Reframing the practice of volunteering as a collective endeavour through a focal brand community.

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Reframing the practice of volunteering as a collective endeavour through a focal brand community.

Abstract

Purpose: Nonprofit organisations (NPOs) are an increasingly fundamental part of our society. Meeting rising demand requires NPOs to attract enough resources, especially volunteers, to enable service delivery. This paper adopts a novel theoretical lens to reframe this marketing challenge to inform practice and extend theory.

Design/method/approach: Practice-based exploration of a volunteer-enabled NPO, parkrun, through depth interviews and secondary source analysis.

Findings: The research identified that the brand community connects volunteers through three inter-connected levels. The big idea of parkrun, the focal brand, resonated with people through being 'on their wavelength', something they believed in. The local, physical event meant engagement was 'on their patch', anchored in place. Finally, the brand community enables people to volunteer 'on their terms', with fluid roles and flexible levels of commitment.

Practical implications: Clear recommendations for practice include the opportunity to integrate service beneficiary with service delivery enabler (volunteer) to strengthen the implicit social contract, increasing participation to deepen the social identity felt towards the brand, and key practices that reduce barriers to volunteering.

Research limitations/implications: Not all NPOs have service beneficiaries who are able to volunteer, services with different volunteering roles, or operate through a local physical presence**.** However, taking a focal brand approach, to consider the brand community through which people volunteer for an NPO, the practices that reinforce that community, and how to offer volunteers significantly greater flexibility of both role and commitment presents an opportunity for NPOs to rethink how volunteering works for them in the future.

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Originality/value: The paper extends volunteering theory from the traditional individual needs approach to a focal brand community perspective. The marketing challenge of attracting volunteer resource to NPOs is understood through rethinking the boundaries between service beneficiaries and service enablers, anchored in Social Identity Theory. It provides clear recommendations for practice through reframing the recruitment challenge.

Key words: Brand community, volunteer, social identity theory, nonprofit organisation, practice.

Paper type: Research paper

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Introduction

Recent social, economic, and political changes have highlighted the importance of the nonprofit sector. The austerity cuts in welfare funding of the previous government (Paine and Hill, 2016), combined with the rising numbers of people needing help, have resulted in it becoming an increasingly fundamental part of the fabric of our society. In 2018, three quarters of UK households used at least one nonprofit service, including 19% seeking advice and 11% receiving medical care (CAF, 2018). Although data is not yet available, this is predicted to be higher due to Covid as voluntary organisations, such as NHS Charities Together and Royal Voluntary Service, became an integral part of the pandemic solution. Even pre-Covid, in the UK alone the third sector contributed more to GDP than agriculture, for example, and 91% of NPOs rely solely on volunteers to deliver their services (NCVO, 2021). Attracting this vital volunteer resource to NPO brands is a core challenge for nonprofit marketing.

This paper addresses this important marketing issue through a novel approach that reframes volunteering through brand community theory. The purpose of this research is to identify academic insight that supports nonprofit practice 'in real life' in a relevant and impactful way, through a better understanding of how to attract and retain volunteers. Adopting this practice-based approach (Nicolini, 2012) resonates with the recent call by Heerde *et al*. (2021, p.1) for academic exploration to be anchored in ecological value, defined as "*the degree to which research reflects and is relevant to marketing as it exists and evolves among marketing stakeholders and marketing ecosystems"*. The authors also outline the process for analysis: "*When going from phenomenon to theory, what are the novel connections that extend current thinking about the phenomenon and/or the theory?"* (2021, p.2).

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While volunteering literature is relatively mature, the theoretical focus has tended to be a needs-based perspective, mapping individual motivation to volunteer against personal needs, and assessing how well NPOs subsequently meet those needs (Hustinx *et al*., 2022, Clary *et al.,* 1998). In contrast, the literature on firm-managed brand communities has tended to consider the focal brand and its management of the group and then the subsequent engagement behaviour of the participants (Schouten *et al*., 2007). Prior to this study, there has been little research applying a brand community perspective to nonprofit volunteering, which is surprising given they share a common theoretical thread through Social Identity Theory (Tajfel, 1981, Mitchell, 2021). This research addresses that gap in knowledge by directly examining the relationship between brand communities and nonprofit volunteering, informed through primary research on parkrun as an illustrative case study.

Through adopting this novel approach, the paper makes four contributions. First, it extends volunteering theory through reframing it as a focal brand community social ecosystem underpinned by a big idea and local ownership, in contrast to prior work focusing on individual needs. Second, distinct to recent research considering brand community as a social media phenomenon with no geographical boundaries, this study refocuses the theoretical construct of brand community back towards a physical service experience anchored in local place 'in real life'. Third, the paper argues that the future nonprofit volunteer practice requires rethinking the traditional distinction between service beneficiaries and service enablers in order to develop an implicit social contract where beneficiaries feel such a strong sense of value and ownership that they enable service delivery through volunteering. Finally, the paper identifies specific implications for NPO practice: providing impact through encouraging a new perspective on volunteering, demonstrating the importance of building social identity withing a brand community, and sharing of best practice around fluid volunteer engagement behaviours.

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Volunteer Theory: Meeting Personal Needs

Understanding why people volunteer has conventionally been anchored in the motivation to meet personal needs (Bénabou and Tirole, 2003, Randle and Dolnicar, 2011). Developed in the 90's, the Volunteer Function Inventory (VFI) has become the theoretical bedrock for understanding that people evaluate the benefits of volunteering against one or more of six needs: meeting personal values, understanding (of service users), career enhancement, social, protective (including guilt reduction) and self-esteem (Clary *et al.,* 1998, Omoto and Snyder, 2002). Choice of volunteering is informed by research examining how consumers make choices to achieve goals (Bagozzi and Dholakia, 1999) and so "*it is critical to characterize a consumer's goal for a particular task when trying to ascertain why his or her choice processes take a particular form*" (Bettman *et al.*, 1998, p.208). This idea of understanding individual volunteer motivations and needs has been extended to consider 'job' satisfaction once in the volunteering position (Davis *et al.,* 2003). Extrinsic benefits of the volunteer role are more likely to meet functional needs – developing skills, advancing career, and convenience of time and place. Intrinsic benefits include the fit between what the organization is perceived to stand for with what the volunteer values as important and what supporting that organization says about the volunteer (Boezeman and Ellemers, 2009, Mitchell and Clark, 2022).

Through Social Exchange Theory (Venable *et al.,* 2005, Emerson, 1976), this assumes people act in their own self-interest: *"(the) voluntary actions of individuals that are motivated by the rewards they are expected to bring"* (Blau, 1964, p.91). Social exchange is contingent on the rewarding nature of other people's reaction: if there was no reaction by others, the action would not have taken place (Blau, 1964). This feeds into their social identity, which has been identified in several studies as an important determinant of prosocial behaviour (Tidwell, 2005, Finkelstein *et al*., 2005). Ho and O'Donohoe (2014) examined how volunteers managed their

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social identities given the stereotypes associated with different volunteering roles. White *et al.* (2016) examined role identity in relation to three donation roles – giving money, time, and blood. They found that the important driver of donation behaviour was the person's identity as a donor rather than having been seen as helpful or other general personality characteristics (van Ingen and Wilson, 2016).

However, the VFI has been criticised by Mitchell and Clark (2020a) as only explaining half the story: that is, the generic decision to volunteer, rather than also including the subsequent choice of brand, role, and/or cause. This research moves away from the academic tradition of large-scale volunteer surveys with average findings reported (Omoto and Snyder, 2002, Mowen and Sujan, 2005, Clary *et al*., 1996, Clary *et al.,* 2015), to a more holistic understanding of personal choices around volunteering through qualitative investigation of real life in practice (Schatzki, 2001). Interestingly, this broadening of methodological approaches to understand volunteering has been prevalent in other disciplines such as medical studies (Stoelen *et al*., (2021), tourism (Magrizos *et al*., 2021), and recent responses to Covid (Lai and Wang, 2022).

Through laddering interviews and Means-End Chain analysis of a large sample of regular service-delivery volunteers, Mitchell and Clark (2020a) identified the seven major needs driving specific choice of NPO. These were self-respect, social recognition, sense of accomplishment, sense of belonging, living my values, pleasure, and excitement. The volunteers chose the specific role that would best meet their needs. Crucially, the authors identified this was a two stage process. First, it was the volunteering choice of role, rather than fundraising, donating, or advocacy, that was identified as best fit by the participants. In the data there was scant evidence of volunteers adopting multiple roles to support for an organisation. However, it did not preclude lower involvement support for *other* NPOs, such as ad hoc donations or buying clothes from a charity shop. Second, they identified the type of

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volunteering role that was most appealing, such as front line service-delivery, retail, or volunteering in a head office function. Different volunteering roles were peceived to meet different needs, for example providing a high level of challenge or social recognition. This resonates with other research that identifies the importance of role to the supporter's need for social identity (Finkelstein *et al.,* 2005).

In addition, and particularly relevant for this paper, Mitchell and Clark's (2020a) study of service delivery volunteers, did not consider situations with fluidity between volunteering roles within an organisation. It also found little evidence of the blurring of stakeholder roles between service beneficiary and service enabler (volunteer). Finally, their results found no evidence of a linear decision process where people identified a cause or brand to support and then considered how best to deliver that support, subsequently choosing volunteering (Mitchell and Clark, 2020a). That is, despite being prompted in interviews, no participant had considered donating or fundraising to that organisation instead.

These findings resonate with research on the presbyterian church (Kang, 2016) which found that understanding volunteer motivation was fundamental in driving engagement and loyalty but that impact on job satisfaction was moderated by identification with the cause/brand. It also connects to literature on affective commitment, defined as reflecting *"an emotional attachment to, identification with and involvement in an organization*" (Meyer and Smith, 2000, p.320). Affective commitment underpins engagement as the *"emotional bonding and pride that brings additional efforts to sustain relationships"* (Kang, 2014, p.402). That is, where a volunteer feels a sense of belonging, they are more likely to be fully engaged with the NPO (Mitchell, 2021).

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Therefore, within volunteering theory, and extant volunteering literature, questions remain. Social exchange in the nonprofit volunteering context has been explored on an individual level (Venable *et al.,* 2005, Emerson, 1976), but what happens when the unit of analysis becomes a group or collective? That is, can volunteer theory move beyond an individual needs-based approach (Mowen and Sujan, 2005), to consider the needs of the group? Studies of decision-making around nonprofit volunteering have been role led (Mitchell and Clark, 2020a), but what happens when it is brand led? Understanding volunteer self-identity has also been anchored in role (Finkelstein *et al.,* 2005), but what happens when we consider flexible and fluid roles? Distinctions between stakeholder groups such as service beneficiary and service enabler have been the norm in volunteer studies (Mowen and Sujan, 2005), but how does that change when the boundaries are blurred? Finally, how does building a sense of community impact our understanding of volunteer motivation (Meyer and Smith, 2000)?

Brand Communities Theory: Building Identity and Engagement

Recent research on brand communities has predominantly focused on online activity. Having a clear definition of what is meant by the brand community construct and being conscious of the theoretical development and debates underpinning that construct is key to enabling future contributions to knowledge. A brand community has been defined as a "*specialized, non-geographically bound community that is based on a structured set of social relations among admirers of a brand*" (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001, p.412). It is characterised as having "*well-developed social identity, whose members engage jointly in group actions to accomplish collective goals and/or express mutual sentiments and commitments*" (Bagozzi and Dholakia, 2006, p.45). It is through the sharing of these experiences that value is created for customers.

However, brand communities were originally developed as physical events, created by companies to strengthen engagement between the focal brand and enthusiastic customers who

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perceived a sense of community with other brand users. These 'brand-fests' were, in effect, "*marketer-facilitated consumption activities*" (Schouten *et al.*, 2007, p.359), for brands such as Jeep (McAlexander and Schouten, 1998) and Harley Davidson (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995). Taking Jeep as an example, participation in brand-fests led to significant increases in feelings of integration into the Jeep brand community and positive feelings towards the brand (McAlexander *et al*., 2002).

Company-created brand communities have been seen as pure relationship marketing (Carlson *et al*., 2008), also witnessed within Apple (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001) and VW (Algescheimer *et al*., 2005) communities. Customers who are committed to a brand in this way feel they are in a relationship with it, similar to interpersonal relationships (Morgan and Hunt, 1994), experiencing emotions such as such as passion, self-connection, interdependence, commitment, and compatibility (Fournier, 1998, Shouten *et al*., 2007). Aggarwal (2004) argues that people relate to brands much like friends, reinforced by the literature on consumer-brand identification: that is the perception of similarity between the brand and the consumer (Fournier, 1998), particularly through value congruity (Islam *et al*., 2018).

Tajfel (1981, p.255) defines social identity as *"that part of an individual's self-concept which derives from knowledge of his membership of a social group together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership*". Stevens *et al.* (2019) extend this, describing how having a specific social identity means aligning attitudes and behaviours with those who share it. The stronger a person's identification as a member of the group, and therefore stronger the social identity contribution to their sense of self, the more motivated they are to engage in behaviours with others who share it (Turner *et al*., 1987, Stevens *et al*., 2019). A person socially identifies with a community through self-awareness of their membership in a group (saliency) and the emotional and evaluative significance of this membership (Bagozzi

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and Dholakia, 2002). That is, they don't automatically become members of the group, this depends on their attitude towards the group and how important it is to them (Heere *et al.*, 2011). The crucial thing for companies investing in these communities is that social identity, that is cognitive self-awareness of membership in the brand community, affective commitments, and perceived importance of membership, influences brand behaviour (Bagozzi and Dholakia, 2006; Homburg *et al.*, 2009*)*. One interesting and relevant example of a physical brand community is the Fairtrade Town movement, studied by Samuel *et al.* (2017). These communities are strongly emotionally connected to a physical place and value is created both through the sense of community they build but also the idea-development that drives innovation. They are described as a brand warrior bands of citizen marketers (Samuel *et al.*, 2017). Although *not* discussed by Samuel *et al.* (2017), the physical concept of place resonates with early theories of community as being anchored in place, such as Tonnies' Gemeinschaft (Adler, 2015), drawing on a rural ideal of social systems based on face to face interaction and simple rules.

The shape and type of brand communities has clearly now evolved to predominantly include online domains and also organic communities which exist outside the company, and which may be online, offline, or a combination. Brand community engagement has been defined as the "*holy grail of social media*" (McAlexander *et al.*, 2002, p.38) but this assumes a positive relationship: where the community has rejected a customer, for example refusing their application to join a firm-led community in a bid to keep the group exclusive, the impact on the brand can be disastrous, particularly for weaker brands (Wang and Ding, 2017, Dessart *et al.*, 2020), which demonstrates an area of potential risk.

Focusing on the more common favourable brand-online customer community relationship, recent research has tried to understand the user base. Through exploring a German online

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company-hosted community, Marbach *et al*. (2019) identified three personality traits that were positively correlated to engagement: extraversion, openness to experiences, and altruism. Likewise, Ouwersloot and Odekerken-Schröder (2008) in their study of a company-run website for Swatch, as well as a physical brand event (board game tournaments), found that a brand community can be segmented based on motivation to join. Dessart *et al*. (2019) also explored member typologies of an online company-managed brand community, in particular considering the different roles that affective, cognitive, and behavioural engagement play in driving brand loyalty. They identified three different segments of engaged community members – emotional engagers, thinkers, and active engagers based on perceived value of the community.

Within organic brand communities users create value for others through sharing their experiences (Chen *et al*., 2018, Kumar, 2020). As the community develops, one of the challenges is whether the customer loyalty remains to the focal brand (for example, Ducati) or transfers to the group itself (Marzocchi *et al*., 2011). The issue is where the power lies in the relationship. There is an argument that the company ceding control to the customer can positively drive engagement and therefore have a positive impact on brand equity (Schau *et al*., 2009, Cova *et al*., 2007). This brings a sense of psychological ownership where customers are possessive about a brand and feel they have control over it (Kumar, 2020, Marzocci *et al*., 2013). The other is where the online community creates its own value rather than value for the company (Chen *et al.*, 2018), such as with the Instructables.com community that shares projects: through the self-expression of ideas, a collective benefit is received, labelled by the authors as ‘prosumption’ rather than co-creation (Alhashem *et al*., 2020).

In their study of (primarily) organic communities, Shau *et al*., (2009) provide a counter argument to the idea that brand community membership comes through salience and importance of that group to the person. They argue that it is only through development of

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practices that foster an exchange of resources can a sense of membership and identity develop. Across the nine communities they researched, all but one had developed organically rather than being firm-hosted and these included fan clubs and user experience sharing groups for both obsolete and current products. The authors identify twelve value-creating practices beyond those created by the firm, clustered into four themes: social networking, impression management, community engagement, and brand use. These practices operate as an apprenticeship that evolves over time as the engagement deepens. Likewise, Skålén et al. (2015) in their study of the Alfa Romeo online brand community, Alfisti.com, found co-creation of value was more likely to succeed when the company and the customers enacted collaboration practices in similar ways.

Constructs within the brand community literature include Brand Community Engagement, defined as "*identification with and participation in the brand communities"* (Wirtz *et al.,* 2013, p.230*)* and *"continuous customer involvement in the activities"* (Raies *et al*., 2015, p.2634) and that it *"acts as a strong predictor of community based and brand based relationship outcomes like satisfaction with the brand and the community at the same time"* (Wirtz *et al.,* 2013, p.236). Brand Community Commitment has been understood as the "*degree of strong and positive feelings towards the community amongst members*" (Jang *et al.,* 2008, p.68). Finally, Community Relationship Investment considers the resources such as time and effort a company employs to maintain or enhance the relationship with their customers (De Wulf *et al*., 2001). They argue that stronger the investment, the more likely the brand community engagement. Perceived customer benefits resulting from that investment drive positive attitudes and engagement (Kumar, 2020; Zheng *et al*., 2015).

However, despite the growing body of research on brand communities, and their popularity as a loyalty building tool amongst marketing managers, there are dissenting voices. Zwick and

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Bradshaw (2016) in their essay critiquing Web 2.0 argue "*online customer and brand communities rarely exist in substantial or meaningful ways*" (p.92). They argue the development of brand communities is simply one example of biopolitical marketing, that is a world where marketing is "*inserted into the fabric of everyday life*" (p.93), where everything that is done ends up "*in the great vortex of promotional culture*" (p.93). The authors share their concern that biopolitical marketing, using online customer communities as an example of this, place themselves outside the logic of a marketer as they are not self-contained and sometimes seen as anarchic. Zwick and Bradshaw (2016) are concerned that marketers use the construct of community too loosely but argue "*Such analytical carelessness is common in marketing because marketers usually have no commercial interest in disambiguating concepts*" (p.97). Clearly, they come from an alternative perspective to those engaged in empirical research mapping the phenomenon.

More recently, other critics (Wickstrom et al., 2021) focus on their perception of an underlying assumption in brand community literature that customers want to consume communally so marketing practices, such as creating brand communities, bring a sense of belonging (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995; Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001). Drawing on a wide range of philosophical perspectives, Wickstrom *et al.* (2021) argue there is an underlying bias in the literature towards socially desirable constructs of engagement and participation, rather than seeing how brand communities can, in themselves, enforce "*separation and fragmentation through the production of social, material, spatial, and temporal differences*" (p.76). However, the authors do concede that the sense of belonging to the community may derive from shared practice, passions, and emotions which create a link, providing a moment of joy that leads to cyclical patterns of behaviour (Wickstrom *et al.*, 2021). Stratton and Northcote (2016) critique the idea of brand communities being about feelings of community but rather sense of collective affiliation and ownership over shared cultural elements. De Burgh-Woodman and Brace-

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Govan (2007) go further, arguing it is these very cultural elements that help brand community members distinguish their brand from similar offers in the marketplace, with the brand bringing a "*self-induced sense of exclusivity*" (p.199). Above all, these critics argue that brand community literature merely develops an "*understanding of marketized belonging as a remedy for societal rationalization*" (Wickstrom *et al.,* 2021, p.82): that is, they are concerned that a shared sense of belonging, while desireable at a general level, is more complex when deployed as a marketing tool.

In contrast, in their 2009 conceptual paper, Hassay and Peloza argued there was a strong opportunity for charities to build brand communities as a relationship marketing tool, as a "*consciousness of kind (identification) and shared rituals (behavioral involvement) can lead to the development of moral responsibility (perceived sense of community) and subsequently commitment to a brand or charity*" (Hassay and Peloza, 2009, p.31). The fundamental relationships within brand community theory are therefore relevant to the nonprofit context: including exploring how social identity is derived from self-concept as a member of a group (Tajfel, 1981), how stronger identification as a member of the group results in motivation to engage in behaviours with others who share it (Stevens *et al*., 2019) and finally, despite the dominance of online brand community studies, how the physical concept of place resonates with people (Adler, 2015). Given the importance for NPOs of being able to harness scarce resources, it is therefore important to better understand whether volunteer resource to enable NPO service delivery can be attracted through the creation of a brand community.

Therefore, this research takes a novel approach extending nonprofit volunteering through adopting a brand community lens. From a theoretical perspective, brand community theory has yet to be understood thoroughly in the context of nonprofit volunteering, offering an opportunity for this research to build on the earlier studies of physical commercial brand

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communities such as Jeep and VW, but also to extend knowledge through considering a case where the brand community is the delivery, not simply a marketing-related initiative to promote the product/service. In addition, reframing volunteering through a brand community lens offers the potential for this research to evolve volunteering theory from the individual needs-based approach to an organisation-led, group-based approach, offering an alternative perspective in order to contribute to the conversation in literature about the importance of focal brands in the nonprofit sector (Mitchell and Clark, 2020a, 2020b).

Research Design, Context and Approach

Research Design

The research design responds to a call to identify situations of "*practice moving faster than research*" (Reis *et al*., 2016, p.1341) described as "*the pull, real world practitioner experience*" (Reis *et al*., 2016, p.1345) that explores "*marketing as it exists and evolves among marketing stakeholders and marketing ecosystems"* (Heerde *et al.,* 2021, p.1*)*. In this way it builds on a growing conversation about understanding subjects 'in real life' (IRL) where research adopts a practice-based approach (Luyen *et al*., 2021, Dyen *et al*., 2018, Gannon and Prothero, 2016, Hietanen and Rokka, 2015). This approach has been seen as a way of understanding social and organisational phenomena within the world we inhabit (Nicolini, 2012) and has been gathering momentum (Schatzki, 2018). However, it has its critics. Some identify it as a practice bandwagon (Corradi *et al*., 2010). Others argue a unified theory of practice does not exist (Nicolini, 2012) and that it lacks theoretical coherence (Rouse, 2007). What is clear is that there is range of terminology including practice theory, practice axioms, practice idioms, and a practice lens (Corradi *et al*., 2010, Schatzki, 2001, Rouse, 2007). Specialisms such as strategy-as-practice have emerged, with a focus on understanding practitioners, praxis, and practices within management decision-making (Jarzabkowski and Spee, 2009). However, recently the

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debate has shifted away from disagreements about terminology to the more inclusive language of 'practice-based approaches' (Dyen *et al*., 2018, Luyen *et al*., 2021, Hietanen and Rokka, 2015), which focuses energy on the social reality of what we experience as something that "*sheds new light on the nature of knowledge and discourse*" (Nicolini, 2012, p.13).

The purpose of the research was to understand the implications for nonprofit volunteering as part of an organisation-created brand community (Yin, 2009). Adopting a practice-based approach informed the research design: study of a volunteer-enabled NPO, parkrun, that was identified as meeting three characteristics present within the brand community literature: a well-identified social identity (Bagozzi and Dholakia, 2006, Stevens *et. al*., 2019), clear focal brand (McAlexander *et al*., 2002), and presence of value-creating brand community practices (Shau *et al*., 2009).

Research Context of the Case Study: parkrun[i]

Every Saturday morning, all over the country, a quiet phenomenon happens. People get up, come together and run/walk 5km. In their local park. For free. For fun. Not a race against others – but against themselves. 'parkrun'[ii] was founded in 2004 by Paul Sinton-Hewitt, a keen runner who was injured but wanted to stay involved with his running community (Bourne, 2014). He devised a weekly 5km run for his running club members and other local clubs to join. By March 2023, the number of people taking part was 2.8 million and number of runs completed in the UK alone was 45.3 million (parkrun, 2023). It is deliberately accessible with tail-walkers so no participant comes last, open to those running with pets or pushchairs, and with a 2km version for younger people (aged 4-14 years). Each person completes a one-off registration and gains a printed barcode which enables them to turn up and track their participation in any parkrun in the world. parkrun now employs 24 people at the centre and is supported by sponsorship from brands such as Vitality and Co-op.

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The charity behind this phenomenon has created a global movement that raises interesting and important implications for future models of volunteering. Participating in parkrun is free but the events only function through people stepping forward to volunteer including registering people, recording times, and marshalling the route. The parkrun volunteers' hub illustrates the difference of their approach to volunteering with their first guiding principle being "*volunteer for the love of it"* and a mission that states *"It is absolutely our belief that volunteering should be done simply for the pleasure of helping out and for the benefits that are gained from doing so. Volunteering at parkrun is an equal form of participation, where the act of volunteering itself is the reward"* (parkrun, 2021).

Within an event, parkrun reduces barriers to volunteering through offering a variety of volunteering roles with different levels of responsibility and technical knowledge so people can choose what they feel comfortable with or suits their situation, for example if they also want to run/walk the event. In addition, the rapid growth of parkrun has been organic. The decentralised approach is driven through the mission to enable parkrun to be available to all. However, this necessitates a core team of committed volunteers in each location, motivated to start something in their local community. Tasks include fundraising the £3,000 set up costs (UK example), building a core of volunteers often from local running clubs, and gaining all the local permissions. It requires people to put their hand up to take a lead, but in return they receive a real sense of ownership and empowerment. And crucially, they are supported. Since 2013, the Ambassador Network recognises those who are involved in one event but happy to support others in setting up their own. They act as mentors for new location teams. The central team also provides advice includes systems, safeguarding, and gaining council permission.

Research Approach

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The research was conducted in two phases. Ethical approval was granted by the author's University Research Ethics Committee.

Phase 1: Informed by the broader literature on volunteering, Phase 1 was a detailed review of existing organisation-specific, published research on parkrun (Wiltshire and Stevinson, 2018, Grunseit *et al.,* 2018, Morris and Scott, 2019), 'official' material from the organisation itself including the website (parkrun, 2021) and authorised book of the story (Bourne, 2014), founder interviews and media commentary (Chakrabortty, 2018, Griffiths, 2016, Hobson, 2018), and event observation prior to the Covid lockdown. The purpose of Phase 1 was to ensure the research made a unique contribution to knowledge, to inform the primary data collection and analysis, and to underpin the interpretation of the findings.

Phase 2: A qualitative research approach was used which explored the lived experience of current members of the brand community. This approach allowed for in-depth insight into engagement, including capturing behavioural, cognitive, and emotional factors. A sample of 19 parkrun community members aged between 17 and 66 years participated, of whom 17 had volunteered and two were runners only. Interestingly, all the volunteers had also taken part as runners/walkers, as indicated in the sample profile in Appendix 1. The recruitment method was snowball sampling and 79% of the sample were female. Identities were protected using pseudonyms. The participants came from 11 geographical areas, anchored in their all local parkrun community. This geographical spread was identified to be important as each local parkrun community was found in the extant research on parkrun (reviewed in Phase 1) to have different 'personalities' influenced by longevity, local conditions, and scale. Amongst the volunteers, the behavioural engagement in focal brand-specific volunteering ranged from novice (one time only) through to deeply committed, with one participant having volunteered over 300 times. Accuracy of frequency data on volunteer participation was supported through

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the central on-line record of participation counts, both running/walking and volunteering: that is, every time a parkrunner logs onto the website, their statistics for running and volunteering are there to see. A wide range of volunteering roles had been experienced across the sample including specific roles such as being Run Director through to being a generalist resource, happy to do whatever is needed on the day.

The interviews were conducted early in the first Covid lockdown, March – May 2020, at a time when parkrun (and all other group activity) had to cease. This had a reflective effect as participants considered their experience of engagement with the parkrun phenomenon. The data was analysed in three stages throughout the interview period and saturation was deemed to have been achieved as no new themes emerged with the final participant (Bowen, 2008). In addition, no further interviews were conducted due to the risk of later interviews having a longer time-period since physical parkrun participation and the potential for memory to be distorted over time. Each participant interview sought to understand the current level of interaction with parkrun including running/walking and volunteering, perceptions of the national and local organisation, and exploring depth and type of engagement with the brand community. Interviews lasted 40 minutes on average, were recorded on zoom, transcribed by an external transcription professional, and then checked for accuracy by the researcher.

To understand the relationship between the individual, local brand community, and focal brand, the data was analysed through thematic coding, drawing on the guidelines provided by Braun and Clark (2006). An organic approach to coding was adopted in line with Braun and Clark's methodological guidance for qualitative research in sport, exercise, and health studies (Braun and Clark, 2019). Prior to data analysis, a familiarisation stage included multiple re-watching of recordings and reading of transcripts (Byrne, 2022), as well as reviewing the findings from the Phase 1 focal brand research and observation. Initial codes were identified by the researcher

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within the first five interviews and then the Codebook developed through analysis of the next five. Data from these first ten interviews was then second coded by an independent practitioner, outside the brand community but experienced in volunteer management, based on the Codebook, to ensure the coding had been applied consistently and comprehensively (Neuendorf, 2018). Any discrepancies in the coding were discussed with the researcher and the coding revised as a consequence. The Codebook including themes and sub-codes, were then updated by the researcher to ensure it accurately captured the data and was applied to the remaining interview sample. Analysis was conducted using NVivo 12. The final Codebook is shown in Appendix 2.

Findings

Phase 1: parkrun Research Review

The reach and popularity of the parkrun phenomenon has stimulated a rich exploration in research, anchored in theoretical frameworks from sport and health (Reis *et al.*, 2016, Renfree and West, 2019), and building community through sport (Wiltshire *et al.,* 2018). Early studies (Stevinson and Hickson, 2014) identified the public health potential, subsequently adopted by the UK Government as part of policy to build a more active nation (DCMS, 2015). By 2018, Tobin was arguing in The Lancet in favour of the idea of prescribing parkrun, describing it as a social context for collective health practice (Tobin, 2018). Grunseit *et al.* (2018) explored the positive connection between parkrun participation and improved physical and mental well-being. Morris and Scott (2019) identified parkrun as a refuge for those with mental health problems. Moving beyond the sports and medical literature, parkrun has also been identified as a tourist phenomenon with enthusiasts planning their overseas travel around parkrun event participation (McKendrick *et al.*, 2020).

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Although *not* the theoretical focus of the extant body of parkrun research, core constructs of reciprocity, social networks, and social capital can be identified within the studies. Stevinson *et al.* (2015, p.173) describe the combination of volunteering/fundraising and benefits received through running as '*giving and gaining'*. Several studies identified that recruitment is often driven through friends and family (Cleland *et al*., 2019, Quirk and Haake, 2018), with Wiltshire and Stevinson (2018) in particular discussing the social capital created. The concept of parkrun as a community is widely observed (Bowness *et al.,* 2021; Hindley, 2020; Sharman *et al*., 2019) although not researched as a specific construct. Hindley (2020, p.6) describes parkrun as a "*community-based recreational running initiative*", a shared leisure space. This raises an interesting observation on brand communities that are underpinned by interest based sub-cultures, such as running groups (Shipway *et al*., 2013, Lassalle *et al*., 2019). Many participants were already running, either by themselves/with a friend or as members of running clubs. It is an interest they have in common: something that unifies across different levels of ability and commitment and has resulted in the growth of other organised running events such as 'Tough Mudder' and 'RunThrough' races. parkrun was able to harness that interest, in the same way that specific brand communities for motorbikes, cars, or tech brands have done (McAlexander *et al*., 2002; Schouten *et al.*, 2007). However, in the case of parkrun, through the simplicity of the event, lack of 'race' and accessible length, it then went on to attract people new to running, people not running (walking with prams or dogs), and people supporting others. Building on an existing culture of running (Lassalle *et al.,* 2010, Shipway *et al.*, 2013) gave parkrun momentum and relevance. Building accessibility and appeal for a wider range of people and their needs gave parkrun mass participation (Stevinson *et al.*, 2015) and global appeal.

Stevens *et al.* (2019) identified a significant correlation between the strength of identification with parkrun and the level of participation, positive exercise experiences, and group cohesion. Again, with the ultimate focus on health, Bowness, Tulle and McKendrick (2020) argue that

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both media coverage and academic research present parkrun as a community which may potentially lead to health benefits. They identify that volunteering is a way of staying within that community even when runners are injured and identify a culture of "*collective effervescence through values, ethos and buzz*" (Bowness *et al*., 2020, p.59). At the heart of that culture are the concepts of reciprocity (competition and volunteering opportunities) and freedom (accessibility and inclusivity) (Wiltshire and Stevinson, 2018). The authors found that volunteering at parkrun binds people to the event, which they identify as social capital influencing field-specific cultural capital.

Given the parkrun phenomenon, it is not surprising it has attracted academic research attention. However, to date this research has been motivated through developing better understanding of the physical and mental health benefits, rather than considering a brand perspective or through the marketing challenge of recruiting enough volunteers. No evidence of parkrun being considered through a brand community theoretical lens was found in the literature which confirmed the potential contribution to knowledge of the research.

Phase 2: Primary Research

Through thematic analysis of the 19 depth interviews, three dominant themes emerged, all with important implications for future models of volunteering. These have been labelled 'On your wavelength', 'On your patch', and 'On your terms', illustrated in Figure 1.

Theme 1: 'On your wavelength'

Universally, participants talked about the big idea of parkrun and understood that the events are very clearly directed by the focal brand (Schouten *et al*., 2007).

> *"It's incredible that there's this really tiny core team in the parkrun headquarters that's running the whole of parkrun around the world."* (Sarah, Witney).

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There was universal awareness of the organisation, and its distinctiveness.

> *"They've realised what works and what doesn't. And they've streamlined it. And I think they've got it right." (*Mia, Lewisham)

Crucially, this was more than brand awareness but an alignment to the brand mission and values. The organisational ethos was perceived as social participation, motivated by a desire to make parkrun available to all and a strong belief in the power of running to do physical and mental good. Participants felt the brand was on their wavelength, consistent with what they also believe to be true about its power to bring positive change at a local, national, and global scale.

> *"I think sometimes it reminds you of all those positive elements of humanity and connection and spirit that you just don't get through a computer."* (Sarah, Witney)

The values and ethos of the organisation resonated with them and made them feel they were part of something bigger, something underpinned by the universality of event format: a set time every Saturday (9am) and set length (5k).

> *"It's just amazing to know that at the same time, all over the country and all over the world, whenever they get to nine o'clock, you know the same thing is happening that you're part of a much bigger thing. It makes you feel good. It makes you feel as though you're part of something."* (Liz, Abingdon)

This brings an almost religious following for some participants, one that is deeply anchored in emotion. This is reflected in the language used to describe how they feel about it, including being 'devoted' to it and something 'I believe in'. Other participants talked about how it was the highlight of their week, the thing they looked forward to most, or how a runner in their area

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thanked them (for volunteering) for literally saving their life after a hip operation left them isolated.

Therefore, there is clear evidence of this being a focal brand created community (McAlexander *et al*., 2002), which participants emotionally identify with through values and mission alignment, they feel that is on their wavelength. This finding is consistent with brand community theory that argues the stronger a person's identification as a member of the community, and therefore stronger the social identity contribution to their sense of self, the more motivated they are to engage with the community (Turner *et al*., 1987, Stevens *et al*., 2019), and to see it emotionally significant to them (Bagozzi and Dholakia, 2002).

> *"It's something I really care about. I just love it. I cannot put into words what it means to me personally."* (Saadia, Newbury)

However, despite having some of the features of social movements, such as exhibiting shared collective identities and being a network of interactions between individuals and groups (Diani, 1992), we cannot go as far as describing parkrun as a social movement as it is not engaged in political or cultural conflict (Diani, 1992).

Theme 2: 'On your patch'

Participants experience the big idea of being part of the brand community through engagement anchored in place, resonating with Tonnies' Gemeinschaft (Adler, 2015). Despite the fact that parkrunners talk about visiting other parkruns, including on holiday, there was a strong sense of identity being anchored in 'my local parkrun', contrasting strongly with the body of research understanding brand communities as a purely online phenomenon (McAlexander *et al*., 2002; Dessart *et al*., 2013). The rapid growth of the parkrun geographical footprint has been made

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possible by people, usually keen runners, stepping forward to bring the big idea of parkrun to their 'patch'.

> "*I think there's probably a sense of kind of civic pride when a place like Todd gets a parkrun and you don't want it to fail or not to go ahead.*" (Joe, Todmorden)

They universally articulated a strong local community feel that develops through the parkrun: it creates a social environment.

> "*So, lots of our volunteers might not see anybody else on that Saturday, they might come up and they see everybody in the morning and then be by themselves for the rest of the day. But through volunteering, they build up a circle of friends and become part of the community. And that's really rewarding.*" (Mia, Lewisham)

This embedding in the local community is further developed through a deliberate identification of a local café where participants and their families meet afterwards which builds social engagement through this shared practice.

> "*I think actually the social element of it is probably a massive reason that encourages people coming together rather than it just being about the activity itself.*" (Sarah, Witney)

Each parkrun is a community in its own right but they are also anchored in the wider local community which enables participants, whether runners/walkers or volunteers or both, to feel better engaged in their local area:

> "*It makes me feel grounded, particularly with the type of job I do, so I feel I have somewhere to go every Saturday where I feel part of community … it makes me feel like*

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> *I have the ability to maintain social relationships at home with people in my community, which my job doesn't necessarily allow for."* (Harsha, Witney)

It also consciously reaches out to other local groups, such as local running clubs, local charities, or youth movements like Scouts for involvement including 'takeovers' of one event. People talked about feeling much more embedded in their local community through parkrun, building social networks, and feeling anchored in the place. parkrun to them is more than just a big idea, it is their local community: a feeling which is reinforced through the brand practices including birthday celebrations at the pre-briefings and quick availability of run times on the website afterwards.

Crucially, these practices are anchored in volunteering as well as running/walking, with points given for volunteering as well as running. The milestone achievement T shirts for example – for participation 25/50/100/250/500 times are for running/walking and for volunteering.

> *"I also think it's really lovely that parkrun reward for you being a volunteer … So even if you are injured or you're pregnant and can't run or whatever, you still part of that team and you're still working towards something."* (Naomi, Abingdon)

The engagement through shared practice was also present through social media activities - checking results against personal best times on the website, number of times volunteered, reading the run reports which includes stories and experiences of the volunteers, following the local Facebook pages and twitter feeds. Participants also spoke about receiving the central parkrun organisation emails, but it was the local ones that described events and results from their patch that resonated more strongly as they were about their local area. This finding of focal brand communities being anchored in place is consistent with the research on Fairtrade Towns (Samuel *et al*., 2017), but, in this case, engagement was deepened through the multiple examples of shared local practices.

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Theme 3: 'On your terms'

The practices of volunteering within the parkrun community are found to be distinct to extant studies of volunteering practice, both within commercial contexts (Shau *et al*., 2009) and nonprofit contexts (Mitchell and Clark, 2020a). Identity as a parkrunner encompasses multiple roles – sometimes running, sometimes volunteering, sometimes organising, sometimes running and volunteering. Crucially, this means the service beneficiary is often the same person as the service delivery enabler (volunteer). This blurring of stakeholder roles is unusual within the nonprofit context (Mitchell and Clark, 2020a). Regular volunteers also included runners who were injured but wanting to stay in touch with their local community, partners/family of people running including teenagers using the volunteering for their Duke of Edinburgh award, and those who run but know they should give back to enable the event to happen, the most common group. The research identified that it was the norm for the core volunteer team of Run Directors to be runners who want to share their enthusiasm with others through their local parkrun.

There is widespread understanding of the social exchange of needing to contribute to make the event happen. Crucially, this is putting aside individual needs (e.g. enjoyment and fitness gained from running) (Mowen and Sujan, 2005, Clary *et al*., 1996) for the sake the needs of the group/community, again quite distinct within volunteering studies.

> *"I kind of set myself a challenge if I can [to] ... volunteer once every six weeks, something like that, and then I feel like I'm doing my bit really."* (Joe, Todmorden)

There was also wide-spread evidence of people being flexible in volunteering roles lending a hand to whatever was needed on the day, which helps the organisers 'fill holes' but also brings the volunteer a sense of variety.

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> *"I don't* [chose a role] *because I kind of think that whoever is organising it and has the overall responsibility that they want, in my experience, when you're organising something like that, you want somebody to say, right, okay, I'll turn up and do whatever you want me to do. Well, I've got experience of organising races before. I can handle the timers. I can marshall the course. So, I'll do whatever you want me to and then it's up to them really to say."* (Joe, Todmorden)

However, in contrast to traditional models of nonprofit volunteering, the arrangement with parkrun is not a formal commitment. There are no set hours you are required to give back, no job descriptions, no notice period. Indeed, there was no evidence from Run Directors of any prejudice against runners who never volunteered, which was surprising, and the running-only participants in the sample did not feel any pressure to volunteer.

> *"I have seen sometimes people say if you run ten times, giving one back is a good thing to do. But our core team believes very strongly that you just don't know what people come forward and what they get out of it. And if running is what they need to do and they can't volunteer, that's OK, maybe they volunteer somewhere else, maybe they do other things that ... you just don't know."* (Harsha, Witney)

Likewise, parkrun volunteering practices included flexibility on timing:

> *"I think for me that being able to book into a job that you want to do on a date that you want to do with people you want to do it with is really, really important."* (Naomi Abingdon)

This flexibility also extends to type of role. Some people prefer to choose a particular role, perhaps so it enables them to run as well (such as managing the mid-week social media), or because it is seen as less stressful (like marshalling). The fact that parkrun has a range in

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volunteer roles supports this idea of finding something that suits each person. Within the nonprofit context, this is unusual: for example, directly contrasting with the specific and fixed roles of supporting a charity shop (customer assistant), being a Samaritan (counsellor) or a Citizen's Advice volunteer (advisor).

This combination of having a range of volunteer roles, enabling people to identify a role preference if they want to, providing training for different roles, enabling people to change with ease, and having a body of volunteers that will just fill the gaps needed enables each local parkrun to operate for free and be open to everyone. However, it did not appear to lead to volunteers being less committed to supporting the organisation, compared to having for example a specific role and 'shift' each week such as with Samaritans or Citizen's Advice. The parkrun volunteering practices have the effect of reducing potential barriers to volunteering. Ironically, by not thinking about it as a commitment, people did then feel the responsibility to making their local parkrun happen through volunteering. This was in part due to being able to volunteer on their own terms including frequency, type of role, and variety of roles. This finding about the fluid volunteer practices present in this case is significantly different to extant literature and represents a new approach to nonprofit volunteering.

Research Contribution

Implications for Marketing Theory

Recruiting enough volunteers to deliver nonprofit services is a marketing challenge (Mitchell and Clark, 2020b): attracting resource to a focal brand within the fiercely competitive environment of multiple demands on people's time. Historically, the decision to volunteer generically (Omoto and Snyder, 2002, Mowen and Sujan, 2005, Clary *et al.*, 1996), and the choice of NPO specifically (Mitchell and Clark, 2020a), have been understood through an individual needs-based theoretical approaches such as Social Exchange Theory (Emerson,

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1976, Blau, 1964) and the Volunteer Function Inventory (Omoto and Snyder, 2002, Mowen and Sujan, 2005). In particular, Mitchell and Clark (2021a) have shown that service delivery volunteers identify that they want to volunteer, and then select the cause and brand with whom to make that happen that best fits their needs. However, through this research an alternative perspective emerges, anchored in brand community theory (Bagozzi and Dholakia, 2006, Shau *et al*., 2009, Schouten *et al*., 2007), that of nonprofit volunteering as a focal brand community where the needs of the group are paramount. This novel approach offers important contributions for evolving marketing theory.

First, the study is distinct to company-initiated communities (Shouten *et al*., 2007) in that the local parkruns are *not* developed as exercises in relationship marketing (Carlson *et al*., 2008), as Hassay and Peloza (2009) argue they should, but instead are the core delivery mechanism of the brand: the parkrun community *is* the product/service, not customers of the product. This point of difference is important and the local empowerment created is, in a way, closer to studies of consumer-initiated brand communities (such as Indestructables.com) that operate independently of the focal brand (Alhashem *et al*., 2020).

The local parkrun community is the enactment of a 'big idea', the organisational mission that participants universally buy into. It is very much anchored in the parkrun focal brand and the values that underpin that, resonating with Bowness *et al*. (2020)'s observation of strong cultures being underpinned by values. There is universal awareness of the focal brand amongst participants, including the stories underpinning it, consistent with the particular importance of storytelling within the nonprofit sector as a way of building emotional connection and brand differentiation (Mitchell and Clark, 2021). In the data, participants articulate three layers of connection to the brand: a social identity to the big idea/focal brand, with participants talking about being devoted to it and believing in what it stands for, connection to their local parkrun

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community building for many a stronger engagement in their local community through parkrun, and their own routes to participation in practice such as the variety of roles they have undertaken and the depth of their commitment. This goes beyond a connection, or social link (Cova, 1997) to the run itself but to the broader values and ethos of the organisation. Each of these three layers contribute to a deep social identity with the brand (Tidwell, 2005), consistent with Tajfel's (1981) description of self-concept coming through the emotional significance attached to being a member of the group. For most participants, volunteering was episodic. However, that does not mean the engagement with the organisation was (Hyde *et al*., 2016). The weekly volunteer emails in advance of the event, the in-person briefing prior to the event, the social catch up in the café afterwards, checking the website for run times and the race report afterwards, all create multiple points of engagement for the sample that deepened the relationship with the focal brand building Brand Community Commitment (Jang *et al.*, 2008) and Community Relationship Investment (Kumar, 2020).

Participants feel that parkrun is on their wavelength, that is a good fit with their values and what they believe is important in life. Some go further and talk in almost religious terms, about what they believe in, how they are devoted to it, and the central role it plays in their life. This goes beyond self-identification as a 'runner', identified as a distinct sub-culture in its own right (Lassalle *et al.* 2019, Shipway *et al.,* 2013), to self-identifying as a member of the parkrun community, something distinct and specific.

However, understanding the contrast between this focal brand approach vs. individual needs approach is further complicated by public perceptions of parkrun as a 'grass roots' activity, and indeed the founder Paul Sinton-Hewett was awarded a CBE[iii] in recognition of his service to "grassroots sports participation". It is certainly true that parkrun encourages participation in physical exercise at a local level and, equally important, the organisation of local parkruns is

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at a local level including leadership roles, volunteer management, and local parkrun community building through social media. However, the big idea of parkrun, the brand and what it stands for, and processes for organisation of existing and new parkruns, and crucially, the perspective on volunteering as participation comes from the centre, the focal brand.

Second, the study refocuses brand community theory back to a physical phenomenon. In contrast to extant definitions of brand communities as non-geographically bound (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001), the parkrun brand community exists physically for participants at the local level; anchored in place. This has parallels to the physical brand communities identified within the Fairtrade Town phenomenon (Samuel *et al.*, 2017), but contrasts with the growing body of brand community literature focusing on exclusively online communities (McAlexander *et al.*, 2002; Dessart *et al.*, 2013). The strength of the physical parkrun brand community IRL works to rebalance the theoretical exploration of brand communities as a purely virtual phenomenon, coming full-circle back to early studies of 'brand-fests' (McAlexander *et al.*, 2002). Each local team is empowered and feels a sense of ownership. Engagement is strengthened through mid-week social media but the primary relationship is through the physical event[iv]. The practice of place is embedded: the central organisational fully empowers the local volunteer delivery teams, including the Run Director. Building wider networks within the local community through running clubs, schools, and organisations such as Scouts and Guides strengthens this sense of integration. Localised communication during the week, such as Facebook groups, maintains the momentum. This builds on the work of Hindley (2020) who found that the 'casual sociability' of the shared leisure activity that is parkrun built a sense of community.

However, this research extends beyond a sense of belonging to the organisation to building a sense of belonging to, and identity with, the specific place, through meeting people living nearby, socialising afterwards in a café, and participating in an activity in their community.

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The enthusiasm of participants to find this type of face to face social interaction resonates with Tönnies original construct of Gemeinschaft (Tilman, 2004) based on rural society, perhaps as an antidote to dominant societal Gesellschaft urban societies with their impersonal and indirect relationships (Adler, 2015). Sometimes viewed as ideal types rather than representations of reality, the academic debate about the relevance of this slightly old-fashioned idea of community is anchored in place. However, this takes on particular relevance in the Covid and post-Covid era, when where we live (and had to stay) physically, and engagement within our local community to support each other, was brought to the fore.

Third, the study extends nonprofit volunteering theory through challenging traditional models of how nonprofit volunteering happens in practice. In conventional volunteer research the service beneficiary is one stakeholder group and the volunteer another. There are examples of overlap in practice, for example, those supported by Macmillan Cancer Relief may then volunteer to fundraise or share their experience online to help others: those supported by the Children's Society's parent and child programmes may then volunteer their time to give back. However, the norm within extant nonprofit literature is for those delivering the service, the volunteers, to be a distinct cohort to those receiving the service. Self-identity is anchored to a specific stakeholder role/group (Mitchell and Clark, 2020a), if at all. This is not the case with parkrun. The clear message from the central organisation is that volunteering is participation, just as much as running or walking. Being a 'parkrunner' encompasses multiple running and volunteering personas. The relationship is at brand level not stakeholder group level (van Ingen and Wilson, 2016) and the boundaries between the groups are blurred.

Finally, the study identifies distinct volunteering practices IRL that contrast with widely researched traditional nonprofit volunteer management practices (Hager and Brudney, 2015, Cuskelly *et al*., 2006), including published job descriptions, the application and interview

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process, CRB checks, and formal performance reviews. Previously, the individual volunteer assesses the advertised volunteering role against their personal needs (Clary *et al*., 1998). In contrast, organisational fluidity is at the heart of the innovative parkrun approach: rethinking volunteering as an integral part of a brand community, underpinned by the implicit but informal social contract. Not only are there a range of roles to choose from but also flexibility to change roles (depending on preference), and vary level of commitment/frequency, both of which reduces the barriers to volunteering (Torgerson and Edwards, 2012) In addition, recognition practices within that lived experience practice raise the visibility of volunteering at the heart of the brand community include gaining points for volunteering, visibility of counts (number of times volunteering) on the website, public thanks in weekly briefings and run reports, as well as reward T shirts for 25 times volunteered. Being thanked has been found to be a key motivational driver for volunteers (Stukas *et al*., 2016). The clear brand practices identified within the parkrun brand community, such as the fluidity of roles and these recognition practices, build a strong sense of membership and development of social identity, consistent with Shau et al.'s (2009) work on organic brand communities.

This exploration of the parkrun phenomenon extends volunteering theory through reframing it as a brand community social ecosystem underpinned by a big idea and local ownership. It refocuses the construct of brand community back to a physical service experience anchored in local place IRL. From a theoretical perspective, it calls for a rethink of the traditional stakeholder group distinction between service beneficiaries and service enablers towards a mutually reinforcing, integrated focal brand community.

Implications for Marketing Practice

In addition to being of theoretical importance, the research is of practical importance. Given the natural churn in volunteering, service-delivery based NPOs constantly struggle to attract

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enough volunteers. This research has deliberately adopted a practice-based methodology (Heerde *et al.*, 2021, Luyen *et al.*, 2021, Dyen *et al.*, 2018), not only to inform development of theory, but also to provide empirically informed insight to strengthen NPO practice. Above all, the paper argues NPOs need to adopt a fresh and fluid approach to re-imagine volunteering for the future. What parkrun has achieved is the creation of a social ecosystem through engagement with local brand communities that is very closely aligned to the mission and ethos of the focal brand. Clear storytelling about the big idea, the ethos of the NPO, and the mission is well understood. However, ownership and empowerment are anchored at the local community level. Beneficiaries of the service value it so highly, they offer to volunteer in order to maintain the service, honouring an implicit but informal social contract. This is underpinned by multiple opportunities for engagement, lack of formal volunteering commitment, multiple practices that reinforce the social identity as a parkrunnner, flexibility of roles, and understanding the importance of social networks. It is this relationship between focal and local that makes it particularly useful as a model for nonprofit practice.

This exemplar organisation has created a community that enables volunteering to thrive, opening up a novel way of thinking about volunteering practice, one where:

- there is a blurring of stakeholder groups between service beneficiaries (in this case runners/walkers) and service enablers (volunteers) and therefore through this inter-dependence, creating an understanding of an implicit social contract where group needs are put before individual needs
- there is fluidity of roles and flexibility of engagement, such as no explicit volunteering commitment, a flexibility of volunteering role choice, flexibility of timing and frequency of volunteering, all of which reduce the barriers to volunteering (with the exception of the local Event Director)

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- engagement at a local level is anchored in community, following a template created by the focal brand.

The implications for nonprofit volunteering best practice are considerable, not least requiring a mind-set shift from structured, exclusive individual roles to the fluidity of a brand community. The paper encourages NPOs to audit their current volunteering practice against these findings, including mapping current levels of brand community investment, brand community engagement, and affective commitment by their volunteers.

Limitations and Future Research

The potential for generalisability of the research is limited through the diversity in the characteristics of NPOs: for example, not all NPOs have service beneficiaries who are able to volunteer, or services with different volunteering roles, or who operate through a local physical presence. Future research could seek out evidence of brand communities within NPOs of different profiles. Future studies could also explore the implications for evolving to this model of 'volunteering as brand community'.

Second, the research is limited through geographical context. Future research could explore cases of volunteering brand communities in other countries exhibiting high levels of formal volunteering such as USA, New Zealand, and Norway. Third, the research focuses on a physical brand community, anchored in local place. Future research could build on this work through exploring whether experiencing the brand in other locations (such as parkrun participation in neighbouring towns or while on holiday) results in a change in perception of the focal brand. Finally, this research identifies that brand community connects volunteers through three inter-connected levels: the presence of a big idea ('on your wavelength'), locality ('on your patch') and flexibility of roles ('on your terms'). Future studies could deepen our

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understanding of the relationship between these three levels and identify which are the primary drivers of the relationship with the focal brand.

(Insert Appendix 1: Sample Profile)

(Insert Appendix 2: Codebook)

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[i] 'parkrun' brand name is always written in lowercase.
[ii] The parkrun brand identity was launched in 2008: prior to that each event was called the (location) Time Trial e.g., Bushy Park Time Trial.
[iii] Commander of the British Empire medal.
[iv] Before lockdown, in a normal situation.

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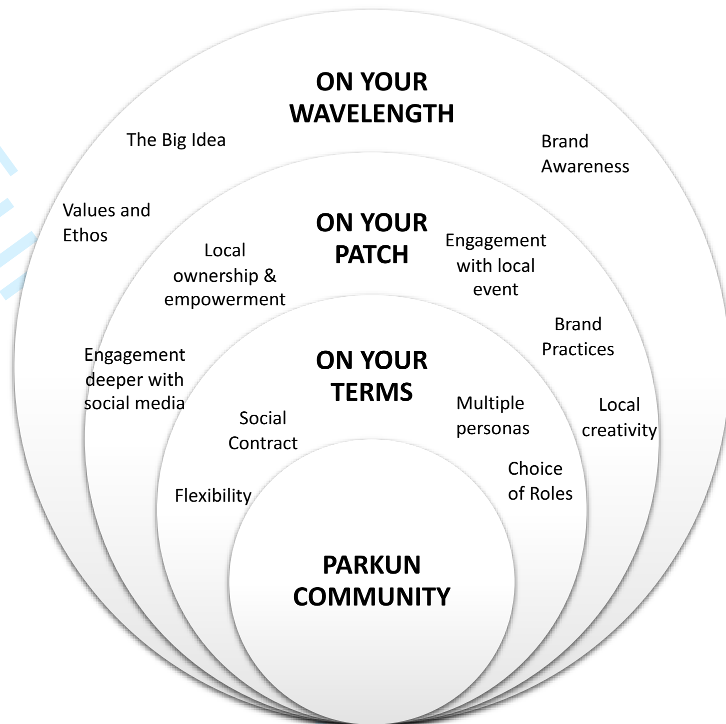
Figure 1: Primary Research Finding



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Appendix 1: Sample Profile

No.	Pseudonym	Local parkrun	Age	Number run	Number volunteered	Volunteering roles done
1	Lucinda	Oxford	20s	About 50	None	Other - RDA for DofE and swimming coaching.
2	Laura	Oxford	50s	More than 100	None	Other - Only informal
3	Esme	Abingdon	50s	About 10	1	PR[1] - Handing out times at the end
4	Bronwyn	Cardiff	40s	57	80+	PR - Many various but now Race Director/ local race founder
5	Jane	Didcot	50s	13	3	PR - Marshall
6	Henry	Rickmansworth	60s	39	1	PR - End time scanner
7	Saadia	Newbury	40s	114	5	PR - Marshall, timekeeping,
8	Yuksel	Newbury	Teen[2]	40	35	PR - Everything general scanning, times, marshalling.
9	Adama	Colchester	30s	65	30	PR – Various
10	Harsha	Whitney	40s	Many walking	100+	PR – Local race founder and Race Director
11	Ed	Cardiff	60s	120+	12+	PR - Marshall
12	Laura	Lee-on-Solent	40s	80+	30+	PR - Pace keeper (adult s), Marshall (kids), funnel manager
13	Mia	Lewisham	40s	102	300+	PR - All roles, Run Director now. Tail walking, marshalling, timing.
14	Clara	Colchester	30s	60	30	PR - Marshall, handing out tokens, scanning
15	Naomi	Abingdon	30s	120	5	PR - Marshall, handing out tokens, scanning
16	Sarah	Witney	40s	79	140	PR - Volunteer co-ordinator, marshall, barcode scanning.
17	Liz	Didcot.	30s	50	5	PR - Marshall, time-keeper, tail runner
18	Marcus	Edinburgh	40s	12	3	PR - Marshall
19	Joe	Todmorden	40s	5	6	PR - Range of roles – whatever needed doing.

[1] PR means 'at parkrun'

[2] 'Teen' in this research means people aged 17-19 years.

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Appendix 2: Codebook

Meta-theme Description	Meta-theme Label	Sub-Code	Description	Illustrative data example
The big idea of parkrun is something that resonates people, something they believe in.	**'On your wavelength'**	The Big Idea	Participants talk about the simplicity of the core concept of parkrun: the big idea.	*It's just a straightforward, simple thing to do.* (Joe, Todmorden) *I genuinely think the whole concept is brilliant. (*Marcus, Edinburgh) *I mean, it's just amazing to know that at the same time, all over the country and all over the world, whenever they get to nine o'clock, you know, the same thing is happening that you're part of, actually a much bigger thing.* (Liz, Didcot)
		Ethos and values	The way it works attracts people, including the friendly atmosphere.	*You see every type of person there, genuinely you see people who are very clearly retired and they're just sort of plodding along or you see very small children with their parents, it is very open and welcoming and … it's just it's a lovely environment.* (Yuksel, Newbury)
		Universal awareness of focal brand	Brand well known and clearly differentiated	*When you go to parkrun, you do feel very much part of something.* (Naomi, Abingdon)
Engagement with parkrun brand community is through participation in their local area.	**'On your patch'**	Social identity connected to (local) place	Emotional engagement is to the local parkrun.	*I think the other thing is you can do it as part of a community… people who use (it) as their kind of.. what in days gone by was probably the post office queue... I met Betty, from number 37 in the post office queue. But now you probably meet in the in the part in a parkrun queue.. so, there's an element of community catch up as well, I think. (*Joe, Todmorden) *I like the idea of getting involved with the community, but essentially I do because I feel like I should do it.* (Laura, Lee-on-Solent)
		Social activities build a community	parkrun anchored in the wider local community including local cafes and running clubs.	*It's a regular feature of a Saturday morning and you do the coffee afterwards … a nice thing with people sort of extending the common experience with a bit of social chat.* (Ed, Cardiff)

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		Local ownership brings empowerment.	Confidence amongst Run Director teams.	*The core team that we have, we were very experienced in order to run the parkrun anyway, so we knew we knew what was required and what we knew the different roles and we knew what would be needed.* (Bronwyn, Cardiff)
		Local ownership brings creativity	Evidence of local personalities and initiatives to give each parkrun its own feel.	*Every so often if a sponsor changes, they give us new high vis vests and we always feel a bit uncertain about this because of the waste … but one of our run directors is very creative and she used some of our old vests to make bunting so that when we have a special event, we have this high vis bunting ... and she made some little bags for us to put the finish tokens in.* (Mia, Lewisham)
		Organisational brand practices strengthen engagement	Volunteer practices including counts (number of times volunteered) on website, points for volunteering, thanks in run report, T shirts.	*In the end, if you go through your stats, it tells you how many times you volunteered. You get a certain number of points for running for where you've come, what position you come, but also for volunteering.* (Liz, Didcot) *I've got my 50 T shirt which is something I love. (but) I think I'm more proud of my twenty five volunteer T shirt.* (Adama, Colchester)
		Physical engagement is strengthened through the social media	Checking personal bests (website), newsletters, Facebook and twitter for conditions and volunteering updates.	*There's a new volunteer hub for parkrun, and while things were happening. I would check in with that and I would read my email and if there's any extra news or anything like that.* (Adama, Colchester)
Terms of engagement with local parkrun community are personal, flexible and informal.	**'On your terms'**	Service beneficiary and delivery are intertwined.	Participation clearly includes both volunteer and running (in volunteer mission).	*You do feel very much part of something whether you're running or volunteering.* (Naomi, Abingdon)
		Social contract	Widespread understanding of the social contract of volunteering to enable events to take place.	*I think there is an expectation from parkrun as an organisation that you are required as a runner if you, you know, to pay back, you know, by volunteering.* (Saadia, Newbury) *I obviously see things like Parkrun and I look at and I think, well, this doesn't run itself.* (Laura, Lee-on-Solent)

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		Range of roles	Enabling choice from a range of roles reduces barriers to volunteering.	*We get people emailing on an ad hoc basis just to say, put me down this weekend and we have a real mix of people who, like you say, will specifically ask for what role they want to do, or people just say, put me down, wherever you have got a gap just put me into it*. (Sarah, Witney)
		Volunteer flexibility.	Social contract leads to people being flexible in volunteering role depending on what is needed.	*I've done all of them. So, it's things like timing, scanning the bar codes, handing out finish tokens, martialling, tail walking*. (Mia, Lewisham) *I suspect there's not many volunteering opportunities where you can just turn up in a strange place and say, OK, I'm happy to be here.* (Ed, Cardiff)

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