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Introducing branded communities in sport for building strong brand relations in social media



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ABSTRACT

Brand communities have become an important aspect for brand management in social media. However, many brands have failed to establish a successful online brand community. In this study, we introduce branded communities as an alternative concept to brand communities. In contrast to brand communities, a branded community does not revolve around a specific (sport) brand, but around any interest or need. However, a specific brand makes use of the community for marketing purposes by sponsoring or operating the community. We emphasize the suitability of sport as an interest around which branded communities can be built as well as links of branded communities to sport sponsorship. We empirically studied the factors which influence the success of this phenomenon and the effects of operating or sponsoring such a community for a brand by using an online survey ($N = 501$) of members of a branded online community relating to football. The results demonstrate the relevance of topic interest (i.e., identification and involvement with football) and the quality of the community as determinants of interest in and loyalty towards a branded community. The brand owner benefits from an increase in brand loyalty for those community members who are aware of the brand as the operator of the community, whereby awareness of this sponsorship does not decrease loyalty towards the community. Our research contributes to previous knowledge by proving that branded communities are both an effective means for companies to deploy sponsorship and branding strategies in social media and provide a promising opportunity for sport managers to generate value.

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1. Introduction

The creation of virtual communities has been and remains an important aspect of web marketing theory. Brand communities (i.e., communities which are built around a specific brand), in particular, have been the subject of considerable interest in the last few years (e.g., Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001; Pongsakornrungrungsilp & Schroeder, 2011). Emerging research on social media emphasizes that this phenomenon will become even more important in the future (Zaglia, 2013). Past research has shown that interactions in brand communities influence the members' (but also non-members') attitudes and behaviour

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regarding the brand (Algesheimer, Borle, Dholakia, & Singh, 2010). In particular, positive effects of brand communities on several brand objectives (e.g., customer satisfaction, brand loyalty, feedback, and product innovation) have been empirically proven in various contexts such as sports (Pongsakornrungrungsilp & Schroeder, 2011; Won, Green, Yong, Seunghwan, & Schenewark, 2007), the Harley Davidson Owners Group (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006), car clubs (Algesheimer, Dholakia, & Herrmann, 2005), theme parks (Carlson, Suter, & Brown, 2008) and also convenience products such as Nutella (Cova & Pace, 2006). Consequently, many major brands (e.g., Coca Cola, IKEA, VW, BMW) have tried to build and maintain their own respective brand communities, and some of them have achieved considerable sustained success in doing so (e.g., Dell Community Forum with over 1.4 million registered users in 2008; Ant's Eye View, 2008).

However, not every brand has the potential to be the basis of enduring interaction with and among its customers, so that several companies (e.g., E.ON, Deutsche Telekom) were forced to close their brand communities shortly after employing substantial financial and marketing efforts in their establishment. Those brands lacking potential as the basis of a brand community are obliged to look for other ways of building meaningful relationships in the online environment, thus benefiting from the current trend towards social media and away from brand pages (Hutton & Fosdick, 2011).

One possible strategy used by brand managers to integrate online communities into their branding activities is sponsoring or operating a community on *any* topic; that is, the community is centred on an arbitrary interest and not on a specific brand. This topic may be strongly related to the brand itself (e.g., Bosch as a manufacturer of tools for tradesmen operating www.1-2-do.com, a community for DIY enthusiasts) or have no direct link to the brand itself (e.g., www.kochbar.de, a community for sharing cooking recipes operated by the TV station VOX). To cover these phenomena, this paper introduces the concept of 'branded communities' as an alternative to 'brand communities'. In contrast to brand communities, a branded community does not revolve around a specific brand, but around any interest or need. However, a specific brand makes use of the community for marketing purposes by sponsoring or operating the community.

Branded communities tie in with recent publications which suggest that online communities may offer worthwhile strategies for brand management and sponsorships. For example, in a research synthesis of the extant literature on online brand communities, Wirtz et al. (2013) propose that brands with less strongly developed identities may build online brand communities which focus on a wider shared interest rather than on the brand itself. Moreover, Meenaghan, McLoughlin, and McCormack (2013) consider the deployment of sponsorship towards social media opportunities (e.g., sponsored blogs), as a key challenge in sponsorship. However, empirical evidence that highlights the worth of branded communities or branded social media is still required. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to define branded communities and discuss likely economic potential.

For a number of reasons, gaining insights into the phenomenon of branded communities is particularly important for sport managers: First, sport is a particular strong interest in terms of group cohesion on the internet (Stavros, Meng, Westberg, & Farrelly, 2014). Second, successful sport-based branded communities (e.g., Deutsche Telekom as a telecommunication company operating www.fussball.de, an online community focused on football) indicate both companies' expectations of using sport-related social media as a means for establishing and maintaining long-term relationships with consumers and substantiate the relevance of this phenomenon in sport. Third, and as a consequence, sport-based branded communities should be considered as a new opportunity to acquire sponsorships and to derive value of sport- or sport team-related interaction in social media.

The present article therefore makes a twofold contribution to previous research: First, it generally introduces the phenomenon of branded communities, provides its theoretical foundations, and a corresponding generally valid framework for branded communities. This framework highlights (1) what factors lead to the success of a branded community and (2) the effects of operating or sponsoring a community for a brand. Second, the general framework is empirically tested using a branded community focusing on sport thereby providing implications both for the use of branded communities as a marketing tool in general as well as an innovative strategy for marketing through sport. In doing so, we provide an innovative example of how brands may use social media strategically in the important area of building and strengthening brand relationships in the sport context (Filo, Lock, & Karg, 2015).

The remainder of the article is organized as follows: We first describe the theoretical background of branded communities and demarcate this phenomenon from brand communities. Subsequently, we provide a conceptual framework for our study and derive the hypotheses of our conceptual model. Thereafter, a structural model is tested using a branded online community relating to football. Based on the findings of this study, we discuss general managerial implications and implications for sport managers who need to recognize branded communities as a valuable way to sell sport. Finally, we address limitations of our research and highlight recommendations for further research.

2. Theoretical background

The leverage of communities for business objectives has primarily been promoted by Hagel and Armstrong's (1997, p. 18) work on virtual communities, which was the first to extensively study the "dispersed group of people who share interest and expertise in a specific topic". In the last few years, the continued growth of social media has increased the importance of this field of research with many firms now implementing online-based customer community marketing programs (Algesheimer et al., 2010; Jahn & Kunz, 2012). In a recent meta-analysis, Filo et al. (2015) highlight that this is also true for sport and identify a research stream that studies how brands use new media to build relationships with consumers.

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