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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.

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