



DOCTORAL THESIS

SOCIAL MEDIA ENGAGEMENT IN A DEDICATED FACEBOOK CHANNEL: AN ANALYSIS OF RELATIONSHIPS TO EMOTIONAL ATTACHMENT, SELF-BRAND CONNECTION AND BRAND COMMITMENT TOWARDS SPORTS SPONSORING BRANDS

By

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CERTIFICATE OF ORIGINALITY

I certify that the work in this thesis has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree except as fully acknowledged within the text.

I also certify that the thesis has been written by me. Any help that I have received in my research work and the preparation of the thesis itself has been acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

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Christoph Hechelmann

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research is to examine the formation of social media engagement and its relationship to emotional dynamics that underpin brand relationships between sport sponsors and their customers. The study focuses on two leading sport sponsors, and their respective use of social media (in this case two dedicated Facebook channels) to intensify self-brand connection, emotional attachment and brand commitment among subscribers. The study tested marketing assumptions that the degree of engagement with social media has important implications for levels of subscribers' 'self-brand connection', 'emotional attachment', and 'brand commitment'. In short, it explored whether subscribers engaging with the selected sponsors' brands within these two channels (Adidas Football, Nike Football) are more likely to develop stronger emotional bonds with the sponsoring brands.

To test these propositions, an inductive interpretive mixed-methods approach was used, utilising a triangulation of research methods. First, a blended content analysis was conducted in order to identify and evaluate experiences, thoughts and feelings that channel subscribers have when using the medium. This analysis was necessary in order to justify the use of, and further development of an existing media engagement scale in a social media setting. Second, a pre-test survey was conducted to gather insights into the usability of the existing media engagement scale, to collect data for its further development, and to collect additional qualitative data (by use of open-ended questions) on experience items that may have been missed out during the blended content analysis. Third, the main quantitative survey and structural equation modelling explored how far a perceived sense of social media engagement is positively related to users' self-brand connection, their degree of emotional attachment and commitment to the sponsors' brands. Finally, a discrete choice experiment using a conditional logit model provided insights into the question of whether the ultimate latent variable of the structural equation model - brand commitment – correlates positively with consumer stated choice behaviours.

By investigating user engagement in a social media setting, this study extends current applications of experience based measurement of media effects and, in this case, an understanding of relationships between football fans and a football-related sponsoring brand. This research provides two main contributions to existing scholarship. First, the thesis extends the research focus on sponsorship beyond the point of purchase, which has been the main focus in marketing studies, towards investigation of ongoing relationships between sponsors and consumers. Second, it answers questions about experience based media engagement in a social setting and explores the development of customer-brand relational outcomes under the themes of self-brand connection, emotional attachment and brand commitment.

Results indicate that the sum of ten key motivational experiences provides a basis for the formation and ongoing social media engagement with Facebook Football channels. Here, football domain involvement and team identification are found to be further positively related to social media engagement. The results also indicate that social media engagement is positively related to the degree of self-brand connection, emotional attachment and commitment with the sponsor's brand.