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“YOU FORGET THEY’RE ACTUALLY A BRAND.”: FANS’ PERCEPTIONS OF EVENTS SOCIAL MEDIA USAGE

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Synopsis:

Abstract:
The use of social media as a marketing channel has increased, with both Facebook and Twitter widely embraced in the sporting context. Although most users are familiar with business and marketing activities on social media, they use it primarily for fun and personal purposes (Fournier & Avery, 2011). Consequently, brands entering this private space have garnered the reputation of “party-crashers” (Fournier & Avery, 2011, p. 193) and their marketing efforts have been met with resistance by consumers, who seek to maintain a foothold on their personal space free from marketers and advertisers. Fournier and Avery (2011) assert that the personal nature of social media presents unique challenges to brands that aim to capitalise on the growth and popularity of this communications medium as a site to build their brand and relationships with fans. Whilst it has been argued that social media provides excellent channels for fostering relationships with sports fans (Williams & Chinn, 2010), there is an urgent need to better understand how fans and followers perceive professional sports events social media use in relation to building their brand and relationships with fans.

LITERATURE REVIEW:
It has been acknowledged that there is a dearth of fan-related social media research (Filo, Lock, & Karg, 2014). Furthermore, previous research has focused on using simple metrics (i.e., likes, shares, comments) as measures of social media effectiveness (e.g., Thompson et al., 2014; Wallace et al., 2011). Whilst this allows sports properties to quantify engagement with certain content, it does little to shed light on the underlying perceptions of those who follow these events. Sports brands managing their own social media need to understand how users perceive a brand’s use of such platforms. Therefore, this study examined fans’ perceptions of social media use by four professional

tennis events (Australian Open, Roland Garros, Wimbledon and US Open) during 2013.

METHODOLOGY:
A qualitative survey, with open-ended questions was utilised to provide deeper insight into fans' own perceptions of social media usage. Due to the geographical dispersion of these events' fans, an online survey was deemed the most appropriate method. The survey included measures of demographics, participants' general social media usage, and questions on event social media usage. The survey was made available on Survey Monkey for six weeks around the time each tennis event was held, resulting in 105 usable surveys. Data analysis consisted of a thematic textual analysis, with responses analysed using a general inductive approach.

FINDINGS/DISCUSSION
Responses from fans indicate they perceive these events' usage of social media to be about four novel aspects unique to the sport event brand context: (1) the nature of information provided enhanced fans' at-event attendance experiences, fostered feelings of exclusivity and was free from 'spin' prevalent in other outlets event-related coverage, (2) interaction and engagement facilitated socialisation (i.e., brand-to-fan and fan-to-fan) that evoked feelings of emotional 'connectedness' resulting in fans feeling more involved with the event itself, (3) naturalistic conversations led fans to identify aspects of brand anthropomorphism, (4)social media platform preference. In addition, fan responses identify two key barriers that brands need to overcome: (1) technological capabilities of the platforms, which influenced fans motives and use; and, (2) the ability to provide value.

The influence of social media as a key source of sports-related information (and consumption) continues to grow among tennis fans, which are now willing to connect and interact with these tennis events, as the humanistic approach used served to remove traditional consumer-brand barriers. Fans revealed that as a result of brand anthropomorphism they were now more likely to engage in interaction with the brand, resulting in deeper emotional connections. This is important given fans have been sceptical about allowing brands into their personal social space (see Fournier & Avery, 2011). That said, certain platforms are still considered to be an exclusive site to interact with friends, and this needs to be acknowledged by individuals tasked with the role of developing a social media presence. Importantly these event brands manage two distinct follower groups: at-event attendees and online followers, providing unique challenges associated with delivering relevant content. Thus, sports events seeking to utilise social media to foster long-term consumer-brand relationships, must ensure alignment with the needs of their fans, to ensure content and interactions deliver value for their specific fan groups (Williams & Chinn, 2010). Furthermore, fans may avert or absolve their connection if they perceive content to be irrelevant or too infrequent. The full findings of this study will be presented along with the theoretical and practical implications for sports managers and marketers.

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