User-generated branding via social media: An examination of six running brands

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\textbf{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. One such method, user-generated branding (UGB), is defined as “the strategic and operative management of brand-related user-generated content (UGC) to achieve brand goals” (Burmann & Arnhold, 2009, p. 66). Other disciplines have identified potential benefits of UGB such as cost effectiveness, the ability to track consumers, and immediate feedback regarding a brand and its products or services (Burmann, 2010). Hambrick and Kang (2015) also posited that UGB might be effective in developing stronger relationships between brands and consumers and eliciting greater engagement with consumers on social media. This study sought to fill the gap on UGB research within the sport management field. Utilising Porter’s (1985) generic strategies as a theoretical framework, the Instagram accounts of six purposefully selected running brands were examined to determine to what extent brands utilised user-generated content on their Instagram accounts and whether differences existed in audience engagement based on the type of content posted. A quantitative content analysis method was employed, and results indicated that those brands utilising a differentiation strategy and posts with an overt focus on the product or brand were most successful in eliciting engagement from followers. Implications for researchers and practitioners are discussed in greater detail in the paper.

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1. Introduction

Technological advancements provide today’s sports brands with greater opportunities to market their products or services to consumers than ever before. No longer confined to methods such as traditional advertising, publicity, activation at events, or athlete endorsements, brands now have the opportunity to leverage the Internet through the use of websites, blogs, and social media outlets, as well as via mobile technologies such as smartphone apps. With these increased options to create awareness and to build desired images of their brand, however, comes increased competition with other brands to reach their target consumers, many of whom have become adept at ignoring marketing messages. This, combined with 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

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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 increasingly 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 have 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. Grönroos (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 Grönroos (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 was to examine six consumer running brands’ use of UGC on social media to determine (a) to what extent each brand utilised user-generated content on their account, and (b) whether differences existed in audience engagement based on the type of content posted. To achieve this purpose, Instagram was chosen as the social media platform of inquiry, and the six brands were purposefully selected based on Porter’s (1985) generic strategies, which businesses tend to adopt based on their target markets and the type of competitive advantage they seek in the marketplace. These strategies, which include low-cost provider, differentiation, a generic focused, a differentiated focused, and the consideration of best-cost provider, are explained in greater depth in Section 3 of this paper. The brands under investigation followed different strategies, and four brands actively sought user-generated photos from their followers while the other two did not. Research on UGB within the sport industry is necessary in order to understand the potential benefits such marketing activities offer sport brands, as UGB is thought to be less expensive than other forms of marketing, and could potentially be viewed as more authentic by consumers (Burmann & Arnhold, 2009). From a theoretical perspective, this research offers new insights into the application of Porter’s (1985) generic strategies in the digital realm, and can provide recommendations on how brands can best utilize UGB in conjunction with their chosen strategy.

To better understand UGB efforts of sport brands, this study chose to focus on brands’ UGB efforts via social media, specifically on the visual mobile platform, Instagram. Increasing in popularity, Instagram offers organisations a network of more than 400 million global accounts, 70.00% of which exist outside the United States, with 70 million photos shared, and 3.5 billion likes daily (LaPage, 2015). Of the top 100 global companies as ranked by Interbrand, 85.00% of these organisations utilised the platform for marketing initiatives (Shively, 2015), resulting in mobile advertising revenue of $595 million for Instagram in 2015, with projections to increase to $2.81 billion by 2017 (eMarketer, 2015). Thus, Instagram was the chosen social media platform for this study due to growing utilisation of the platform for marketing and branding initiatives, as it offers organisations an application specifically designed for mobile viewing and a higher rate of engagement with audiences (Cohen, 2015). Facebook remains the most popular social media platform with 71.00% of Internet users possessing an account, however, the platform’s high level of advertising saturation and algorithm has resulted in only 6.00% of branded advertising reaching their followers, with 32.00% follower engagement (Morrison, 2015). Instagram, with a smaller 26.00% of Internet users possessing an account, offers organisations 100.00% follower reach for branded content and 68.00% user engagement with this content, making it a much more effective marketing platform to reach targeted audiences (Morrison). As such, companies like Mercedes-Benz, Audi, Coca-Cola, and McDonalds have employed Instagram-based branding campaigns and reported lifts in advertising recall and message association (Instagram business, 2016).

The findings of this study illustrate the engagement and integration of consumers into sport brands’ marketing mix and their strategic decision-making process through UGB. The findings have implications for future studies regarding branding literature in a digital environment. Additionally, from a practitioner standpoint, the findings illustrate the potential importance of the utilisation of social media as a tool to facilitate the bond between consumers and organisations through UGB.

2. Literature review

As previously stated, very little research has been conducted on UGB in the sport management literature. Indeed, Burmann (2010) reported that research on UGB and UGC is in its infancy in all academic disciplines. According to Burmann (2010), UGB is distinct from other forms of consumer marketing such as brand communities or word-of-mouth communications, and “while brand communities represent a network of brand fans and word of mouth describes a dissemination channel, UGB refers to brand-related content” (p. 2). Additionally, Burmann (2010) stated that UGB has the ability to be an effective branding tool, and research on this content is necessary to better understand this marketing method.
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