Modified	04/02/2009 14:57		Coding	1
			Sources Coded	1
			Cases Coded	0
comparing strategies			Tree Node	
Nickname			Words Coded	53
Created	03/02/2009 16:35		Paragraphs	1
Modified	04/02/2009 16:17		Coding	1
			Sources Coded	1
			Cases Coded	0
decision process			Tree Node	
Nickname			Words Coded	608
Created	03/02/2009 16:28		Paragraphs	9
Modified	04/02/2009 16:13		Coding	5
			Sources Coded	3
			Cases Coded	0
different events have different impact			Tree Node	
Nickname			Words Coded	168
Created	03/02/2009 16:23		Paragraphs	2
Modified	04/02/2009 16:12		Coding	2
			Sources Coded	2
			Cases Coded	0
e-newsletter			Tree Node	
Nickname			Words Coded	313
Created	03/02/2009 16:35		Paragraphs	3
Modified	04/02/2009 16:17		Coding	3
			Sources Coded	3
		191	Cases Coded	0

e-newsletter		Tree Node	
Nickname		Words Coded	180
Created	04/02/2009 14:34	Paragraphs	3
Modified	04/02/2009 15:59	Coding	2
		Sources Coded	2
		Cases Coded	0
events		Tree Node	
Nickname		Words Coded	151
Created	04/02/2009 14:34	Paragraphs	2
Modified	04/02/2009 14:34	Coding	1
		Sources Coded	1
		Cases Coded	0
events helping the development of the association		Tree Node	
Nickname		Words Coded	352
Created	03/02/2009 16:29	Paragraphs	6
Modified	04/02/2009 16:14	Coding	3
		Sources Coded	3
		Cases Coded	0
events pr media		Tree Node	
Nickname		Words Coded	315
Created	03/02/2009 16:37	Paragraphs	4
Modified	04/02/2009 16:04	Coding	2
		Sources Coded	2
		Cases Coded	0
events pushing alumni to become more involved		Tree Node	
Nickname		Words Coded	577
Created	03/02/2009 16:32	Paragraphs	6
Modified	04/02/2009 16:22	Coding	4
		Sources Coded	3
		Cases Coded	0
events strengthening relationships between alumni		Tree Node	
Nickname		Words Coded	317
Created	03/02/2009 16:30	Paragraphs	2
Modified	04/02/2009 16:15	Coding	2
		Sources Coded	2
		Cases Coded	0

fundraising			Tree Node	
Nickname		Words Coded		130
Created	03/02/2009 16:17	Paragraphs		3
Modified	04/02/2009 16:08	Coding		3
		Sources Coded		2
		Cases Coded		0
graduates with students			Tree Node	
Nickname		Words Coded		145
Created	03/02/2009 16:26	Paragraphs		2
Modified	04/02/2009 16:24	Coding		2
		Sources Coded		2
		Cases Coded		0
interaction - establish relationships			Tree Node	
Nickname		Words Coded		76
Created	03/02/2009 16:17	Paragraphs		3
Modified	04/02/2009 16:06	Coding		3
		Sources Coded		3
		Cases Coded		0
magazine			Tree Node	
Nickname		Words Coded		184
Created	03/02/2009 16:35	Paragraphs		3
Modified	04/02/2009 16:17	Coding		3
		Sources Coded		3
		Cases Coded		0
magazine			Tree Node	
Nickname		Words Coded		213
Created	04/02/2009 14:34	Paragraphs		2
Modified	04/02/2009 15:59	Coding		2
		Sources Coded		2
		Cases Coded		0
measuring the success of an event			Tree Node	
Nickname		Words Coded		493
Created	03/02/2009 16:33	Paragraphs		6
Modified	04/02/2009 16:16	Coding		4
		Sources Coded		3
		Cases Coded		0

mentoring			Tree Node	
Nickname		Words Coded		136
Created	03/02/2009 16:17	Paragraphs		3
Modified	04/02/2009 16:22	Coding		2
		Sources Coded		2
		Cases Coded		0
one off events			Tree Node	
Nickname		Words Coded		57
Created	04/02/2009 14:57	Paragraphs		1
Modified	04/02/2009 14:57	Coding		1
		Sources Coded		1
		Cases Coded		0
postcards			Tree Node	
Nickname		Words Coded		109
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Modified	04/02/2009 15:57	Coding		1
		Sources Coded		1
		Cases Coded		0
reasons why alumni participate			Tree Node	
Nickname		Words Coded		379
Created	03/02/2009 16:27	Paragraphs		3
Modified	04/02/2009 16:13	Coding		3
		Sources Coded		3
		Cases Coded		0
recruitment role			Tree Node	
Nickname		Words Coded		178
Created	03/02/2009 16:37	Paragraphs		4
Modified	03/02/2009 16:37	Coding		1
		Sources Coded		1
		Cases Coded		0
reasons for using events			Tree Node	
Nickname		Words Coded		555
Created	03/02/2009 16:18	Paragraphs		11
Modified	04/02/2009 16:33	Coding		4
		Sources Coded		4
		Cases Coded		0

reunions		Tree Node	
Nickname		Words Coded	246
Created	03/02/2009 16:23	Paragraphs	4
Modified	04/02/2009 16:28	Coding	5
		Sources Coded	3
		Cases Coded	0

social networking sites		Tree Node	
Nickname		Words Coded	310
Created	04/02/2009 16:24	Paragraphs	1
Modified	04/02/2009 16:25	Coding	1
		Sources Coded	1
		Cases Coded	0

strategies besides events		Tree Node	
Nickname		Words Coded	108
Created	03/02/2009 16:33	Paragraphs	1
Modified	04/02/2009 16:21	Coding	1
		Sources Coded	1
		Cases Coded	0

types of events		Tree Node	
Nickname		Words Coded	40
Created	03/02/2009 16:20	Paragraphs	3
Modified	03/02/2009 16:22	Coding	2
		Sources Coded	1
		Cases Coded	0

Node Summary Report

Project: alumni officers 2
Generated: 11/09/2009 13:15

aims of the association		Free Node
Nickname		Words Coded 523
Created	04/06/2009 02:19	Paragraphs 12
Modified	04/06/2009 02:49	Coding 4
		Sources Coded 4
		Cases Coded 0

alumni - institution		Free Node
Nickname		Words Coded 843
Created	04/06/2009 02:13	Paragraphs 16
Modified	04/06/2009 02:51	Coding 6
		Sources Coded 5
		Cases Coded 0

alumni alumni		Free Node
Nickname		Words Coded 426
Created	04/06/2009 02:13	Paragraphs 4
Modified	04/06/2009 02:40	Coding 3
		Sources Coded 3
		Cases Coded 0

alumni getting more involved		Free Node
Nickname		Words Coded 1,270
Created	04/06/2009 02:12	Paragraphs 14
Modified	04/06/2009 02:54	Coding 9
		Sources Coded 4
		Cases Coded 0

alumni helping the development of the institution		Free Node
Nickname		Words Coded 508
Created	04/06/2009 02:14	Paragraphs 7
Modified	04/06/2009 02:50	Coding 3
		Sources Coded 3
		Cases Coded 0

benefits			Free Node	
Nickname			Words Coded	541
Created	04/06/2009 02:09		Paragraphs	9
Modified	04/06/2009 02:28		Coding	4
			Sources Coded	3
			Cases Coded	0
business network			Free Node	
Nickname			Words Coded	501
Created	04/06/2009 02:13		Paragraphs	5
Modified	04/06/2009 02:50		Coding	3
			Sources Coded	3
			Cases Coded	0
chapters			Free Node	
Nickname			Words Coded	281
Created	04/06/2009 02:15		Paragraphs	5
Modified	04/06/2009 02:38		Coding	4
			Sources Coded	3
			Cases Coded	0
different events different impact			Free Node	
Nickname			Words Coded	280
Created	04/06/2009 02:11		Paragraphs	5
Modified	04/06/2009 02:38		Coding	3
			Sources Coded	3
			Cases Coded	0
events helping the development of the association			Free Node	
Nickname			Words Coded	235
Created	04/06/2009 02:12		Paragraphs	4
Modified	04/06/2009 02:29		Coding	2
			Sources Coded	2
			Cases Coded	0
fundraising			Free Node	
Nickname			Words Coded	55
Created	04/06/2009 02:11		Paragraphs	2
Modified	04/06/2009 02:25		Coding	2
			Sources Coded	2
		197	Cases Coded	0

measuring the success			Free Node
Nickname		Words Coded	947
Created	04/06/2009 02:14	Paragraphs	10
Modified	04/06/2009 02:51	Coding	6
		Sources Coded	5
		Cases Coded	0
mentoring			Free Node
Nickname		Words Coded	177
Created	04/06/2009 02:34	Paragraphs	3
Modified	04/06/2009 02:39	Coding	2
		Sources Coded	2
		Cases Coded	0
on campus			Free Node
Nickname		Words Coded	49
Created	04/06/2009 02:20	Paragraphs	1
Modified	04/06/2009 02:20	Coding	1
		Sources Coded	1
		Cases Coded	0
other strategies			Free Node
Nickname		Words Coded	2,428
Created	04/06/2009 02:12	Paragraphs	42
Modified	04/06/2009 02:53	Coding	12
		Sources Coded	5
		Cases Coded	0
publicity promotion			Free Node
Nickname		Words Coded	618
Created	04/06/2009 02:14	Paragraphs	7
Modified	04/06/2009 02:54	Coding	5
		Sources Coded	4
		Cases Coded	0
reasons for using events			Free Node
Nickname		Words Coded	697
Created	04/06/2009 02:08	Paragraphs	12
Modified	04/06/2009 02:49	Coding	5
		Sources Coded	5
		Cases Coded	0

referring		Free Node	
Nickname		Words Coded	419
Created	04/06/2009 02:21	Paragraphs	11
Modified	04/06/2009 02:53	Coding	3
		Sources Coded	3
		Cases Coded	0

types of events		Free Node	
Nickname		Words Coded	1,131
Created	04/06/2009 02:10	Paragraphs	32
Modified	04/06/2009 02:50	Coding	6
		Sources Coded	5
		Cases Coded	0

why alumni want to attend events		Free Node	
Nickname		Words Coded	845
Created	04/06/2009 02:11	Paragraphs	11
Modified	04/06/2009 02:50	Coding	10
		Sources Coded	5
		Cases Coded	0

Node Summary Report

Project: alumni board members

Generated: 11/09/2009 13:11

alumni association institution brand

Free Node

Nickname		Words Coded	1,067
Created	04/06/2009 00:41	Paragraphs	10
Modified	04/06/2009 01:05	Coding	6
		Sources Coded	3
		Cases Coded	0

alumni-alumni

Free Node

Nickname		Words Coded	638
Created	04/06/2009 00:37	Paragraphs	10
Modified	04/06/2009 01:03	Coding	4
		Sources Coded	3
		Cases Coded	0

becoming more involved

Free Node

Nickname		Words Coded	4,999
Created	04/06/2009 00:42	Paragraphs	54
Modified	04/06/2009 00:54	Coding	2
		Sources Coded	2
		Cases Coded	0

business network

Free Node

Nickname		Words Coded	304
Created	04/06/2009 00:37	Paragraphs	6
Modified	04/06/2009 01:00	Coding	4
		Sources Coded	3
		Cases Coded	0

contributing

Free Node

Nickname		Words Coded	458
Created	04/06/2009 00:37	Paragraphs	4
Modified	04/06/2009 01:00	Coding	4
		Sources Coded	3
		Cases Coded	0

getting involved			Free Node
Nickname		Words Coded	670
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Modified	04/06/2009 00:59	Coding	4
		Sources Coded	3
		Cases Coded	0
lectures			Free Node
Nickname		Words Coded	4,903
Created	04/06/2009 00:56	Paragraphs	56
Modified	04/06/2009 01:06	Coding	3
		Sources Coded	2
		Cases Coded	0
on campus -outside campus			Free Node
Nickname		Words Coded	153
Created	04/06/2009 01:02	Paragraphs	2
Modified	04/06/2009 01:02	Coding	1
		Sources Coded	1
		Cases Coded	0
other strategies			Free Node
Nickname		Words Coded	1,116
Created	04/06/2009 00:38	Paragraphs	10
Modified	04/06/2009 01:07	Coding	3
		Sources Coded	3
		Cases Coded	0
reasons for attending			Free Node
Nickname		Words Coded	579
Created	04/06/2009 00:36	Paragraphs	9
Modified	04/06/2009 01:01	Coding	4
		Sources Coded	3
		Cases Coded	0
referring			Free Node
Nickname		Words Coded	113
Created	04/06/2009 00:40	Paragraphs	4
Modified	04/06/2009 00:58	Coding	2
		Sources Coded	2
		Cases Coded	0

201

underrgraduates**Free Node**

Nickname		Words Coded	687
Created	04/06/2009 00:50	Paragraphs	4
Modified	04/06/2009 00:50	Coding	1
		Sources Coded	1
		Cases Coded	0

Node Summary Report

Project: alumni members
Generated: 11/09/2009 13:05

alumni association		Free Node	
Nickname		Words Coded	1,814
Created	03/06/2009 19:36	Paragraphs	43
Modified	03/06/2009 20:02	Coding	8
		Sources Coded	4
		Cases Coded	0

business network		Free Node	
Nickname		Words Coded	758
Created	03/06/2009 19:16	Paragraphs	11
Modified	03/06/2009 19:56	Coding	4
		Sources Coded	4
		Cases Coded	0

expectations		Free Node	
Nickname		Words Coded	548
Created	03/06/2009 18:53	Paragraphs	4
Modified	03/06/2009 19:55	Coding	4
		Sources Coded	4
		Cases Coded	0

memorable moment		Free Node	
Nickname		Words Coded	471
Created	03/06/2009 19:01	Paragraphs	5
Modified	03/06/2009 19:53	Coding	4
		Sources Coded	4
		Cases Coded	0

on campus-outside campus		Free Node	
Nickname		Words Coded	91
Created	03/06/2009 19:00	Paragraphs	1
Modified	03/06/2009 19:00	Coding	1
		Sources Coded	1
		Cases Coded	0

other strategies			Free Node	
Nickname			Words Coded	1,551
Created	03/06/2009 19:09		Paragraphs	30
Modified	03/06/2009 20:02		Coding	7
			Sources Coded	4
			Cases Coded	0
perception of the institution			Free Node	
Nickname			Words Coded	418
Created	03/06/2009 19:07		Paragraphs	5
Modified	03/06/2009 19:18		Coding	2
			Sources Coded	2
			Cases Coded	0
reasons for attending			Free Node	
Nickname			Words Coded	607
Created	03/06/2009 18:53		Paragraphs	4
Modified	03/06/2009 19:56		Coding	4
			Sources Coded	4
			Cases Coded	0
relationship with lecturers			Free Node	
Nickname			Words Coded	209
Created	03/06/2009 18:54		Paragraphs	9
Modified	03/06/2009 19:56		Coding	3
			Sources Coded	3
			Cases Coded	0
become more involved with the association			Tree Node	
Nickname			Words Coded	2,671
Created	04/06/2009 00:19		Paragraphs	27
Modified	04/06/2009 00:19		Coding	6
			Sources Coded	4
			Cases Coded	0
donating			Tree Node	
Nickname			Words Coded	567
Created	04/06/2009 00:19		Paragraphs	10
Modified	04/06/2009 00:19		Coding	4
			Sources Coded	4
		204	Cases Coded	0

referring		Tree Node	
Nickname		Words Coded	570
Created	04/06/2009 00:20	Paragraphs	15
Modified	04/06/2009 00:20	Coding	3
		Sources Coded	3
		Cases Coded	0

relationship with alumni association		Tree Node	
Nickname		Words Coded	553
Created	04/06/2009 00:18	Paragraphs	19
Modified	04/06/2009 00:18	Coding	5
		Sources Coded	4
		Cases Coded	0

relationships between alumni		Tree Node	
Nickname		Words Coded	1,129
Created	03/06/2009 21:23	Paragraphs	17
Modified	03/06/2009 21:23	Coding	6
		Sources Coded	4
		Cases Coded	0

return to higher education		Tree Node	
Nickname		Words Coded	453
Created	04/06/2009 00:19	Paragraphs	14
Modified	04/06/2009 00:19	Coding	3
		Sources Coded	3
		Cases Coded	0