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BUILDING BRANDS AND FAN RELATIONSHIPS
THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA:
THE CASE OF THE GRAND SLAM TENNIS EVENTS

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy
in
Sport and Exercise

At Massey University, Palmerston North,
New Zealand

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2016
ABSTRACT

Social media have become pervasive parts of society and modern consumer culture. However, sports scholars have noted a distinct lack of knowledge and understanding related to their use among sports properties. This thesis, through the novel use of a modified circuit of culture framework (du Gay, Hall, Jones, McKay & Negus, 1997) explores how Facebook and Twitter were utilised by the four Grand Slam tennis events (Australian Open, Roland Garros, Wimbledon and U.S. Open) to build their brands and relationships with fans. A unique multi-perspectival, multi-method approach involving semi-structured interviews, a content analysis of Facebook and Twitter posts, and online surveys provided rich sources of data.

The findings reveal that these events are deliberately and proactively using social media. It is apparent that social media aid in two key functions: (1) a facilitator of socialisation and emotional connections, and (2) a cultivator of brand image and brand experience. Furthermore, two unique challenges were identified: (1) providing value and meeting fan expectations, and (2) organisational adaptability. Importantly, this research has significant practical and scholarly implications, providing one of the first empirical examinations into how social media assist sports event brands in brand management efforts. Social media are shown to be sites that provide opportunities for practitioners to create a quasi-virtual brand experience, representing an online substitute for the live event. This particular aspect represents a unique finding and an aspect that is of particular relevance for sports event brands. In addition, this study was one of the first to employ a multi-method approach, framed within the circuit of culture, in sports-related social media research. The use of this approach revealed the need to modify the circuit of culture with a centralised moment of “prosumption” for future social media related studies. It is proposed that this approach would be transferable to other sports contexts, advancing the research agenda of sport management scholars.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to acknowledge and express my sincerest thanks to the following people who have contributed a significant amount to this study.

To my parents, thank you for encouraging me to be curious, for inspiring me to pursue lofty goals and for teaching me to be successful by refusing to give up. You have both provided me with much love, support and reassurance throughout this entire journey. Thank you for believing in me. For this, I am grateful beyond measure.

To my supervisor, Associate Professor Andy Martin, thank you for seeing the potential in me and giving me the motivation to undertake this thesis. Along with my other supervisors, Dr. Sarah Gee and Dr. Andrea Geurin, my sincerest thanks to you all for your guidance and support. I sincerely appreciate the time and effort you dedicated to helping me through this journey, and I am extremely grateful for your continued encouragement and commitment to this process. I have the utmost respect for you all.

Thanks must go to my closest friends and fellow School of Sport and Exercise post-grad students who kindly listened and offered their support at trying times throughout this journey. I would also like to extend special appreciation and gratitude to EASM, NASSM, and SMAANZ conference friends for being a constant source of encouragement and inspiration. Your feedback and support of my research was invaluable.

To the Massey University Scholarship Committee, thank you for your financial support. Finally, to the event personnel and fans who gave up their time to be part of this study, I thank you for your willingness to be involved. This thesis would not have been possible without you.

To all of you, you have my deepest gratitude.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT .......................................................................................................................... ii  
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .................................................................................................. iii  
TABLE OF CONTENTS .................................................................................................. iv  
LIST OF TABLES ........................................................................................................... ix  
LIST OF FIGURES .......................................................................................................... x  
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION ............................................................................... 1  
1.1 The Emergence and Role of Social Media in Modern Society ......................... 1  
1.2 The Dilemma of Social Media for Sports Events........................................... 2  
     1.2.1 Australian Open .................................................................................. 3  
     1.2.2 Ryder Cup ...................................................................................... 5  
1.3 Rationale for the Research ........................................................................... 6  
1.4 Purpose and Research Questions ................................................................ 7  
1.5 Personal Motivation for the Research ...................................................... 8  
1.6 Nature of the Research .............................................................................. 9  
1.7 Delimitations ............................................................................................. 9  
1.8 Structure of the Thesis ............................................................................. 10  
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW ............................................................... 13  
2.1 Social Media ................................................................................................. 13  
     2.1.1 Facebook ...................................................................................... 16  
     2.1.2 Twitter ......................................................................................... 17  
     2.1.3 Social Media and Sport ................................................................ 19  
     2.1.4 Criticisms of Social Media Research ........................................... 23  
2.2 Branding ....................................................................................................... 26  
     2.2.1 The Brand Building Process ......................................................... 27
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4.3.4 Challenges and Issues</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.4 Discussion</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.4.1 Benefits and Values</td>
<td>106</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.4.2 Activities and Strategies</td>
<td>108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.4.3 Challenges and Issues</td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.5 Summary</td>
<td>113</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER FIVE: A CONTENT ANALYSIS OF FACEBOOK AND TWITTER</td>
<td>114</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.1 Literature Review</td>
<td>115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2 Methods</td>
<td>119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2.1 Data Collection</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2.2 Data Analysis</td>
<td>133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.3 Results</td>
<td>134</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.3.1 Sample Characteristics</td>
<td>134</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.3.2 Form of Communication</td>
<td>138</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.3.3 Brand Associations</td>
<td>146</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.3.4 Marketing Strategies</td>
<td>148</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.3.5 Relationship building</td>
<td>150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.4 Discussion</td>
<td>153</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.4.1 Management of Brand Perceptions</td>
<td>154</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.4.2 Unique Management Approaches</td>
<td>156</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.4.3 Specific Platform</td>
<td>157</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.4.4 Evolution in Social Media Use</td>
<td>159</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.5 Summary</td>
<td>161</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER SIX: FANS’ PERCEPTIONS OF SOCIAL MEDIA USAGE

BY PROFESSIONAL TENNIS EVENTS ................................................................. 163

6.1 Literature Review ................................................................................... 164
6.2 Methods ................................................................................................. 168
   6.2.1 Data Collection ............................................................................. 168
   6.2.2 Data Analysis .............................................................................. 176
6.3 Results .................................................................................................... 178
   6.3.1 Sample Characteristics ............................................................... 178
   6.3.2 Interaction .................................................................................... 182
   6.3.3 Information Source ..................................................................... 186
   6.3.4 Brand Anthropomorphism ........................................................... 190
   6.3.5 Platform Preference .................................................................. 191
   6.3.6 Challenges .................................................................................. 192
6.4 Discussion ............................................................................................... 196
   6.4.1 Interaction .................................................................................... 197
   6.4.2 Information Source ..................................................................... 199
   6.4.3 Brand Anthropomorphism ........................................................... 200
   6.4.4 Platform Preference .................................................................. 201
   6.4.5 Challenges .................................................................................. 202
6.5 Summary ................................................................................................. 205

CHAPTER SEVEN: CONCLUSIONS ..................................................................... 207

7.1 Social Media as a Site to Build Brands and Relationships with Fans ........ 207
   7.1.1 Facilitator of Socialisation and Emotional Connections ............... 209
   7.1.2 Cultivator of Brand Image and Brand Experience ....................... 210
   7.1.3 Providing Value and Meeting Fan Expectations ......................... 212
7.1.4 Organisational Adaptability .................................................213

7.2 Implications of the Study .............................................................215
    7.2.1 Changing Nature of Brand Management in the Social Media Era .......215
    7.2.2 Modification of the Circuit of Culture .....................................217
    7.2.3 Duality of Live-Event versus Online-Event Experience ..............219

7.3 Recommendations for Future Research ........................................220
    7.3.1 Co-created Brand Identity ......................................................220
    7.3.2 Modification of the Circuit of Culture .....................................220
    7.3.3 Live-Event vs. Online-Event Experience ..................................221
    7.3.4 Stakeholder-Nexus ..............................................................221

7.4 Limitations and Ongoing Relevance of Research .................................222

7.5 Concluding Statement ......................................................................222

REFERENCES ..............................................................................................224

APPENDICES ..................................................................................................269
    Appendix A: Invitation to Participate in Interviews ...............................269
    Appendix B: Interview Guide ...............................................................271
    Appendix C: Between-Event Constructed Week Collection Dates ..........273
    Appendix D: Expanded Description of Coding Categories and Examples ........274
    Appendix E: Online Survey Questions ...............................................279
LIST OF TABLES

Table 1: Definitions of Social Media .............................................................................. 14
Table 2: Grand Slam Events Context and 2013 Audience .............................................. 59
Table 3: Social Media Presence by Event ...................................................................... 60
Table 4: Event Interviewee Information ......................................................................... 79
Table 5: Overview of Each Event’s Social Media Team .................................................. 84
Table 6: During-Event Data Collection Period for Each Event .................................... 121
Table 7: Inter-coder Reliability Results ........................................................................ 131
Table 8: Facebook and Twitter Post Count by Event and Time Period ....................... 135
Table 9: Daily Post Count for Facebook by Event and Time Period ......................... 137
Table 10: Daily Post Count for Twitter by Event and Time Period .............................. 138
Table 11: Frequencies and Percentages of Events’ Posts by Communication Tools ... 142
Table 12: Frequencies and Percentages of Posts by Branding, Marketing and
          Relationship Building Strategy ............................................................................. 143
Table 13: Online Survey Data Collection Period by Event .......................................... 176
Table 14: Demographic Information of Survey Respondents ....................................... 180
Table 15: Social media Usage Characteristics of Survey Respondents ....................... 181
Table 16: Most Frequently Used Social Media Platform to Follow Events ................. 191
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Australian Open 3D hashtag in Garden Square..............................................4

Figure 2: Australian Open Social Shack, Twitter vending machine and selfie station. ...5

Figure 3: The Circuit of Culture.....................................................................................66

Figure 4: Key emergent themes: social media and grand slam tennis events - brand
    personnel perspective............................................................................................106

Figure 5: Facebook interaction example post..............................................................125

Figure 6: Key emergent themes: content analysis.....................................................153

Figure 7: Recruitment tweet posted to Twitter (via @ashton99).................................174

Figure 8: Recruitment message posted MensTennisForum.com ................................174

Figure :9 Fan perceptions of events' social media usage ..........................................197

Figure 10: Synthesis of research findings ..................................................................208