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## **SOCIAL NETWORK-BASED ANTI-BRAND COMMUNITIES OPPOSING SPONSORS OF SPORT TEAMS**

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AIM OF PAPER

Social networks such as Facebook have become a fundamental venue for positive sport-related interaction. However, social media provide also a perfect platform for negative communication and anti-brand communities which are forming around common aversions toward a specific brand (Hollenbeck & Zinkhan, 2006). Emerging research suggests negative consequences of anti-brand communities opposing a sport team, both for the team itself and for its sponsors. Spillover effects from the team to the sponsor occur as members of the community may also dislike related sponsors (Hickman & Lawrence, 2010). However, communities which do not oppose a sport team, but its sponsor and the sponsorship, have not been studied yet. Therefore, our research aims to identify the nature and the consequences of anti-brand communities which built around the shared aversion of a sponsorship.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Sport fans regularly build brand communities to share their strong interest in their team. However, social media recently has given rise to anti-brand communities which are considered as the antithesis of a brand community (Hollenbeck & Zinkhan, 2006; Krishnamurthy & Kucuk, 2009). This phenomenon reveals similar characteristics as brand communities, however the members share their aversion of a specific brand and try to provoke, disparage, and corrupt the opposed brand.

Most anti-brand communities in sport build around a disliked team, but some also oppose a sponsorship of the team. Research on image transfers (Meenaghan, 2001) and balance theory (Dalakas & Levin, 2005) provide a suitable theoretical framework for a rationale of interrelationships between the

anti-brand community and the team. Sponsorship research suggests that anti-brand communities rejecting sponsors of a sport team also affect their members' attitudes towards the team.

#### METHODOLOGY, RESEARCH DESIGN AND DATA ANALYSIS

We conducted netnographic research on two Facebook-based anti-brand communities opposing sponsorships of teams from the Professional German Football League (Bundesliga). One community originates from the rejection of Wiesenhof as jersey sponsor of Werder Bremen. The other one opposes Red Bull as main sponsor of RB Leipzig. In addition, we studied the (non-Facebook-based) online community related to the latter.

#### RESULTS

Netnography on the anti-Red Bull communities discloses that most users join the community to fight against Red Bull which is considered as incarnation of the ultimate commercialization of football. Members disparage the sponsors, the club, and its fans by posts consisting of paroles or provoking graphics. Moreover, fans of opponent teams call for boycotts of RB Leipzig games or organize actions at RB Leipzig games. Activists further urge the football association to fight against the commercialization and Red Bull's doings which undercut league rules. Finally, fans of RB Leipzig visit the anti-RB Leipzig communities and try to defend their team thereby contributing to the interaction as well as rivalry among fans.

The example of Werder/Wiesenhof reveals parallels to RB Leipzig, but also illustrates strong differences. Half of the members are fans of the sponsee Werder Bremen, 22% are activists against industrial livestock farming, 6% are animal-rights activists and 22% other. This illustrates the different motivations of members of this community: While fans of Werder Bremen try to protect their club against a bad reputation spilling over from the sponsor, other activists engage for animal rights and try to harm the sponsor. Werder fans indicate that their relationship to the club is negatively affected and that they are willing to boycott merchandising articles incorporating the sponsor brand. The Werder/Wiesenhof example demonstrates that anti-brand communities in social networks can grow quickly (more than 4.000 supporters on the first day after foundation in 2012) and cause a very instant challenge for sponsor and club. Finally, we identified a dilemma for sponsees and opposed sponsors: While public media appreciated reactions from the sponsor and the club such as discussion sessions with fans and visits of players at Wiesenhof, they had the opposite effect on the anti-sponsor community and rather stimulated the negative debate.

#### IMPLICATIONS AND DISCUSSION

The multifaceted effects on sponsors as well as clubs suggest that this phenomenon has to be considered and monitored by both of them. The strong dynamics of social networks and propagation of anti-sponsor communities by other media to a broad mass of individuals corroborate this finding. While anti-sponsor community members generally dislike the sponsor, they differ in their attachment to the sponsored team. This imbalance of fan attachment to team and sponsor can lead to negative changes in fans' attitudes towards the team. Brand managers and teams facing anti-sponsor communities need to identify the (varying) motivations of members in order to find suitable strategies for

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coping with this anti-sponsor activism.

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