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Hlanganani Ncube
Department of Accounting and
Auditing, Zimbabwe Open
University, North Regional
Campus, No 15 & 16 Hospital
Road, Hwange, Zimbabwe

Mafa Ngwenya
Department of Accounting and
Auditing, Zimbabwe Open
University, North Regional
Campus, No 15 & 16 Hospital
Road, Hwange, Zimbabwe

Elevating long term financial performance: Why not with brand communities? A focus on OK Zimbabwe

Hlanganani Ncube and Mafa Ngwenya

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Abstract
Long term financial performance is arguably a function of effective brand awareness, commitment, trust, and loyalty. The purpose of this study was to investigate the influence of brand communities on long term financial performance for the period 2019 to 2021. The study was guided by a pragmatism philosophy and a mixed methodology paradigm was adopted. A convergence parallel design was employed to collect data. For quantitative data, systematic sampling method was used to select sample participants from the population for a sample size determined using the Taro Yamani model and to which a statistical questionnaire was administered. Quantitative data was presented in the form of frequency tables and analyzed using descriptive statistics. Qualitative data was collected from purposively selected participants and were thematically analyzed. The study found that brand loyalty, built from brand awareness, brand commitment and brand trust increases financial strength in the retail sector on a longer term, thus the study concludes that effective brand communities result in long term financial performance. The study recommends that retail outlets operate online brand communities to serve the interests and needs of community members.

Keywords: Financial performance, brand community, brand commitment, brand loyalty

1. Introduction
Long term financial performance has of late attracted so much attention among researchers (Kim, 2010) [10] from both the accounting and marketing perspectives. The growing need for healthy financial performance indicated by increasing profitability, improving returns on assets and capital employed, and gaining share values, have been investigated by previous researchers in relation to marketing variables, mostly in the short to medium term (Kim, Kim, & Qian, 2015; Hyman & Mathur, 2005) [11, 9]. For some researchers investigating long term financial performance, ethical practices in the form of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) activities (Okafor, Adeleye, & Adusei, 2021; Kim, Kim, & Qian, 2015; Kim, 2010) [25, 10-11] were found to be a key driver of long term financial performance in the United States and other parts of the world. However, the impact of CSR activities depends on how the brand is viewed by the communities which companies serve, otherwise expecting long term financial benefits will be like building castles in the air, thus, the importance of brand communities in building the brand image cannot be overemphasized. In the case of Nike, the company lost a lot of revenue in the mid to late 1990s (Scamardella, 2015; Lund-Thomsen & Coe, 2014) [30, 16] due to a tainted brand image in communities it served resulting from allegations of using child labor in production, which was considered unethical, hence the motivation to investigate the power of brand communities in promoting a good brand image so as to influence long term financial performance.

Brand communities are used by several companies round the world as a marketing strategy, without regard of whether they are physical or online, formal, or informal and they have a great influence in the communities they are implemented (Zaglia, 2013) [31]. Muniz & `O`Guinn, (2001) [21] argue that brand communities have a major influence in brand success since they bind the brand and the community together, this being essential for long term financial performance. Such companies as Apple which were near bankruptcy in 1997, grew its brand communities round the world (Zaglia, 2013) [31] to over 110015 members by 2011 and in 2018 it had become a trillion-dollar company, while Starbucks grew to over 21 238 192 members as at the year 2011, and these brands are so strong up to today.

Corresponding Author:
Hlanganani Ncube
Department of Accounting and
Auditing, Zimbabwe Open
University, North Regional
Campus, No 15 & 16 Hospital
Road, Hwange, Zimbabwe

In brand communities, members exchange their social beliefs which when appropriately influenced, have a great impact on specific company products.

Brand communities are based on a set of structured set of relationships among their community (Zhou, Zhang, Cheteng, & Zhou, 2012) [32]. In fact, they promote consumers-to-consumers communication (Zhou, Zhang, Cheteng, & Zhou, 2012; McWilliams, 2000) [32, 19], thus compliment relationship marketing which promotes company-to-consumers communication. A study by Lee, Sridhar, Henderson, & Palmatier, (2014) [15] and another by Kumar, Venkatesan, & Reinartz, (2008) [12] found that closer customer relationships enhance customer satisfaction and customer value, being a milestone towards long term financial performance (Mittal, Anderson, Sayrak, & Tadikamalla, 2005) [20]. Dell in 2010 realigned its corporate business units (Lee, *et al*, 2014) [15] around its customers to create clear customer-centric focus which drove its financial muscle up until today. A point to note however is that customers are different in size, in tastes and preferences, and in their needs. The need to utilize brand communities for a tailor-made customer satisfaction to create brand loyalty on these distinct brand community groups for long term financial performance is of paramount significance. This was alluded to by (Laroche, Habibi, Richard, & Sankaranarayanan, 2012) [14] who asserted that maintaining one on one relationships between customers is always efficient in creating good brands.

Zhou, *et al*, (2012) [32] in their study in China, revealed that for long term survival, it is of paramount importance to understand the connection between consumer-brand-community commitment and consumer-brand-commitment. The focal point is that consumer brand-community commitment does not always result in consumer-brand-commitment. As such there is need for brand owners to cultivate consumer emotions towards a brand. This view complement that of Laroche, *et al*, (2012) [14], their study carried out in Canada alludes to that brand communities must achieve brand loyalty through enhancement of brand trust. Laroche, *et al*, (2012) [14], are of the view that brand trust can be best achieved through creating online brand communities. In other words, it's a way of creating brand value through enhanced capabilities of information technology and social media, hence the importance of brand communities as a sales enhancing strategy cannot be overemphasized if long term financial performance is to be achieved.

Through growth of technology, it is inevitable that brand communities go beyond the borders. The value of the brand (Cova & Pace, 2007; Bernard & Stefano, 2006) [5, 2] must be able to go beyond national and continental boundaries but however, Robert, (2002) [28] argues that brand communities have plurality of meanings to the same brand, and this may cause conflict in how brands are perceived in different communities, hence making it very difficult to liberate brand communities from geographical locations. A case in point is with Apple products which may be preferred and perform best in United States of America but not being preferred in Europe. To maximize the financial returns for longer, this calls for a careful thought of creating consumer commitment to a brand, not necessarily to a brand community even though the two have a very close relationship.

Brand community have also been a powerful marketing strategy with the South African banking system. Chabata, (2019) [4] found that online banking communities were integral to the South African Banks and had helped bank managers to understand the constructs that influence consumers` choices of banking services. The importance of brand communities in this case enabled user oriented online banking sites, a key driver of South African banks` markets and this ensured their survival during the global economic recession.

In the Zimbabwean context the issue of brand communities has not been more pronounced or given much attention. However, one will agree with me that some brand communities come into existence informally. In the mining sector, large mining companies have used brand communities to circulate financial resources within the company, from paying employees and coming back to retain the financial resources in the name of recreational facilities through social clubs, sporting, commercialized Trust business units and other social activities to which employees and their dependents subscribe. Brand communities have also been used by institutions of Higher learning, to promote their brand in the form of Student Representative Council (SRC), and the Students` Alumni. The commodity retail sector, fast foods industry and other business units commonly use Facebook communities, twitter communities, Instagram and other groups with unique names like Easy shopper cardholders' communities in an effort to at least offer a tailor made service to a specific group of customers. A general observation is that these brand communities are not given much attention in pursuance of long-term financial benefits across industries, thus the study drawing the following research objective and question.

Objective: To investigate the influence of brand-communities on long term financial performance.

Question: How do brand communities influence long-term financial performance?

The study holds that brand-communities require attention that is beyond being viewed as CSR activities, if long term financial performance driven by sales and profits is to be achieved, thus a motivation for this research being carried out in the commodity retail sector.

2. Theory and concept of Brand communities and financial performance

The first subsection discusses the Social Identity Theory and the next deals in detail with the concept of brand communities.

2.1 The Social identity theory

The study employs the Social Identity theory by Henri Tajfel (1979), a psychologist. Social identity is a person`s sense of who they are, based on their group`s membership. Tajfel proposed that the groups to which people belong, were an important source of pride and self-esteem. The group gives a sense of belonging to the social world and a perception of oneness with other group members connected to their common interests. Social identification stems from categorization of individuals, the distinctiveness and prestige of the group and leads to activities that are congruent with identity, support for institutions that embody

the identity and outcomes that are traditionally associated with group formation. This theory relates to how people define their own place and relate themselves in a brand community which highlights similarities between themselves and other group members.

In relation to the theory of social identity, it can be argued that when the customers are strongly identified with or related to the brand and its brand community environment, this will activate consumer-brand-community-commitment and consumer-brand-commitment, thus probably result in higher motivation towards participation and support for a brand for a longer period. The consequences of such, are long term financial gains pinned on brand communities.

2.2 The concept of brand communities

Brand communities are specialized, non-geographically bound communities, based on a structured set of social relations among admirers of brand as defined by (Muniz & `O`Guinn, 2001) [21]. Bernard & Stefano, (2006) [2] argues that a brand community as a group that consist of people who have common interests in a specific brand and create a parallel universe with their own values, rituals, vocabularies, and hierarchy. It can therefore be agreed that Brand communities are groups of consumers who gather out their love for brands, participants from specific connections, rituals, and traditions among themselves and show a sense of responsibility towards the community. Such shared values and beliefs result in long-term attachments, hence a potential to be carefully used for long term financial gains.

Brand community (Zaglia, 2013; Muniz & `O`Guinn, 2001) [31, 21] have become a main area of focus on the study of brands since they bind together the community and the brand. Such communities are characterized by social interactions between the community members, which influence the members` attitude and perceptions towards the brand (Zaglia, 2013; McAlexander, Schouten, & Koenig, 2002) [31, 18]. In brand communities (Zaglia, 2013; Laroche, et al, 2012) [21, 14] social exchanges exist through different product categories, cultures and types of communities (Muniz & `O`Guinn, 2001) [21, 14], which then are consequential to both online and offline brand communities. Whether the brand communities must be established online, or offline will depends on multiple factors, some of which may be beyond control of the brand owner.

Laroche, et al, (2012) [14] are in support of that geographical location is not essential for brand communities to be created, instead (Zaglia, 2013; Zhou, et al, 2012; Muniz & `O`Guinn, 2001) [31, 32, 21] are of the view that shared values, beliefs and community relations are paramount. As a result, online brand communities know no geographical boundaries as is the case with Apple products, and L`Oreal, they have members around the world. Another case in point is G-tel Cellular which has members on its online platform the whole of Southern Africa. Mass media and new technologies which enhance less cost and more accessibility led to brand communities transcending geographical boundaries. Researchers have discovered that business leaders who create an online presence can benefit from free media, continue to generate sales, and improve local economies.

Online brand communities marketing tools are cost effective, increase the growing importance of the social media and are a pervasive strategy for increasing sales leading to more revenue for business and more visibility to products and services. Social interactions between community members profoundly influence customers' relationship with attitudes and perceptions towards a brand (McAlexander, et al, 2002) [18]. These social formations are a tool to build strong and lasting relationships with customers (Algesheiner, Dholakia, & Herrmann, 2005) [1]. Interactivity in online brand communities can improve the quality of communication. With the advancement of computer-mediated communication (CMC) tools such as instant messaging (IM) technology like, Wechat, Tencent QQ, Facebook, twitter or what's-up which allows the posting of instant responses, online communication has become rich, warm, and emotional.

However, one will agree that the creation and effectiveness of brand communities will, to a greater extent be influenced by National Information Technology infrastructure and cultural developments which may not be within the control of the brand owner, an aspect which was not investigated by the previously referenced researchers.

As traditionally has been the case, brand communities may be offline or physical. Offline brand communities are mostly (Muniz & `O`Guinn, 2001) [21] characterized by social activities that binds communities together in pursuance of common values. They are evident in the form of social clubs, sporting activities meant to promote common values, beliefs, special services to the classified or categorized customers and social interactions. Mining concession companies have always had these brand communities which in some cases may not have been formally constituted to tie a brand with the community. However, paramount to physical brand communities (Fournier & Lee, 2009) [8] is that the brand exists to serve the interests of the members not those of the business or brand owners. A community-based brand builds loyalty, not by driving sales transactions (Fournier & Lee, 2009; Ouwersloot & Odekerken-Schroder, 2008) [8, 26] but by helping people meet their needs which are also their brand community interests. The effect on sales must therefore be consequential for all effective brand communities. This was the case with Harley Davidson Motorcycle`s close-to-the-customer brand community operating philosophy.

Whether physical or virtual, brand communities work around four dimensions which are brand awareness, brand commitment, brand trust and brand loyalty. Members of a brand community (Muniz & `O`Guinn, 2001) [21] must be fully aware of the brand to create a strong attitude towards it. Brand awareness enhance strong relationships between heterogeneous members to form a moral homogeneity coupled with strong relationship, emotional inclination, trust and strong perceptions towards a brand (Ouwersloot & Odekerken-Schroder, 2008) [26], which are essentials for long term brand loyalty, and potentially long term financial gains as shown in figure 1.1 below.
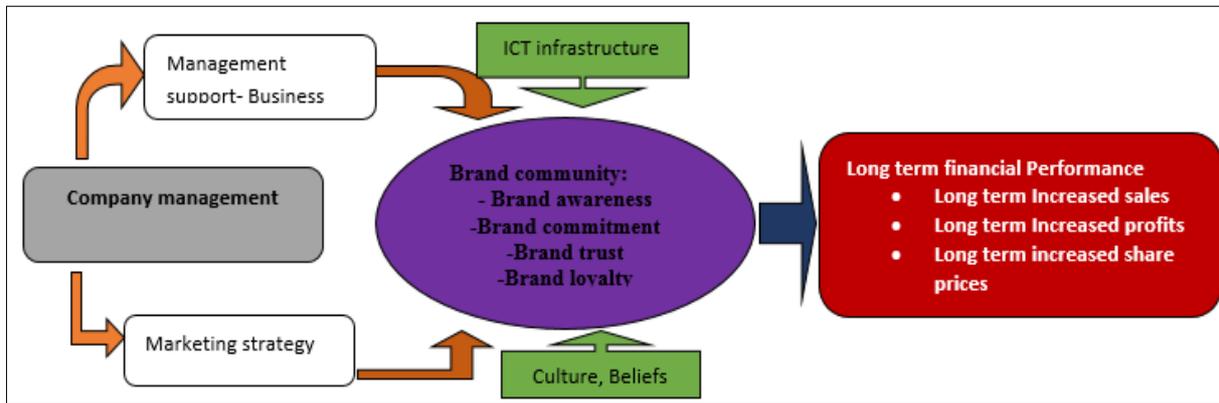
Fig 1: The concept of brand communities

However, (Zhou, *et al*, 2012; Laroche, *et al*, 2012) [32, 14] argue that brand communities replace relationship marketing in that they promote consumer-to-consumer communication rather than company-to-consumer. In these circumstances consumer commitment requires a close assessment. Consumer commitment (Laroche, *et al*, 2012) [14] to the brand- community does not always result in consumer commitment to the brand. Thus, a consumer may be committed to the brand-community to serve his or her interests but not those of the brand. This therefore calls for the need to cultivate emotions towards the brand to create brand trust. This cannot be achieved without understanding consumers` needs (Fournier & Lee, 2009) [8], hence motivation to investigate needs of brand communities differently to establish a connection between the brand owner and the brand community.

Brand communities are built around brand loyalty, which is also dependent on brand trust. Marozocchi, Morandin, & Bergami, (2013) [17] argue that brand loyalty is constructed on trust and identification of brand community members. Whether members are identified with a brand owner or brand community, it reinforces trust and have influence in product marketing. A careful evaluation is therefore required for each of the brand communities, if they are to function effectively.

The existence of brand communities is greatly affected by other variables which include Information Communication Technology (ICT) for online brand communities, legal statues that regulate the gathering and grouping of people, and licensing of businesses. Brand communities are also highly influenced by community culture of members, a strong determinant of brand trust. Brand communities have a potential of being an effective marketing strategy that promote sales in the long term, if both company management and the community share responsibilities of retaining customers and pulling in new ones. Once customers are loyal to the brand, sales and profits improve.

Literature by many scholars (Marozocchi, *et al*, 2013; Zaglia, 2013; Laroche, *et al*, 2012; Ouwersloot & Odekerken-Schroder, 2008; Muniz & `O`Guinn, 2001;) [17, 21, 14, 26, 21] investigated brand communities in relation to short-medium term financial key performance indicators, hence the need for a long term financial performance focused research.

3. Methodology

Guided by a pragmatism philosophy, the study used a mixed methodology (Fischler, 2021; Cresswell, 2014) [7, 6] paradigm to balance the strengths and weaknesses of quantitative and qualitative research methods. A convergence parallel design shown on figure 1.2 was employed (Risinamhodzi & Ncube, 2022; Fischler, 2021; Cresswell, 2014) [27, 7, 6] in concurrently collecting both quantitative and qualitative data.
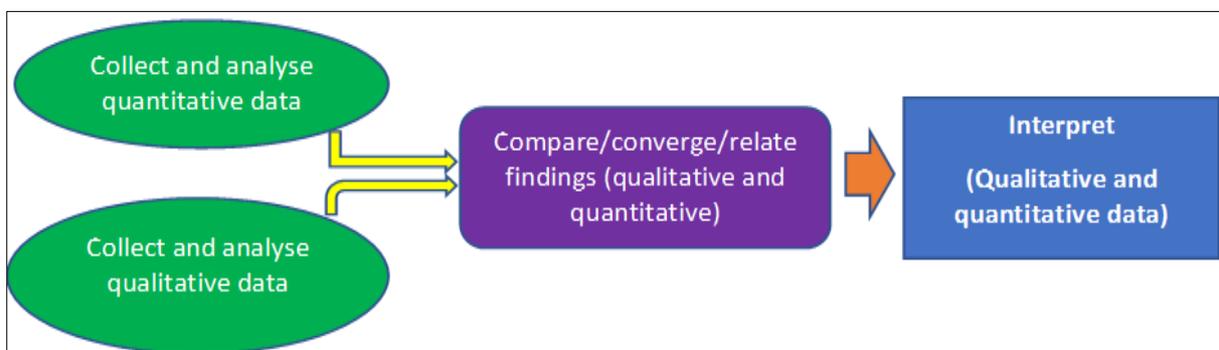
Fig 2: Convergence parallel design adapted from Creswell 2014

On one hand, the population for quantitative analysis consisted of 136 000 followers subscribing to OK Zimbabwe Facebook Community page. A sample size of 398 participants was determined using the Taro Yamani (1967), (Muogbo & Jacobs, 2019) [22], model by applying the following formulae.

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$$n = \frac{N}{1+Ne^2}$$

Where n is the sample size
N is the population
e is the margin of error (0.05)

The elements of a sample were then selected using a systematic (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2009) [29] random sampling technique, by selecting every 100th subscriber from OK Facebook Community page population arranged in alphabetical order. A statistical questionnaire (appendix 1) was generated using Kobo Toolbox application and administered on Facebook through an online link posted to Facebook inbox of selected participants. Data collected was statistically analyzed using descriptive statistics.

On the other hand, for qualitative analysis, five experts were purposively (Cresswell, 2014; Saunders, *et al*, 2009) [6, 29] selected, three from Ok Zimbabwe Marketing department and two from Zimbabwe Institute of Marketing Management, from whom in-depth interviews (Appendix 2) were conducted. From the analysis of data collected through interviews, important themes (Nowell, Noris, White, & Moules, 2017; Braun & Clarke, 2006) [24, 3] were generated from the views, attitudes, and feelings of participants. Findings from both quantitative and qualitative analysis were matched and presented concurrently. Quantitative finds were presented in the form of tables while qualitative findings in the form of narratives.

For the purposes of this study the research instruments were tested for validity using the Lawshe`s (1975), model, cited in (Ncube, Ngwenya, & Muleya, 2023; Kurauone, 2021) [23,

13], of assessing content validity. Ten experts evaluated the content and results (appendix 3) were analyzed using the content validity ratio calculated using the following formulae.

$$CVR = \frac{(n_e - 0.5N)}{0.5N}$$

Where   CVR is the content validity ratio
n_e is the number of experts observing the content as relevant to be researched.
N is the total number of experts in the panel

The researcher included in both the statistical questionnaire and interview guide all items that passed a minimum score of 0.78 suggested by Lawshe (1975), while those which scored below were dropped.

4. Results
Results of the nexus of brand awareness, brand commitment, brand trust and loyalty to long term financial performance in the context of brand communities are presented below.

4.1 Brand Awareness (BA)
Awareness of the brand is one of the essentials to be considered for effective brand communities. Table 1.1 presents the likert scale frequency results on the means of creating awareness of OK as a brand to harness long term financial performance.

Table 1: Means of creating Brand awareness.

Appendix1 Element (BA)	Likert scale average frequency									
	5		4		3		2		1	
	Mean	S/D	Mean	S/D	Mean	S/D	Mean	S/D	Mean	S/D
(BA)A	112	10.23	95	2.94	41	2.62	19	4.32	11	2.49
(BA)B	77	10.80	77	4.96	45	13.14	45	7.25	34	4.02
(BA)C	46	2.94	47	7.31	62	5.73	76	4.54	46	3.09
(BA)D	40	1.25	54	2.16	28	2.16	73	4.64	81	2.05
(BA)E	42	8.52	37	7.03	27	6.79	75	4.49	90	2.49
(BA)F	47	5.31	51	5.43	67	3.74	69	2.44	45	11.86

On the overall, the results show that brand awareness is the major driver of creating a strong brand at OK Zimbabwe, with most respondents scoring moderate extent (likert score 3) to very high extent (likert scale 5) on the frequency table 1:1. Promoting awareness through online communities ((BA)A) scored the highest frequency of 112 on the likert scale (very high extent (scale 5)) with a relatively low standard deviation of 10.23, followed by in-store adverts with 77 with a standard deviation of 10.8. The results suggest that brand awareness is effectively promoted using online communities in line with the findings of (Algesheiner, *et al*, 2005; McAlexander, *et al*, 2002; Muniz & `O`Guinn, 2001) [1, 18, 21]. They held that the growing importance of social media is a pervasive strategy for creating brand awareness and increase sales, thus financial performance for enterprising businesses through interactions between community members. It is through such awareness that the brand community creates a strong attitude towards a

brand.
On the other hand, the results show that radio and television ((BA)D), print media ((BA)E) and CSR activities ((BA)F) promotes awareness of the brand to a lesser extent with a high frequency on the likert scale 2 and 1 (small extent or nil) ranging from 73-90. These results suggest that technology aided communities are replacing physical communities due to growing usage of internet as affirmed by (Muniz & `O`Guinn, 2001) [21].

4.2 Brand Commitment (BC)
Long term financial performance can be best achieved when customers are committed to the brand, thus motivated to support the business through long term consumption of its products. The results in table 1:2 below presents a likert scale frequency for the factors that create commitment to a brand at OK Zimbabwe Facebook brand community.

Table 2: Factors influencing Brand commitment.

| Appendix1 Element (BC) | Likert scale average frequency | | | | | | | | | |
| | 5 | | 4 | | 3 | | 2 | | 1 | |
	Mean	S/D	Mean	S/D	Mean	S/D	Mean	S/D	Mean	S/D
(BC)G	139	5.43	87	2.94	42	5.55	8	2.16	3	1.41
(BC)H	102	26.54	62	9.28	62	15.19	34	11.77	18	7.40
(BC)I	109	8.57	98	13.12	27	5.55	20	0.81	15	4.08
(BC)J	116	24.72	82	3.77	27	9.20	22	8.57	11	5.65
(BC)K	16	3.85	28	4.18	73	9.10	86	4.98	51	10.49
(BC)L	21	6.23	31	1.24	45	3.29	86	7.40	81	9.84

Overall results show a strong connection between awareness and commitment with brand awareness required first, on all factors determining brand commitment of a customer in line with the findings of (Muniz & `O`Guinn, 2001) [21]. Appendix 1 elements (BC) G to (BC) J are major influencers of brand commitment with frequency ranging from 82-139 for likert scale classification 4 and 5. The standard deviations were also low ranging from 1.24 to 13.12 for elements (BC) G, (BC) I and (BC) K, suggesting the frequency scores were closer to the mean. However elements (BC) H and (BC) J had relatively higher frequency scores with standard deviations of 26.54 and 24.72 respectively. The results suggest that the flow of information regarding goods on promotion, testimonies of good customer service and prompt address to customer queries, greatly influence the commitment of customers to a brand, thus continued consumption of goods and services enabling long term financial performance. The results are in tandem with the findings of (Zhou, *et al*, 2012) [32] who found that brand communities cultivate a connection between consumer-brand-community-commitment and consumer-brand-commitment for long term financial survival of a firm. Results from the interviews agree with quantitative results, however one of the interviewees emphasized on that consumer-brand-community-commitment does not always result in consumer-brand-commitment. The focus therefore on brand communities would better be on satisfying community members` needs rather than those of the brand owners.

4.3 Brand Trust (BT)

A focal point of establishing brand communities is to cultivate emotions towards a consumer-brand-commitment to enhance brand trust and brand loyalty (Laroche, *et al*, 2012) [14]. Brand trust (Muniz & `O`Guinn, 2001) [21] is a paramount essential for long term financial performance. The results on tables 1.3 and 1.4 present the frequencies for types of posts and their response/reaction times by brand owners of online Facebook community.

Table 3: Prevalent posts made by community members on community Facebook page.

| Appendix1 element (BT) | Likert scale average frequency | | | | | | | | | |
| | 5 | | 4 | | 3 | | 2 | | 1 | |
	Mean	S/D	Mean	S/D	Mean	S/D	Mean	S/D	Mean	S/D
(BT)M	32	9.17	29	5.35	39	6.97	72	9.79	97	4.78
(BT)N	67	5.43	64	5.65	57	4.32	60	5.73	25	7.13
(BT)O	40	1.24	23	3.09	33	6.64	78	3.09	92	1.63

The results show that there are few posts for Appendix 1 elements (BT)M (customer complaints) and (BT)O (requests for products & service) indicated by high frequencies ranging 60-97 on likert scale grading 2 and 1. This suggest that OK as a brand is leveraging on good customer service and provide sufficiently wide range of products leading to gaining high levels of trust from its customers. This can be linked to average compliments for good service indicated by frequencies ranging from 64-67 and standard deviations of 5.43 to 5.65 for scale 4 and 5. Table 1.3 results are further discussed in relation to information presented on table 1.4 below.

Table 4: Reaction timelines by Facebook Community Administrators

| Appendix1 Element (BT) | Likert scale average frequency | | | | | | | | | |
| | 5 | | 4 | | 3 | | 2 | | 1 | |
	Mean	S/D	Mean	S/D	Mean	S/D	Mean	S/D	Mean	S/D
(BT)P	116	16.57	83	8.28	49	8.57	22	17.21	22	5.43
(BT)Q	127	8.80	65	8.21	53	6.94	18	11.61	16	5.43
(BT)R	115	11.84	68	6.97	34	5.79	31	2.86	76	8.57

The high frequencies ranging from 115 to 127 and 65 to 83 for scale grading 5 and 4 respectively on (BT)P (reaction to complaints), (BT)Q (reaction to compliments) and (BT)R (reaction to product requests) suggest that remedial action is given to complaints and requests, and compliments are acknowledged as a trust building process. Results from interviews agree with quantitative results as they pointed out to prompt reaction to customer queries and complaints. These are congruent with findings of (Fournier & Lee, 2009) [8] who further asserted that trust is built when the brand community address members` concerns and needs, while those of the brand owners become a consequence.

4.4 Brand Loyalty (BL)

To harness long term financial performance from brand communities, such brand communities must be built around brand loyalty, which is constructed on trust, awareness, and commitment of community members (Marozocchi, *et al*, 2013) [17]. Table 1.5 below presents results of reasons for loyalty of brand community members toward Ok brand.

Table 5: Reasons for loyalty of OK Facebook Brand community members

Appendix1 Element (BL)	Likert scale average frequency									
	5		4		3		2		1	
	Mean	S/D	Mean	S/D	Mean	S/D	Mean	S/D	Mean	S/D
(BL)S	121	7.78	87	2.86	38	5.35	19	1.69	11	2.49
(BL)T	94	6.34	69	6.79	17	4.10	54	6.12	42	19.48
(BL)U	117	7.48	71	9.39	36	5.88	29	2.16	22	7.58
(BL)V	62	6.54	42	3.29	33	6.18	61	6.12	77	4.64
(BL)W	26	6.79	30	0.47	45	6.34	84	5.09	90	1.63
(BL)X	132	3.85	79	2.05	42	8.49	16.66	5.43	6	1.88
(BL)Y	132	8.73	78	3.55	31	2.82	21.66	5.73	37	3.39

High frequencies ranging from 94 to 132 and scale grading 5 followed by 69 to 87 on scale grading 4 for elements (BL) S, (BL) T, (BL) U, (BL) X, and (BL) Y suggest that brand loyalty is built around the satisfaction of brand community members` needs which include among others competitive price, promotions, good customer service, product availability and good quality of products. The results are congruent with (Marozocchi, *et al*, 2013; Fournier & Lee, 2009; Muniz & `O`Guinn, 2001) [17, 8, 21]. Marozocchi, *et al*, (2013) [17] further asserts that to ensure brand loyalty,

community members must first be aware of the brand, create a form of commitment and trust.

Brand loyalty has a great potential in shaping the behavior of community members` behavior towards a brand overtime (Zhou, *et al*, 2012) [32] by ensuring both consumer-to-consumer and company-to-consumer relationships. Table 1.6 below shows results of factors influencing repeated behavior by community members towards a brand, an essential for long term financial performance.

Table 6: Repeated preference of OK brand as shopping destination

Appendix1 Element (BL)	Likert scale average frequency									
	5		4		3		2		1	
	Mean	S/D	Mean	S/D	Mean	S/D	Mean	S/D	Mean	S/D
(BL)vii	93	3.39	89	6.68	65	6.53	19	3.29	11	2.49
(BL)viii	114	5.55	92	6.94	51	5.79	12	3.55	7	2.05
(BL)ix	127	7.13	93	7.48	47	9.56	5	1.69	4	2.35
(BL)x	136	2.86	83	5.35	47	5.71	7	1.69	4	2.16
(BL)xi	37	7.78	34	5.71	64	3.55	91	9.03	51	12.02
(BL)xii	85	4.64	85	3.74	74	5.31	22	3.74	11	4.71

The frequency scores ranging from 93 to 136 (scale 5) and 89 to 93 (scale 4) for elements (BL) vii, (BL) viii, (BL) ix and (BL) x strongly suggest on the overall that repeated preference of a brand is highly influenced by brand awareness, brand commitment, brand trust and brand loyalty. The results are in tandem with those from interviews and also with the findings of (Zaglia, 2013) [31] found that growth of strong brand communities propels the financial strength of business as measured by profit, returns on both assets and equity or capital employed many fold for longer, as was the case with Apple in the mid-1990s.

5. Implications of the study
Survival of businesses in a longer term fosters long term benefits to owners and wellbeing of the society. Economic conditions are not universal over time, there are times of recession and times of economic boom. In addition, the competitive environment becomes even more fierce, with markets being characterized by new entrants and new technologies, hence the need for long term financial performance strategies. It can therefore be understood that effective brand communities enable a firm, whether in the retail sector or not, to subdue the threats from adverse economic conditions, gain competitive advantage over its competitors in the markets on a longer term, thus ensuring a wellbeing of the business-community ecosystem which benefit from sustainable business operations.

6. Conclusions
Considering the findings, the study concludes that effective brand communities enable long term financial performance

in the retail sector. The study holds that brand awareness by community members increases their commitment, trust, and loyalty to the brand, which are the major contributors to the ability to achieve a long-term financial growth resulting from brand preference over time.

7. Recommendations
The study recommends that retail businesses should have online brand communities, which serve the needs and interests of brand community members to consequently gain long term financial returns.

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Appendix 1
Statistical Questionnaire
Key to Likert scale scores
1. Nil
2. Small extent
3. Moderate extent
4. High extent
5. Very high extent

Brand Awareness (BA)
How would you rate the following in making the OK brand known to many shoppers for the past three years?

	2019					2020				2021				
	5	4	3	2	1	5	4	3	2	5	4	3	2	1
(BA) A														
(BA) B														
(BA) C														
(BA) D														
(BA) E														
(BA) F														

A. Online Communities (Facebook &Twitter); B. In-store Adverts; C. Outdoor Promotions; D. Radio and television; E. Print media; F. CSR activities.

Brand Commitment (BC)
Since being a member of Ok Facebook community, to what extent did the following factors influence your shopping at OK stores during the last three years?

	2019					2020					2021				
	5	4	3	2	1	5	4	3	2	1	5	4	3	2	1
(BC)G															
(BC)H															
(BC)I															
(BC)J															
(BC)K															
(BC)L															

G. Looking for cheaper products; H. Ok has a good customer service; I. To keep track of promotions, J. To address shopping queries, K. For community development updates; L.to understand operations of the shop.

Brand Trust (BT)
Relative to your experience with OK Facebook community, can you rate the prevalence of the following classifications of posts for the past three years.

	2019					2020					2021				
	5	4	3	2	1	5	4	3	2	1	5	4	3	2	1
(BT)M															
(BT)N															
(BT)O															

M. Complaints (service & products); N. Compliments (service & products); O. Requests (service & products).

Can you rate the reaction timelines done by OK Facebook Community managers to the posts classified below?

	2019					2020					2021				
	5	4	3	2	1	5	4	3	2	1	5	4	3	2	1
(BT)P															
(BT)Q															
(BT)R															

P. Complaints (service & products); Q. Compliments (service & products); R. Requests (service & products).

Brand Loyalty (BL)
For the past three years what is your estimated percentage shopping frequency have you done with OK Stores?

Year	81%-100%	61%-80%	41%-60%	21%-40%	1%-20%
2019					
2020					
2021					

For your shopping done at OK stores, to what extent did the following reasons apply for the past three years?

	2019					2020					2021				
	5	4	3	2	1	5	4	3	2	1	5	4	3	2	1
(BL)S															
(BL)T															
(BL)U															
(BL)V															
(BL)W															
(BL)X															
(BL)Y															

S. Product price competitively affordable; T. Available promotions/competitions; U. Good customer service; V. Geographically Convenient; W. Community activities; X. Product availability; Y. Good quality in store products

For your shopping that was not done at OK stores, how did the following reasons apply?

	2019					2020					2021				
	5	4	3	2	1	5	4	3	2	1	5	4	3	2	1
(BL)i															
(BL)ii															
(BL)iii															
(BL)iv															
(BL)v															
(BL)vi															

i. Competitively high prices; ii. Absence of promotions/competitions; iii. Bad customer service; iv. Geographically inconvenient; v. Product unavailability; vi. Compromised product quality.

To what extent did the factors below influence your repeated preference of OK brand as your shopping destination for the past three years?

	2019					2020					2021				
	5	4	3	2	1	5	4	3	2	1	5	4	3	2	1
(BL)vii															
(BL)viii															
(BL)ix															
(BL)x															
(BL)xi															
(BL)xii															

vii. Awareness of the brand; viii. Commitment to the brand; ix. Trust of the brand; x. Loyalty to the brand; xi. CSR activities; xii. Satisfaction of personal needs.

Appendix 2
In-depth Interview Guide
1. Describe the efforts made by Ok Zimbabwe to promote awareness of its brand?
2. To what extent has Facebook community been applied to promote OK as a brand?
3. What factors would you think highly influence the customers` choice of OK as a shopping destination? How would you rate their commitment to the brand?
4. Relative to your experience with OK Facebook community, describe the nature of posts done by customers and what do they suggest in relation to brand trust?
5. Can you describe the nature of reaction by the administrators to the posts made by customers?
6. Ok mostly rely on its loyal customers for their business, what do you think are factors making those customers loyal to OK as a brand? What are their major reasons for their repeat purchases?

Appendix 3
Lawshe`s Content Evaluation Matrix

Relevancy	Clarity	Score
Irrelevant	Unclear	1
Major revision required	Major revision required	2
Considered with minor revision	Considered with minor revision	3
Very relevant and considered	Very clear and considered	4

Note: Only items with a rating score of 2 or 4 were considered as necessary items worthy to be researched

Items worthy to include in the questionnaire and interview guide	Relevant and clear (3 or 4)	Irrelevant and unclear (1 or 2)	$\dfrac{(n_e - 0.5N)}{0.5N}$	Decision
Awareness of the brand	10	0	1	Appropriate and include
Commitment to the brand	9	1	0.8	Appropriate and include
Commitment to the brand community	7	3	0.4	Inappropriate and do not include
Trust of the brand	10	0	1	Appropriate and include
Loyalty to the brand	10	0	1	Appropriate and include