

Investigating the multiple impacts that football club Facebook brand pages have on community and sport team loyalty

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Aim of paper

There are a multitude of benefits in using social media for sport marketing (Filo, Lock, & Karg, 2015). The primary benefit of social media is to encourage and harness the interaction and relationships amongst its users. Sports entities adopted social media tools quickly and developed common "brand fan pages" (Vries, Gensler, & Leeflang, 2012). While the positive outcomes of engaging sport consumers within the social media have been demonstrated (Filo et al., 2015; Meng, Stavros, & Westberg, 2015), understanding the complexity of this multi-relational environment is still in nascent levels of development. Therefore, furthering an understanding of the complex relationships impacting loyalty towards social network sites and brand loyalty, and the respective key drivers of such constructs, is an imperative to advancing theory. This research paper aims to make a key contribution in bridging the gap in knowledge that exists between different targets of identification and their impact on loyalty in the context of social media. In this case, identification is clearly separated at different levels (i.e., depending on the target; brand identification, BSN identification, identification with BSN users).

Theoretical background

Brand social network websites are usually operated by a brand owner within a specific social network platform (e.g., Facebook) and enable consumers to 'like' or comment on brand posts. Thereby, BSN are supposed to contribute to the success of the brand.

Recent research on social media in sports, identification has garnered interest (Meng et al., 2015). These studies commonly focus on a particular sport brand (i.e. team identification) as the main target of identification. However, a customer may identify with multiple brands and, consequently, multiple identifications may interact with one another and could be conflicting (e.g., Thoits, 1983). BSN could potential influence several different targets of identification which are engendered with separate identification meaning and can be perceived as unique entities by consumers, because users are simultaneously exposed to different targets of identification such as the BSN, the users of the BSN, the brand of social network, and the brand of the social network brand page. The present study is unique in utilising a research design that allows for a clear separation between these three separate targets of identification for Facebook brand page users. For both the BSN and the brand, customer loyalty and positive word-of-mouth are considered to be suitable success indicators and theoretical and empirical considerations propose that identification is a clear antecedent to these constructs (Lam, Ahearne, Mullins, Hayati, & Schillewaert, 2013).

Methodology, research design and data analysis

An online survey of key BSN clubs from the first, second and third tier German football leagues was administered. Respondents (n=164) answered the survey for at least one club's Facebook page. The Partial Least Squares Path Modeling (PLS-PM) approach was implemented to estimate the structural equation model.

Results

Identification with other BSN users has the strongest impact on BSN loyalty / BSN WOM ($\beta=0.461^{**}$ / $\beta=0.384^{**}$), followed by identification with the BSN ($\beta=0.219^{**}$ / $\beta=0.326^{**}$) and identification with the brand ($\beta=0.170^{**}$ / $\beta=-0.065$). Brand identification ($\beta=0.626^{**}$) and BSN loyalty ($\beta=0.318^{**}$) significantly impacts brand loyalty. However, contrary to prior expectation our investigation establishes a significant negative effect between BSN identification and BSN loyalty ($\beta=-0.187^{**}$). Brand-related WOM is positively influenced by brand identification ($\beta=0.622^{**}$) and BSN WOM ($\beta=0.190^{**}$).

Discussion and implications

The contribution of our findings are twofold: First, we illustrate the relevance of different targets of identification in BSN for Football sport clubs. Second, we illustrate ways to strengthen BSN and brand loyalty as well as the key drivers to increase BSN- and brand-related WOM as an indicator of new customer acquisition. Our findings thus elucidate the use of social media for marketing and branding purposes. The results illustrate that consumer-identification with other BSN users is the main driver of both an individual's loyalty towards the brand's Facebook page and, additionally, a consumer's willingness to recommend this page to others. Second, it is clear that consumer-brand identification is a significant driver of brand loyalty and brand WOM, whereas identification with the BSN only plays a lesser role. Third, our findings reveal that the user's intention to stay loyal to a BSN or a brand does not necessarily increase positive word-of-mouth at the BSN or brand level. Thus, this study contributes to the existing literature on social network sites such as Facebook by revealing both positive and negative impacts of identification targets on both BSN and brand loyalty. The results demonstrate that multiple targets of identification should be included in future research designs.

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