

Copyright is owned by the Author of the thesis. Permission is given for a copy to be downloaded by an individual for the purpose of research and private study only. The thesis may not be reproduced elsewhere without the permission of the Author.

**BUILDING BRANDS AND FAN RELATIONSHIPS
THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA:
THE CASE OF THE GRAND SLAM TENNIS EVENTS**

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Sport and Exercise

At Massey University, Palmerston North,

New Zealand

Ashleigh-Jane Thompson

2016

ABSTRACT

Social media have become pervasive parts of society and modern consumer culture. However, sports scholars have noted a distinct lack of knowledge and understanding related to their use among sports properties. This thesis, through the novel use of a modified circuit of culture framework (du Gay, Hall, Jones, McKay & Negus, 1997) explores how Facebook and Twitter were utilised by the four Grand Slam tennis events (Australian Open, Roland Garros, Wimbledon and U.S. Open) to build their brands and relationships with fans. A unique multi-perspectival, multi-method approach involving semi-structured interviews, a content analysis of Facebook and Twitter posts, and online surveys provided rich sources of data.

The findings reveal that these events are deliberately and proactively using social media. It is apparent that social media aid in two key functions: (1) a facilitator of socialisation and emotional connections, and (2) a cultivator of brand image and brand experience. Furthermore, two unique challenges were identified: (1) providing value and meeting fan expectations, and (2) organisational adaptability. Importantly, this research has significant practical and scholarly implications, providing one of the first empirical examinations into how social media assist sports event brands in brand management efforts. Social media are shown to be sites that provide opportunities for practitioners to create a quasi-virtual brand experience, representing an online substitute for the live event. This particular aspect represents a unique finding and an aspect that is of particular relevance for sports event brands. In addition, this study was one of the first to employ a multi-method approach, framed within the circuit of culture, in sports-related social media research. The use of this approach revealed the need to modify the circuit of culture with a centralised moment of “prosumption” for future social media related studies. It is proposed that this approach would be transferable to other sports contexts, advancing the research agenda of sport management scholars.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to acknowledge and express my sincerest thanks to the following people who have contributed a significant amount to this study.

To my parents, thank you for encouraging me to be curious, for inspiring me to pursue lofty goals and for teaching me to be successful by refusing to give up. You have both provided me with much love, support and reassurance throughout this entire journey. Thank you for believing in me. For this, I am grateful beyond measure.

To my supervisor, Associate Professor Andy Martin, thank you for seeing the potential in me and giving me the motivation to undertake this thesis. Along with my other supervisors, Dr. Sarah Gee and Dr. Andrea Geurin, my sincerest thanks to you all for your guidance and support. I sincerely appreciate the time and effort you dedicated to helping me through this journey, and I am extremely grateful for your continued encouragement and commitment to this process. I have the utmost respect for you all.

Thanks must go to my closest friends and fellow School of Sport and Exercise post-grad students who kindly listened and offered their support at trying times throughout this journey. I would also like to extend special appreciation and gratitude to EASM, NASSM, and SMAANZ conference friends for being a constant source of encouragement and inspiration. Your feedback and support of my research was invaluable.

To the Massey University Scholarship Committee, thank you for your financial support. Finally, to the event personnel and fans who gave up their time to be part of this study, I thank you for your willingness to be involved. This thesis would not have been possible without you.

To all of you, you have my deepest gratitude.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	ii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iii
TABLE OF CONTENTS	iv
LIST OF TABLES	ix
LIST OF FIGURES	x
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION	1
1.1 The Emergence and Role of Social Media in Modern Society.....	1
1.2 The Dilemma of Social Media for Sports Events	2
<i>1.2.1</i> Australian Open	3
<i>1.2.2</i> Ryder Cup	5
1.3 Rationale for the Research	6
1.4 Purpose and Research Questions	7
1.5 Personal Motivation for the Research	8
1.6 Nature of the Research	9
1.7 Delimitations	9
1.8 Structure of the Thesis	10
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW	13
2.1 Social Media	13
<i>2.1.1</i> Facebook	16
<i>2.1.2</i> Twitter.....	17
<i>2.1.3</i> Social Media and Sport	19
<i>2.1.4</i> Criticisms of Social Media Research	23
2.2 Branding.....	26
<i>2.2.1</i> The Brand Building Process	27

2.2.2	Branding and Sport	30
2.2.3	Branding and Social Media.....	33
2.3	Consumer-Brand Relationships	36
2.3.1	How Brands Affect Consumer-Brand Relationships.....	41
2.3.2	Criticisms and Challenges.....	44
2.3.3	Consumer-Brand Relationships and Social Media	46
2.4	Summary	50
CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY.....		52
3.1	Research Philosophy	52
3.2	Research Context	55
3.2.1	The Grand Slam Events – Tennis’ ‘Majors’	57
3.3	A Multi-Perspectival Research Approach.....	65
3.3.1	Multi-Method Approach	68
3.4	Ethics.....	70
3.5	Summary	71
CHAPTER FOUR: EVENT PERSONNEL’S PERSPECTIVES OF		
SOCIAL MEDIA.....		72
4.1	Literature Review.....	74
4.2	Methods.....	77
4.2.1	Data Collection.....	77
4.2.2	Data Analysis	82
4.3	Results	84
4.3.1	Context	84
4.3.2	Benefits and Value	86
4.3.3	Activities and Strategies.....	93

4.3.4	Challenges and Issues	100
4.4	Discussion	105
4.4.1	Benefits and Values	106
4.4.2	Activities and Strategies.....	108
4.4.3	Challenges and Issues	111
4.5	Summary	113

CHAPTER FIVE: A CONTENT ANALYSIS OF FACEBOOK AND

	TWITTER.....	114
5.1	Literature Review	115
5.2	Methods.....	119
5.2.1	Data Collection	120
5.2.2	Data Analysis	133
5.3	Results.....	134
5.3.1	Sample Characteristics	134
5.3.2	Form of Communication	138
5.3.3	Brand Associations	146
5.3.4	Marketing Strategies	148
5.3.5	Relationship building	150
5.4	Discussion	153
5.4.1	Management of Brand Perceptions	154
5.4.2	Unique Management Approaches	156
5.4.3	Specific Platform.....	157
5.4.4	Evolution in Social Media Use	159
5.5	Summary	161

CHAPTER SIX: FANS' PERCEPTIONS OF SOCIAL MEDIA USAGE

BY PROFESSIONAL TENNIS EVENTS	163
6.1 Literature Review	164
6.2 Methods.....	168
6.2.1 Data Collection.....	168
6.2.2 Data Analysis	176
6.3 Results	178
6.3.1 Sample Characteristics	178
6.3.2 Interaction	182
6.3.3 Information Source.....	186
6.3.4 Brand Anthropomorphism	190
6.3.5 Platform Preference.....	191
6.3.6 Challenges	192
6.4 Discussion	196
6.4.1 Interaction	197
6.4.2 Information Source.....	199
6.4.3 Brand Anthropomorphism	200
6.4.4 Platform Preference.....	201
6.4.5 Challenges	202
6.5 Summary	205
CHAPTER SEVEN: CONCLUSIONS	207
7.1 Social Media as a Site to Build Brands and Relationships with Fans.....	207
7.1.1 Facilitator of Socialisation and Emotional Connections.....	209
7.1.2 Cultivator of Brand Image and Brand Experience	210
7.1.3 Providing Value and Meeting Fan Expectations.....	212

7.1.4	Organisational Adaptability	213
7.2	Implications of the Study	215
7.2.1	Changing Nature of Brand Management in the Social Media Era	215
7.2.2	Modification of the Circuit of Culture	217
7.2.3	Duality of Live-Event versus Online-Event Experience.....	219
7.3	Recommendations for Future Research	220
7.3.1	Co-created Brand Identity	220
7.3.2	Modification of the Circuit of Culture	220
7.3.3	Live-Event vs. Online-Event Experience.....	221
7.3.4	Stakeholder-Nexus	221
7.4	Limitations and Ongoing Relevance of Research.....	222
7.5	Concluding Statement	222
REFERENCES	224
APPENDICES	269
Appendix A:	Invitation to Participate in Interviews	269
Appendix B:	Interview Guide	271
Appendix C:	Between-Event Constructed Week Collection Dates	273
Appendix D:	Expanded Description of Coding Categories and Examples	274
Appendix E:	Online Survey Questions	279

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1: Definitions of Social Media	14
Table 2: Grand Slam Events Context and 2013 Audience.....	59
Table 3: Social Media Presence by Event.....	60
Table 4: Event Interviewee Information	79
Table 5: Overview of Each Event’s Social Media Team.....	84
Table 6: During-Event Data Collection Period for Each Event.....	121
Table 7: Inter-coder Reliability Results	131
Table 8: Facebook and Twitter Post Count by Event and Time Period.....	135
Table 9: Daily Post Count for Facebook by Event and Time Period.....	137
Table 10: Daily Post Count for Twitter by Event and Time Period.....	138
Table 11: Frequencies and Percentages of Events’ Posts by Communication Tools ...	142
Table 12: Frequencies and Percentages of Posts by Branding, Marketing and Relationship Building Strategy	143
Table 13: Online Survey Data Collection Period by Event	176
Table 14: Demographic Information of Survey Respondents.....	180
Table 15: Social media Usage Characteristics of Survey Respondents.....	181
Table 16: Most Frequently Used Social Media Platform to Follow Events	191

LIST OF FIGURES

<i>Figure 1:</i> Australian Open 3D hashtag in Garden Square.	4
<i>Figure 2:</i> Australian Open Social Shack, Twitter vending machine and selfie station. ...	5
<i>Figure 3:</i> The Circuit of Culture.....	66
<i>Figure 4:</i> Key emergent themes: social media and grand slam tennis events - brand personnel perspective	106
<i>Figure 5:</i> Facebook <i>interaction</i> example post	125
<i>Figure 6:</i> Key emergent themes: content analysis.....	153
<i>Figure 7:</i> Recruitment tweet posted to Twitter (via @ashton99).....	174
<i>Figure 8:</i> Recruitment message posted MensTennisForum.com	174
<i>Figure :9</i> Fan perceptions of events' social media usage	197
<i>Figure 10:</i> Synthesis of research findings	208