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Engagement in sports virtual brand communities

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study is to analyze the impact of sports sponsorship in virtual brand communities (VBCs) on consumers' engagement within these communities. We used a professional team in the Scotiabank National Opening Championship (Chile) as the study context and collected data from participants ($N = 268$) on the team's social networks. We used structural equation systems and the Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA) technique to test the hypotheses. The results present five causal combinations, considering factors inherent to the team sponsor that influence engagement within a VBC. The QCA model and SEM explain 78.5% and 71% of engagement, respectively. The most noteworthy variables that have an impact on engagement include attitude towards the sponsor, congruence, and the relationship quality of the VBC. This study is the first attempt to examine the influence of sports sponsorship on consumers' engagement within VBCs. Theoretical and managerial implications are also discussed.

1. Introduction

In today's extremely competitive markets, which are fraught with increasing media clutter, the task of brand building is important and more challenging than ever before (Sung, Kim, Kwon, & Moon, 2010). Since the advent of the brand era, scholars have argued that a brand is a social object and that consumers are actively involved in the creation of the brand community (Muniz, Albert, & O'Guinn, 2001). Muniz et al., (2011) define a *brand community* (BC) as “a specialized, non-geographically bound community that is based on a structured set of social relationships among admirers of a brand” (p. 423). Recently, marketers have become increasingly interested in learning about organizing and managing virtual brand communities (VBCs) on the Internet (Dholakia, Bagozzi, & Pearo, 2004). These communities offer individuals the opportunity to develop meaningful emotional bonds with brands by providing a place for consumers to establish relationships with them (Thompson & Sinha, 2008).

In the field of sports, managers of sports organizations recognize

that VBCs can positively influence fans' identification with the team and stadium attendance (Yoshida, Gordon, James & Heere), in addition to increasing website traffic and thereby increasing commercial profits (McCarthy, Rowley, Ashworth, & Pioch, 2014). Therefore, VBCs create value in communities of sports fans by playing an important role in building relationships with the team (Pongsakornrungrsilp & Schroeder, 2011).

Meanwhile, the sports sponsorship industry continues to experience growth (Grohs, 2015), and social media provides an ideal platform to promote the interaction between brands and consumers (Meenaghan, 2013). In that context, the relationship between VBCs and sponsors of teams or sporting events should be more thoroughly studied in an academic or professional context (Meenaghan, McLoughlin, & McCormack, 2013). Therefore, drawing on the social identity theory (SIT) and the theory of image transfer, the authors of the current study analyzed the impact of sports sponsorship in VBCs on fans' engagement in these communities.

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2. Theoretical background and hypotheses

2.1. Virtual brand communities

The conceptual approach to understanding BCs can differ greatly depending on their social context, platform, and size (McAlexander, Schouten, & Koenig, 2002). Due to the complexity of this concept, researchers have investigated the effects from different viewpoints, which has led to the development of several research models. Researchers have identified two lines of research on VBCs: 1) studies that focus on describing the nature of brand communities and 2) studies that involve measuring and interpreting the results of participation in said communities (Woisetschläger, Hartleb, & Blut, 2008). In the current study, our primary focus is on the second line of research.

VBCs have proven to have a major influence on the different stages of the consumer decision-making process – including searching for information, buying and using products/services, and giving recommendations (Filo, Lock, & Karg, 2015) – thereby drawing the attention of professionals and academics alike. In particular, sponsored VBCs have become an ideal medium for conveying values through the implementation of image transfer strategies (West & Lakhani, 2008). This is evident in the sports world (Alonso Dos Santos, Calabuig, Rejón Guardia, & Pérez Campos, 2016). Users of VBCs associated with sporting events and teams demonstrate a more profound psychological connection to the community than in other VBCs (Popp & Woratschek, 2016). Despite the importance of developing a systematic understanding of the psychological mechanism of this phenomenon and the increasing amount of relevant research, there is still a conceptual void in this realm of research. As a result, brand managers lack a necessary tool to appropriately manage their brand communities (Popp & Woratschek, 2016), and they do not take into consideration the VBCs' potential for fostering user participation within a community (Wirtz et al., 2013) by promoting cooperation and interaction among community members through active engagement (Algesheimer, Dholakia, & Herrmann, 2005).

2.2. Attitude towards the sponsor

According to Yoshida, Gordon, James, and Heere (2015), most of the studies on behavioral-psychological processes in the sports literature focus on attitude. This is evident in the sports sponsorship literature. Scholars argue that consumer attitudes towards sponsors and their brands are major outcome variables (Ko, Chang, Park, & Herbst, 2017; Madrigal, 2001; Speed & Thompson, 2000). Attitude towards the sponsor involves the consumer's overall assessment of the organization that sponsors a sports team or event (Keller, 2003).

Attitude towards the sponsor is linked to behavior within the community, which reflects the influence of social media on the consumer's formation of psychological connections with brands (Filo et al., 2015; Wirtz et al., 2013). Some studies show that attitude towards a sponsor has an influence on identification with the brand community (Algesheimer et al., 2005; Carlson, Suter, & Brown, 2008; Yoshida et al., 2015) and involvement with the community (Close, Finney, Lacey, & Sneath, 2006). Attitude towards the sponsor serves as the backbone of the image transfer process and represents a key antecedent to purchasing the sponsor's products (Koo, Quarterman, Jackson, & Suh, 2005). A logical conclusion, therefore, is that consumers' attitudes towards the sponsor can have a direct influence on their behavioral engagement. This leads to the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1. Attitude towards the sponsor has a positive influence on engagement in the VBC.

2.3. Congruence

Perceived congruence between the sponsor and the sponsored

property has been considered an important sponsor characteristic that helps to develop positive consumer attitudes (Simmons & Becker-Olsen, 2006). The main studies on congruence conclude that the effectiveness of image transfer depends on the correlation between the values transmitted and perceived by the sponsor and the sponsored party (Papadimitriou, Kaplanidou, & Papacharalampous, 2016; Pappu & Cornwell, 2014). Therefore, congruence influences how an individual remembers (Cornwell, Humphreys, Maguire, Weeks, & Tellegen, 2006) and recognizes the brand (Speed & Thompson, 2000). The perception of congruence facilitates the image transfer of the team or sporting event to the sponsors through an improvement in attitude and a perception of the quality of the sponsored products (Papadimitriou et al., 2016), thereby recognizing their predictive capacity (Mazodier & Quester, 2014; Woisetschläger & Michaelis, 2012).

Regarding communities, Dessart, Veloutsou, and Morgan-Thomas (2015) conclude that community participants feel that the adjustment between their values and the brand values (i.e., congruence) allows them to improve relationships within the community. Brands that have values similar to those of the community participants achieve a higher degree of commitment and identification with the brand (Carlson et al., 2008). For the consumer, congruence between an individual's personality and the values transmitted by the brand leads to greater preference, loyalty, adoption of information systems, and engagement (Vries & Carlson, 2014). Consequently, the aforementioned points lead to the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2. Congruence has a positive influence on engagement in VBCs.

2.4. Involvement

Involvement is a person's perception of the relevance of an object based on his or her inherent needs, values, and interests (Zaichkowsky, 1985). Scholars consider involvement to be a multidimensional construct formed by attraction and centrality (Kyle, Graefe, Manning, & Bacon, 2004) and to be the amount of time and effort a buyer invests in consumer behavior, including search, evaluation, and decision processes (Lamb, Hair, & McDaniel, 2004). In the sponsorship literature, scholars have showed that consumer involvement positively influences sponsorship outcomes (Alexandris et al., 2007; Ko, Kim, Claussen, & Kim, 2008).

Wirtz et al. (2013) argue that involvement increases engagement with VBCs. Brodie, Hollebeek, Jurić, and Ilić (2011); Brodie, Ilic, Juric, and Hollebeek (2013) also recognize involvement as an antecedent of engagement in the brand community, rather than as a dimension of engagement as traditionally proposed in the literature. Other prior studies demonstrate the influence of brand involvement through loyalty to the community (Popp & Woratschek, 2016) and commitment to the brand (Alexandris & Tsiotsou, 2012). This leads to the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 3. Involvement has a positive influence on engagement in VBCs.

2.5. Relationship quality of the VBC

Relationship quality refers to the psychological connections formed between consumers and a team, brand, or platform (Kim, Ko, & James, 2011). Understanding the quality of a relationship is fundamental because it allows for the identification and resolution of possible mistakes made in building and maintaining relationships with clients (Roberts, Varki, & Brodie, 2003). Researchers consider relationship quality to be a key informative component on which to base decisions regarding investments or pricing (Wiesel, Skiera, & Villanueva, 2008).

In the sports literature, the quality of the relationship between the fan and a sports team has been found to have a positive influence on

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