SPORT BRANDS' USE OF ONLINE USER-GENERATED VISUAL CONTENT AS A MARKETING TOOL

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Synopsis:

Abstract:
The increased global popularity of social media has led many consumer brands to increasingly turn to consumer-to-consumer marketing methods in recent years. Such methods include, for example, customers' reviews of products and photos of products posted on the brand's websites or social media accounts, and 'brand ambassadors', or everyday users of the brand's products who promote the products via their own social networks. Burmann and Arnhold (2009) refer to this as user-generated branding (UGB), which they defined as, "the strategic and operative management of brand related user-generated content (UGC) to achieve brand goals" (p. 66).

According to Burmann and Arnhold (2009), due to a shift of power between brands and consumers, in which brands are viewed as less authentic and consumers are becoming more empowered, an increasing number of brands have begun encouraging consumers to create brand-related content both in online and offline settings. There is a dearth of literature on this topic within the sport management discipline, but research in other industries such as tourism and hospitality found that cities and tourist destinations' UGB efforts were more effective than traditional advertising (e.g., Rehmet & Dinnie, 2013). Some of the benefits of UGB identified by previous research include cost effectiveness, the ability to track consumers, and immediate feedback regarding the brand and its products or services (Burmann, 2010). UGB also aligns with overarching social media based relationship-marketing initiatives for organisations. Gronroos (2004) defined relationship marketing as "the process of identifying and establishing, maintaining, enhancing, and when necessary terminating relationships with customers and other stakeholders, so that the objectives of all parties are met" (p. 101). Williams and Chinn (2010) extended the traditional

relationship-marketing framework by Gronroos (2004) to include social media exchanges that build relationships with consumers through value-added communication and interaction.

Burmann (2010) stated that future research is needed in order to validate the effectiveness of UGB. To further the limited research on UGB effectiveness, specifically within the field of sport management, the purpose of this study is to examine the social media accounts of six different running brands to determine a) to what extent each brand utilises user-generated content on their social media accounts, and b) whether differences exist in audience engagement based on the type of content posted.

In order to accomplish these research goals, a content analysis methodology will be employed. Content analysis is a replicable and unobtrusive method, which has been used in a wide variety of past sport management research. The social media accounts (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram) of six purposefully selected running apparel and footwear brands of varying competitive strategies based on Porter's (1985) generic strategies (two focused differentiation, two broad differentiation, and two best-cost provider) will be examined. Focused differentiation strategies involve offering a highly differentiated product to a specific market segment, broad differentiation strategies offer a unique product feature from other brands that is valued by consumers, and best-cost provider strategies involve offering products at a low cost while maintaining above-average quality. Four of the selected brands for this study explicitly request content submissions from their consumers, while two do not. The findings relating to the brands' Instagram accounts will be presented at the European Association for Sport Management (EASM) Conference. Instagram is the fastest-growing social media platform used by brands, with over 71% of the world's global brands using it.

A codebook was developed specifically for each social media platform, and each was based on those of previous content analytic social media studies. For the Instagram codebook, the unit of analysis is each individual photo posted on the site, and the codebook variables include the main content of the photo, whether the photo was taken by the sport brand or a consumer, whether a person (or people) appear in the photo, the number of user tags (@), the number of hashtags (#), the number of likes, and the number of comments. The last two variables will be used to measure audience engagement. Two trained coders will code 200 photos from each brand's Instagram account for a total of 1,200 coded photos.

The data analysis will occur in May 2015. Once all photos are coded, measures such as frequencies, ANOVAs, and bivariate correlations will be used to analyse the data and fulfil the purpose of the study. The full study will be complete by the 2015 EASM Conference. Results and implications for UGB and relationship marketing research, sport management academics, and sport industry practitioners will be presented at this time should this abstract be accepted to the conference.

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