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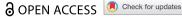
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Categorizing engagement behavior in sport brand communities – an empirical study informed by social practice theory

Pascal Stegmann [a], Tim Ströbel[b] and Herbert Woratschek[c]

[a]Institute of Sport Science, University of Bern, Bern, Switzerland; [b]Marketing and Sport Management, University of Bayreuth, Bayreuth, Germany; [c]Marketing and Service Management, University of Bayreuth, Bayreuth, Germany

ABSTRACT

This study ventures into uncharted territory by focusing exclusively on digital platforms to scrutinize engagement practices within sport clubs and their pivotal role in nurturing vibrant brand communities. By employing a multifaceted methodological framework that blends netnography, document analysis, and semi-structured interviews, it delves into the nuanced ways clubs employ digital strategies to foster active participation and cultivate a sense of belonging among community members. A novel aspect of this research is its consideration of digital engagement platforms as the social context, analyzing how the surrounding social environment influences and enhances digital engagement practices. Furthermore, the study breaks new ground by extending its analysis beyond dyadic relationships to explore the network effects on engagement practices. Therefore, it offers a comprehensive understanding of how these dynamics contribute to the development and sustainability of sport brand communities. The findings reveal the critical importance of diverse engagement practices in fostering meaningful interactions that strengthen a sport brand community fabric. This research enriches the field by presenting actionable insights for sport clubs to refine their digital engagement strategies in the context of broader social networks and effects. This paper makes a significant contribution to the literature by illuminating the complex interplay between digital engagement, social context, and network dynamics in the cultivation of sport brand communities.

Introduction

Exchanges between sport clubs and their actors' network are mainly categorized into two types: transactional (e.g., fans buying a ticket) and non-transactional (e.g., fans creating a choreography) (Yoshida et al., 2014). Transactions are fundamentally contractual in nature, whereas voluntary, non-transactional exchanges between actors and a sport club are considered engagement behaviors (Van Doorn et al., 2010), which can be defined as voluntary behaviors that go beyond contractual

agreements (Buser et al., 2020). Current research in marketing and sport management highlights various beneficial outcomes for sport clubs (brand equity, financial security, reputation, referral behavior, purchase intention, actor retention, cost savings; cf. Harmeling et al., 2017; Schönberner & Woratschek, 2023; Van Doorn et al., 2010; Yoshida et al., 2014) and for other actors (e.g., relationship quality, well-being; cf. McDonald et al., 2022), which emphasizes the need for more research on how engagement behaviors emerge in sport club ecosystems (McDonald et al., 2022).

To date, few studies on engagement behavior in sport management have addressed digital engagement platforms (EPs) (smartphone apps, social media; Annamalai et al., 2021; Behnam et al., 2023; Santos et al., 2019; all focusing on social media), although digital EPs accelerate and facilitate mutual interactions between stakeholders within the sport ecosystem and are particularly relevant for demonstrating engagement behavior (McDonald et al., 2022; Stegmann et al., 2023). Furthermore, research on engagement behavior in sport management has primarily focused on the context of dyadic relationships between fans or sponsors and sport clubs (Annamalai et al., 2021; Behnam et al., 2023; Buser et al., 2020; Huettermann & Kunkel, 2022; Huettermann et al.,2019; Santos et al., 2019; Schönberner & Woratschek, 2023; Yoshida et al., 2014; cf.; McDonald et al., 2022), thus neglecting the complexity of engagement within (brand) communities as described in the sport ecosystem logic (Buser et al., 2022). Considering other actors is necessary for understanding how engagement behaviors emerge among groups of actors and how these engagement behaviors influence the development of belonging within brand communities (Brodie et al., 2019; Katz et al., 2020; McDonald et al., 2022). In relation to such questions that zoom out from individual actors to groups of actors (e.g., groups of sponsors, groups of fans) and emphasize the role of identification and belonging within communities, it is suggested to adapt theories that can recognize such complexity, which is not the case for engagement behavior (cf. Brodie et al., 2019; McDonald et al., 2022). It is therefore suggested to relate to social practice theory (e.g., Grohs et al., 2020; McDonald et al., 2022), which describes the formation of social order (and corresponding behavior) through collective cognitive institutions (e.g., Bourdieu, 1977). Thus, engagement practices (coupling the behavioral act with shared cognitive understanding and interpretation) are proposed as the main unit to analyze when studying the engagement behavior of groups of actors (e.g., Schau et al., 2009). For example, members of sports club brand communities may be guided by cultural-cognitive procedures to show their affiliation with their sports club during a home game by wearing the team's merchandise (which is considered an engagement behavior). As given by the agreed social context of the sport club ecosystem, members of these sport club brand communities share cognitive institutions (e.g., norms and rules) that allow them to share the same cognitive understanding and interpretation of wearing merchandise to demonstrate affiliation, belonging, and support for the team (cf. Stroebel et al., 2021). Thus, considering engagement practices broadens the perspective from individual engagement behaviors to the procedures underlying engagement behaviors (i.e., social norms and rules) that guide actors' behaviors (Schatzki, 1996). This helps sport organizations understand a) how engagement behaviors spread within their brand communities, b) how

engagement behaviors align with shared engagement practices that can enforce or change social norms within brand communities, and c) how these underlying procedures (e.g., social norms and rules) shape brand communities (Kleinaltenkamp et al., 2021; McDonald et al., 2022).

Recent studies in sport management have examined engagement practices on (non-)digital EPs but have focused on single platforms such as sport events (Grohs et al., 2020; Stieler & Germelmann, 2018). In contrast, the purpose of our study is to identify engagement practices on multiple digital EPs across networks of actors in order to understand how different digital EPs may influence and/or create norms and rules within brand communities that enforce or hinder specific forms of engagement behaviors within (sub-)networks of actors of sport club brand communities, and how these engagement practices may influence brand communities. Although McDonald et al. (2022) argue that engagement practices were relevant to sport clubs long before digital EPs, they also emphasize that "new digital technologies provide an exciting vehicle for groups of actors to engage with [brands]" (p. 296), which indicates the need for more research on how engagement practices emerge on digital EPs in sport club brand communities.

Therefore, this study uses a multi-method approach consisting of netnography, document analysis, and semi-structured interviews to investigate the engagement practices of two sport club brand communities by examining two social media platforms and two club-owned smartphone applications. It offers two contributions to sport management research. First, it describes how different digital EPs (as specific social contexts) foster different forms of engagement practices (revealed in the engagement behaviors of different actors influenced by underlying social norms and rules), how these engagement practices enforce or change social norms, and how they shape the respective brand communities. Second, it consolidates a framework of engagement practices in sport brand communities based on the integration of findings from this study and previous sport management research. Furthermore, the findings can help guide sport management practice by providing sport club brands with an understanding of how they can use digital EPs to foster engagement practices. In addition, the study can guide practitioners on how to promote engagement practices to achieve specific outcomes (e.g., reinforcing social norms) and indicates the need for specific training of sport managers.

Theoretical background and literature review

Engagement behavior, engagement platforms and engagement practices

In service management, engagement behavior is defined as: "an actor's voluntary resource contributions that focus on the engagement object, go beyond what is elementary to the exchange, and occur in interactions with a focal object and/or other actors" (Alexander et al., 2018, p. 336). Similarly, in sport management, Yoshida et al. (2014) defined fan engagement behavior as non-transactional extra-role behavior, and Buser et al. (2020, p. 8) defined sponsor engagement as "actor's behavioral manifestation and the integration of resources beyond (or without) the sponsorship contract". Taking the three views (Alexander et al., 2018; Buser et al., 2020; Yoshida et al., 2014) further, we define (actor) engagement

behavior as "voluntary behavior to integrate resources beyond (or without) contractual agreements".

In engagement literature, there is consensus on the role of EPs as "physical or virtual touchpoints designed to provide structural support for the exchange and integration of resources, and thereby co-creation of value between actors in a service ecosystem" (Breidbach et al., 2014, p. 594) to foster engagement behavior (Horbel et al., 2016; Storbacka et al., 2016). More specifically, EPs are considered touchpoints on which engagement behavior takes place and on which situational factors (e.g., the involved actors, prevailing norms and rules for access or behavior) influence such behavior (e.g., Buser et al., 2022, Chandler & Vargo, 2011; Vargo & Lusch, 2016). Researchers have empirically shown the relevance of the social context of EPs (Horbel et al., 2016) but also conceptually (Buser et al., 2022; McDonald et al., 2022) and – related to research focusing on varying contexts – empirically (e.g., Annamalai et al., 2021; Behnam et al., 2023; Santos et al., 2019) agreed on the role of the social context EPs offer to brand communities.

Accordingly, actors engage in socially embedded contexts of EPs (Alexander et al., 2018; Edvardsson et al., 2011), which are guided by institutions that facilitate coordination of activities and define the norms and rules according to which actors engage (Vargo & Lusch, 2016). In other words, institutions guide actors' engagement and enable or constrain interactions (Koskela-Huotari & Vargo, 2016). However, not only do institutions shape actors' engagement behavior; actors also shape institutions (Alexander et al., 2018; Battilana et al., 2009; DiMaggio, 1988), and thus their engagement behavior preserves current institutions or enforces change (Koskela-Huotari et al., 2016; cf. FP5 in; Buser et al., 2022).

The study of engagement behaviors as a psychological phenomenon is highly valuable for sport management as it allows the understanding of human perception and behavior (e.g., manifestation of social identity, cf. Tajfel et al., 1979). However, the psychological, monodisciplinary explanatory approach to research falls short when it comes to the study of social processes and structures (Heckhausen, 1987), which is required to study the interrelationship of behavior and norms/rules. Therefore, in studying how social norms and rules prevalent in specific social contexts such as digital EPs foster specific forms of behaviors among sport club brand communities and vice versa, sociological theories are suggested to be considered. There is research in sport management that has drawn similar conclusions (e.g., Grohs et al., 2020; Katz & Heere, 2013; Table 1 for an overview) and framed their research against social practice theory (Bourdieu, 1977; Schatzki, 1996).

Social practice theory is rooted in Wittgensteinian language game philosophy and posits that social order is embedded in collective cognitive and symbolic structures (Bourdieu, 1977). The main unit of analysis are practices, shared ways of understanding and doing things given by collectively agreed-on cognitive and symbolic structures, for example rules and social norms (Reckwitz, 2002; Schau et al., 2009). Practices go beyond behavioral acts and encompass the "routinized way in which bodies are moved, objects are handled, subjects are treated, things are described, and the world is understood" (Reckwitz, 2002, p. 250). Thus, they aim to provide a more context-specific understanding of how humans interact with their social and cultural environment. This means that studying practices, in contrast to mere behavior, not only considers the behavioral act

Table 1. Overview of identified practices in sport management research.

Source	Focus and contribution	Practices	Research context			
			Network-oriented	Sport club brand community	Digital	Multiple EP's
Stieler and Germelmann (2018)	Triadic constellations in actor engagement practices in team sport ecosystems	Implementing, informing & discussing, performing, signaling. Simultaneous, sequential, actor-led				
Uhrich (2014)	Customer-to-customer practices on joint and customer-led physical and virtual platforms in team sports	Associating and dissociating, engaging and sharing, competing, intensifying, exchanging		✓	✓	✓
Grohs et al. (2020)	Value co-creation practices at sport events	Social networking: welcoming, empathizing, governing Impression management: evangelizing, justifying Community engagement: staking, milestoning, badging, documenting Brand use: grooming, customizing, commoditizing	✓		✓	✓
Seo and Jung (2016)	Social practices in eSports consumption	Playing, watching, governing			✓	
Reifurth et al. (2018)	Social practices in children's game-day experiences in fan communities	Badging		✓		
Woolf et al. (2013)	Brandfest charity sport events in brand community development	Social networking: welcoming, empathizing, governing Impression management: evangelizing, justifying Community engagement: staking, milestoning, badging, documenting Brand use: grooming, customizing, commoditizing				
Zanini et al. (2019)	Virtual soccer brand community engagement practices on Twitter	First type: tweeting, retweeting, liking, mentioning and replying Second type: greeting, empathizing, assisting, mingling, appreciating, celebrating, complaining, ranking		✓	✓	
Katz and Heere (2013)	Tailgating in brand community development processes of a college football team	Staking		✓		
This study	Network-oriented engagement practices on multiple digital engagement platforms in sport club brand communities	Social networking: welcoming, empathizing, governing Impression management: informing & sharing, evangelizing, intensifying Community engagement: staking, requesting, appreciating, documenting Brand use: organizing, grooming, entertaining, customizing, commoditizing Linking: presenting, connecting, co-presenting	✓	✓	✓	✓

of doing things but also, implicitly, how members of social groups understand and interpret a behavioral act (due to shared social norms and rules).

Therefore, the nature of practices allows grasping a network-oriented perspective of engagement behavior within brand communities through shared norms and rules. Particularly, not only the underlying norms and rules can be studied but also the complexity of actor networks – apparent on EPs – is considered through the study of engagement behaviors in social contexts (Schau et al., 2009). Accordingly, studying engagement practices (as non-transactional and voluntary practices in contrast to contractual practices) provides sport management practice more in-depth insights into the social processes within brand communities than studying mere engagement behavior (e.g., McDonald et al., 2022).

Literature review on practice theory in sport management

Most studies analyzing engagement practices in sport management (Grohs et al., 2020; Katz & Heere, 2013; Reifurth et al., 2018; Woolf et al., 2013) have utilized Schau et al. (2009) categorization of four practice categories in offline and online brand communities, while others identified supplementary engagement practices (Seo & Jung, 2016; Stieler & Germelmann, 2018; Uhrich, 2014; Zanini et al., 2019).

Table 1 provides an overview of the existing research landscape concerning engagement practices in sport management, highlighting several research gaps. Primarily, the literature review in sport management reveals a significant dearth of studies considering engagement practices. Only a handful of studies (e.g., Grohs et al., 2020; Seo & Jung, 2016; Uhrich, 2014; Zanini et al., 2019) have ventured into the area of digital EPs. Uhrich (2014) explored Facebook and online fan fora, Zanini et al. (2019) concentrated on Twitter, Grohs et al. (2020) delved into social media and websites and Seo and Jung (2016) focused on eSports. Despite these studies, McDonald et al. (2022) emphasized the need for more in-depth insights into engagement practices on digital EPs. The study of digital EPs is warranted due to their continuous evolution, which has transformed how individuals interact, communicate, and engage within brand communities (Stegmann et al., 2023).

Moreover, most existing studies have focused on dyadic interactions, primarily examining interactions between customers and other customers (e.g., Uhrich, 2014) or between customers and brands (Katz & Heere, 2013). However, such an exclusive concentration on dyadic interactions overlooks the rich tapestry of various actors who actively engage within the broader ecosystems of sport organizations and events, exerting considerable influence on one another (Buser et al., 2022; Woratschek et al., 2020). Notably, Grohs et al. (2020) stands out as an exception by adopting a network-oriented approach. Nevertheless, further research is imperative to fully comprehend the complexities at play.

Furthermore, the predominant focus in existing research has primarily evolved around event brands and engagement practices within sport event EPs. Only a few studies have ventured into the realm of sport club brands that encompass more than just individual sport events (e.g., Katz & Heere, 2013; Reifurth et al., 2018; Uhrich, 2014; Zanini et al., 2019). While all these studies have highlighted the significance of sport club brand communities, only Uhrich (2014) acknowledged the intricate network of EPs offered by

sport club brands (cf. Buser et al., 2022). In so doing, Uhrich (2014) demonstrated engagement practices across various EPs.

As depicted in Table 1, both Uhrich (2014) and Grohs et al. (2020) made commendable efforts in highlighting key aspects essential for comprehending engagement practices within brand communities. Nevertheless, Uhrich (2014) centered predominantly on dyadic relationships, while Grohs et al. (2020) study was primarily oriented towards individual sport events. Considering these reflections, the upcoming study aims to bridge these research gaps by adopting a network-oriented approach focusing on several digital EPs of sport club brands.

Methods

Data selection

We conducted a multi-case analysis (Yin, 2011) focusing on four digital EPs associated with two prominent Swiss sport clubs: Berner Sportclub Young Boys (BSCYB) in football and Schlittschuh Club Bern (SCB) in ice hockey. Our methodological approach employed a mixed-method framework that encompassed netnography, document analysis, and semi-structured interviews. This approach allowed us to investigate common engagement practices within brand communities on digital EPs, rather than individual practices and specific communities (Schau et al., 2009). Our study included two social media EPs (Facebook and Instagram) affiliated with BSCYB, the reigning national champions in Swiss football. BSCYB boasts a network of 500 sponsors (BSCYB, 2023). The club's Instagram account, reflecting its success, experienced a remarkable 570% growth in new followers since 2017. Additionally, we examined two club-owned smartphone app EPs associated with SCB, one of Switzerland's most successful ice hockey clubs with an average attendance of over 16,000 spectators, the highest in European ice hockey (SCB, 2023). SCB also maintains a network of approximately 400 sponsors (SCB, 2023). Both sport clubs have exhibited innovative digital marketing strategies making them ideal subjects for studying engagement practices on digital EPs. BSCYB appointed a Chief Digital Officer in 2018 and introduced its own governance token (BSCYB, 2023). SCB developed club-owned smartphone apps, offering both a fan app accessible to the general public and a business app granting exclusive access to sponsors. Both apps are integrated with a personalized customer relationship management (CRM) tool.

Research process and data analysis

For our investigation of social media EPs, we conducted netnographic research, as it is well-suited for examining online social interactions that are easily accessible by visiting publicly available social media profiles (Kozinets, 2019). Netnography allowed us to observe online social interactions and gain insights into how actors engage on social media (Kozinets, 2019). Our netnographic approach aligned with Stieler and Germelmann's (2018, p. 21) recommendation to "incorporate the dynamic nature of interactions" in understanding the development of team sports ecosystems.

Data collection for the netnography involved a retrospective approach, encompassing all posts on BSCYB's official Facebook and Instagram profiles, the two

primary platforms for the club's social media engagement. This data collection spanned from 1 June 2018, to 31 May 2019, resulting in the identification of $n =$ 804 posts from the sport club (486 from Facebook and 318 from Instagram). These posts were analyzed for date, content (text and images), and reactions from other actors.

For the SCB smartphone app EPs, we conducted document analyses of the two apps' functionalities, by examining and documenting all content pages of the two apps. Due to the unavailability of interactional data, we supplemented this with semi-structured interviews. The document analysis provided insights into the apps' functionalities and the involved actors. The findings from this analysis informed the development of interview questions for eight semi-structured interviews carried out in 2020, including two with SCB managers, three with fans, and three with sponsors. These interviews, lasting an average of 45 minutes (38 to 52 minutes), were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Interviewees shared their perspectives on the digital platforms used by themselves and other actors, how they used the platforms, what boundaries the platform give them and the significance of these platforms in their engagement.

Data analysis involved a three-stage qualitative content analysis (Mayring, 2004) using MAXQDA 2020. In the first stage, we employed inductive and open coding to establish an overview of the data, leading to the identification of actor groups and subgroups, such as fans (casual or diehard), sponsors, coaching staff, players, media, city authorities, charity organizations, leagues (e.g., UEFA Champions League), and politicians. These actors engaged in diverse activities, ranging from welcoming new players to liking Instagram posts and commenting on recent match results.

In the second stage, we conducted a deductive analysis based on the four practice categories defined by Schau et al. (2009), the most comprehensive categorization of practices for studying brand communities in sport management (cf. Table 1). The data was coded into the 12 practices from Schau et al. (2009) in order to connect engagement behavior with underlying norms and rules. Additionally, we inductively identified practices and practice categories, cross-referencing them with existing literature beyond Schau et al. (2009) to determine if similar practices had been identified elsewhere.

In the third stage, we ensured the quality and credibility of the results. We presented the coded category system to an independent researcher, providing definitions and examples for each practice in a sport-specific context (definitions from Schau et al., 2009; examples from; Grohs et al., 2020; complemented with definitions and examples from other studies or inductively derived for new categories and practices). Prior to the independent researcher's coding process, we engaged in discussions to align our understanding of engagement practices. After coding, we conducted an intercoder reliability assessment using Perreault and Leigh's (1989) method, which controls for random matches. The intercoder reliability yielded a strong match of $r = 0.84$. To maintain consistent coding, we identified and resolved any inconsistencies through discussions with the independent researcher until consensus was achieved.

Results

Engagement practices on social media EPs

We identified two practices from *social networking* (SN). *Welcoming* describes the engagement behavior that new members of the brand community are greeted. It sets the tone for BSCYB's brand community's social norms of inclusivity and hospitality and creates an atmosphere for newcomers, while social media EPs making it easier for them to join discussions, share their experiences, feel like part of the community and strengthen the sense of belonging.

Additionally, we found – mainly by members of the platform owner BSCYB – *governing* practices, which communicate behavioral expectations (rules and social norms) within the brand community and beyond (cf. BSCYB tagging the UEFA and the Champions League in the post below). It either enforces predominant norms and rules (e.g., when players communicate expectations regarding anti-racism) or changes – at least temporarily – rules, for example at high-risk games when alcohol is not allowed in the stadium (BSCYB Instagram).

🏳🏴🏳🏴🏳🏴

BSC Young Boys and its players stand for openness, tolerance and friendship. Together, we tackle racism and discrimination @uefa_official @championsleague (BSCYB, 21.10.2018)

Within *impression management* (IM), we identified in our data that actors (most often the brand owner) in sport brand communities exchange information (BSCYB sharing pre-match information; BSCYB Instagram; cf. Uhrich, 2014, i.e., exchanging; Stieler & Germelmann, 2018; i.e., informing & sharing), which fosters discussions, debates, and collective awareness, facilitated by digital EPs. This follows the shared understanding of brand community members to disseminate relevant knowledge and news to and among in-group members to enhance collective cognitive awareness. Thus, we would argue that *informing & sharing* might be considered an engagement practice within the category of IM.

Furthermore, we saw in our sample the engagement practice *evangelizing* and *intensifying* (cf. Uhrich, 2014). Both practices occur when information is shared with the intention of stimulating emotions among brand community members (e.g., when BSCYB and its community celebrated winning the national championship and when they enhance emotions as well as mental activities before an upcoming match against a rival team; BSCYB Instagram). Thus, through the quick dissemination among the brand community members, both practices reinforce collective achievements and the norms of an emotionalized brand community, therefore strengthen the brand's identity (Brand et al., 2023).

Although brand communities are homogeneous (interest in sport club's success), there is evidence for *staking* (in *community engagement [CE]*; Grohs et al., 2020; Katz & Heere, 2013; Schau et al., 2009). We observed forms of *staking* when BSCYB posted a picture of fans at a Champions League away game and thus demonstrating heterogeneity between subgroups of their brand community (BSCYB Instagram).

♡♥👍👏

Grandiose, the YB fans at Old Trafford!

> #bscyb #ybforever #ucl #hungrigufme #championsleague #mufcyb (BSCYB, 28.11.2018)

This describes the norms that although members of sport brand communities are related to each other, social structures and roles may be different. Social media further allows for the enlarged display of different forms of *staking*, such as when fans choose to engage or not to engage in discussions. Thus, digital EPs can amplify the formation of subgroups with distinct identities within the larger community.

Furthermore, we identified *requesting* as asking actors within brand communities to engage with other actors beyond transactional exchanges (e.g., fans are requested to chant for their team). *Requesting* goes along with management cooperation (cf. Yoshida et al., 2014). This underlies the social norms of an involvement of brand community members into decision-making processes of the club (e.g., Schmidt & Koenigstorfer, 2022). Such forms of engagement, which foster brand community identification, are facilitated on social media EPs, for example, when BSCYB asks its fans to predict scores of upcoming matches, share pictures of the championship trophy, participate in a hackathon, or vote for their favorite player or goal.

> 📷🏆♡♥
>
> We say #MerciBärn! Share your cup pictures with the hashtag
> #ÜseChübu #bärn #bscyb #ybforever #gäubschwarz #bern #pokal. (BSCYB, 25.06.2018)

Additionally, we identified actors on the BSCYB's social media to express thankfulness in the brand community using symbolic gestures (i.e., *appreciating*; cf. Zanini et al., 2019). BSCYB fans and sponsors acknowledge the players' performance on the field, their overall performance for the club when they leave, the latest fan choreography, or the players' corporate social responsibility activities when they visit children in a clinic. Thus, we would argue that *appreciating* forms another practice within CE.

Documenting (CE) as illustrating brand community experiences can be observed on social media when BSCYB or its fans and sponsors post pictures of victory celebrations or from fans in yellow raincoats in the Manchester stadium (BSCYB Instagram). *Documenting* practices on digital EPs are highly visible. They help create a collective memory for the community, fostering a sense of history and continuity. Thus, it contributes to the brand community's collective identity.

Furthermore, we identified *brand use* (BU) engagement practices that facilitate or arrange the community members' brand interaction journey (when BSCYB provides travel information to matches or when fans plan the departure of fan trains or buses).

> In 12 days it will finally start again. After the three test matches this week (Wednesday and Saturday) the second half of the season starts on February 2. Tickets are now available. (BSCYB, 21.01.2019)

This shows similarities with Zanini et al. (2019) *mingling*. A practice called *organizing* (BU) that describes the provision of assistance to enhance other actors' planning may integrate the meaning of Zanini et al. (2019) *mingling* and our data.

Lastly (regarding BU), we identified *commoditizing* (Schau et al., 2009), in which in-group members can explicitly (using comments or like buttons) or implicitly (indicated by the traffic) demonstrate how satisfied they are with the offerings (BSCYB Facebook; BSCYB Instagram). These patterns, which are on this scale only enabled by digital EPs,

demonstrate underlying social norms that in-group members are expected to show their valence towards the sport club or other members of brand communities (Schau et al., 2009; Schmidt & Koenigstorfer, 2022).

Finally, we identified two forms of engagement practices addressing structural extensions of the brand community. First, *presenting* refers to the presentation of new actors to the brand community. Accordingly, engagement in *presenting* changes the structure of sport club brand communities since new actors are presented to the brand community (scope). We observed *presenting*, for example, when new players, staff and sponsors are presented and therefore, the network of actors within the brand community has increased (BSCYB Instagram). Similarly, BSCYB presented a deal with local public transport by posting about a new streetcar in the club's colors.

> It's rolling! As of today, the YB-Championship-Streetcar is on the road!
>
> #MerciBärn #meistertram #ybtram #bscyb #meister #gäubschwarz #bern #bscyoungboy #bärn #youngboysbern #bernmobil. (BSCYB, 04.06.2018)

Additionally, we identified *co-presenting*, which can be described as shared engagement from at least two actors addressed to at least one other actor in the brand community. Again, the practice structurally extends the network of brand communities either by increasing the number of interactions in existing relationships (scale) or by newly connecting unconnected actors (density). Typical examples for *co-presenting* are the introduction of jointly organized offerings, for example between several sport clubs in Bern (BSCYB Instagram).

> On Thursday, March 14, BSV Bern will face Pfadi at home. March 14 is known to be the founding date of BSCYB. Therefore, BSV has come up with promotion. (BSCYB, 12.03.2019)

Engagement practices on the fan app EP

On the fan app EP, we found the platform owner (i.e., SCB) to engage in *governing* (SN). More specifically, they guide behaviors on the platform by defining terms of use.

> I confirm the terms of use and approve that they use it for newsletters etc… If I did not want that, then I could not accept the terms of use, however, I would probably have trouble using the app. (SCB, Fan 1)

We also identified *informing & sharing* and *evangelizing* practices (IM). The brand owner exchanges information with the sport brand communities (SCB Fan App). Real-time information, which is only enabled through digital EPs, can be further shared within sub-groups of the brand community. So, brand community members act as multiplicators in the dissemination of knowledge, while either engage in neutral (*informing & sharing*) or valenced (*evangelizing*) exchange:

> It's enough when someone opens the app and then you pat yourself on the back and say: hey look, there's 1:0 for the others, that's good for us. (SCB, Fan 1)

Also *staking* (CE) was facilitated by the fan app EP, for example when SCB fans and sponsors participate (or not) in the fan app light show at the beginning of the game (Manager 2). When particularly die-hard fans do not participate in the light show at the

beginning of the game, they might demonstrate their refusal of over-commercialization, and thus set social norms within SCB's brand community (Fan 2).

Requesting also occurs on SCB's fan app when the club asks SCB's brand community to poll on their happiness using a loyalty program, which demonstrates an appreciation of their opinion within the brand community and simultaneously can develop shared social norms that welcome critical feedback (Manager 2; cf. Schmidt & Koenigstorfer, 2022).

> It's the bear-o-meter. Before every break, there's an announcement "What's your mood?", and then you can enter an emoji and get credits, which you can redeem for a bratwurst. (Manager 2, SCB)

Furthermore, engaging in feedback enhances community bonds as brand community members perceive that their behavior is valuable to the club.

Finally, the fan app also enables BU practices. First, it offers community members a downloadable events calendar or it provides an integrated fan shop and therefore, helps fans in *organizing* their brand use (SCB Fan App; Fan 1, Fan 2).

> But I use the game plan and the reminders that come from my integrated SCB calendar, ah today is game. (SCB, Fan 2)

In order to not only organize but to help the brand community members in using the brand, *grooming* practices systematize use patterns, e.g., when SCB ask to join a light show at the beginning of the game during the players' entrance (SCB Fan App; Manager 2). *Grooming*, accordingly, provides brand community members with discursive knowledge to maximize their own utility (Schau et al., 2009). Thus, *grooming* involves enhancing engagement within the brand community through digital EPs and therefore, reinforcing norms of active participation.

> The campaign with the beer brand and the light show, we did four times last year, and there we saw that more people participated each time. The fans always must see that it could look good. (SCB, Manager 2)

The aim of both, *organizing* and *grooming* practices seems to cater fans' engagement in *entertaining* practices, which extend engagement with the club brand beyond its primary purpose (e.g., by pregame quizzes, collection of credits or live statistics; SCB Fan App; Manager 2) to maximize community members' value beyond utilitarian value through watching the game (Manager 1).

Furthermore, the data shows *customizing* emerging on the fan app, which describes the process of personalizing brand offerings to suit the needs of specific actors (Manager 1). The behavioral act of *customizing*, facilitated by the collection of digital data, follows its purpose to increase utility maximization for brand community members based on the social norms to emotionally commit these members to the brand community.

Moreover, we identified the fan loyalty program (called bear-o-meter) as *commoditizing* (SCB Fan App). In-group members can explicitly (using the bear-o-meter) demonstrate how satisfied they are with the offerings (Fan 1; Sponsor 3). These patterns describe underlying social norms that in-group members are expected to show their valence towards the sport club or other members of the brand communities (Manager 2; Schau et al., 2009). Accordingly, the bear-o-meter serves as a feedback mechanism that enforces

social norms of expressing satisfaction or valence towards the club. It encourages members to participate actively.

Finally, we again identified forms of engagement practices addressing structural extensions of the brand community. *Connecting* practices have been described by one of the fans as the app is considered as one of the entry points to connect with SCB's brand community, which increases the number of interactions (scale) between existing brand community members.

> But it's the entry point to the SCB, so I go through the app, if I want to know something. (SCB, Fan 1)

Co-presenting practices, again, can be identified on the fan app, through competitions jointly organized by sponsors and the sport club (SCB Fan App), or the integration of a player's blog in the fan app (SCB Fan App).

> And we have now started to do [this joint light show] with that beer brand. They want to channel people towards their point of sale. (SCB, Manager 1)

Engagement practices on the business app EP

Finally, on the business app EP, we identified *empathizing* (SN) as the mutual lending of emotional or physical assistance (Schau et al., 2009) between members of the brand community to develop emotional closeness in sponsor relationships:

> This is certainly an instrument, that you don't just calculate them by return of investment when I make my sponsorship contributions, but you also create an emotional bond. (SCB, Sponsor 3)

Additionally, on the business app EP also IM practices have emerged (e.g., *informing & sharing*, *intensifying*), the latter for example through the interactivity of the business app and opportunities to participate. In so doing, the platform owner can stimulate interactions through topics they bring to the business app, which reinforces bonding between the sponsors.

> It's about bringing topics that interest the sponsors, where they can then speak accordingly. It's always when I can activate the target customer to participate in something, then I bring interaction in and then it becomes exciting. (SCB, Sponsor 3)

The business app EP also fosters CE. In particular, the platform itself demonstrates *staking* as it is only accessible to SCB sponsors (Manager 1) and therefore, reinforces heterogeneity within the brand community given by the formal role of sub-groups of the community.

> The business app is first and foremost an exclusive platform for SCB sponsors. You can download [the app], but you will only be able to use it if the SCB approves you. This is very exclusive. (SCB, Sponsor 3)

Furthermore, SCB is *requesting* its sponsors to use the business app EP to confirm participation for business events or games (SCB Business App, Manager 1) and they ask their sponsors to upload photos and share their experiences they made during the season

(Sponsor 3), which reinforces norms of active participation and collaboration within the business-focused community.

Following the practice of *requesting*, sponsors engage in *documenting* when they upload posts about memorable experiences from the season on SCB's business app, which unites members of the brand community and enhances their feeling of belonging and reinforces the norms of shared identities and the role of community members to contribute (SCB Business App; Sponsor 3).

BU is facilitated through digital EPs, all sponsors can see who has confirmed participation in events, which supports sponsors in *organizing* and preparing networking strategies and enforces the social norms that networking is desired within the sponsor subgroup of the SCB brand community:

> In the past you got everything on paper and now you get it via push message and then you can say, "I can pull the event right into the calendar and can also register". It also has the function to look at what [sponsors] are at the event. (SCB, Sponsor 3)

Although the business app EP has a chat function, which sponsors could use to engage with each other, Sponsor 2 explained that he only uses the app for preparation but not for initial establishment of contacts and thus describes a use pattern systematized through social norms (*grooming*).

To better *entertaining* on the business app EP, the platform owner SCB has brought a prediction game to the app, in which sponsors compete in predicting game scores (SCB Business App; Sponsor 2):

> … to make the app more used, we now have a new predicting game that we launched so that we can engage the people there. (SCB, Manager 2)

In the last BU practice (*commoditizing*), one of the sponsors mentioned that through the measures SCB takes with the business app EP, it fosters closer relationships within the sponsors' sub-group of the brand community:

> I think if you manage to activate people and let them participate more or feel closer to the club because they get more information or are enabled to give feedback and receive answers allow them to build a closer relationship to the club, and they feel more part of the brand family. (SCB, Sponsor 3)

Finally, the data again shows evidence for practices that highlight structural extension of the brand community. As such, SCB as platform owner is *presenting* all sponsors in order to provide an overview for other sponsors, which allows for the potential establishment of new connections between existing sponsors in the brand community (density) and is accelerated by the business app.

> … because they see in the app that you are a partner. That helps to have more and faster presence. That's an accelerator within that network. After all, you want to pick up contacts in the network. (SCB, Sponsor 3)

To influence the density of the network, SCB also needs to enable *connecting* practices that allows sponsors to exploit the network effects provided – either by giving access to contact details of the sponsors or by providing a direct opportunity to connect on the platform, such as a chat function.

> It has a chat function to get in touch with other business partners. (SCB, Sponsor 2)

Lastly, we identified *co-presenting* practices again, which influences structural expansion of the brand community sub-group of sponsors. In particular, the business app is a joint effort of SCB and one of its sponsors, which due that profits from the connection between its brand and other sponsors considering collaborations or sales, while providing knowledge to SCB regarding how the app should look like.

> This then became a joint project that we initiated and the SCB then implemented together with the IT partner and programmed to their needs. (SCB, Sponsor 3)

Discussion

Research implications

Our paper offers two main contributions. The first contribution refers to the analysis of how different digital EPs influence engagement practices within brand communities. It highlights the varying impact of specific practices across these platforms, shedding light on their role in enforcing, evolving, or introducing social norms. More specifically, across the four EPs, we identified *informing & sharing* (SN), *staking* (CE), *requesting* (CE), *organizing* (BU), *commoditizing* (BU) and *co-presenting* (linking [LI]) on all four platforms. Digital EPs enforce *informing & sharing* because social norms can be communicated more frequently and more intensively. This shapes a common knowledge base. Similarly, on all four digital EPs, *staking* reinforces the social norms of (sub-)group identification and belonging. By participating in light shows, prediction games or being involved on the business app EP, brand community members demonstrated their affiliation with specific brand community sub-groups. Furthermore, *requesting*, which involved the club seeking input and feedback, enforces norms of active participation and open communication, creating a sense of agency within the community. In addition, *organizing* facilitates brand community members to be structured, while engaging the brand community members on different levels (e.g., social media and fan app majorly helped with scheduling for games while the business app also served as platform to coordinate sponsor-specific events). Moreover, *commoditizing* practices in various formalities took part on all four EPs (e.g., by participating in the bear-o-meter, by writing comments) for the brand community members to share their valence towards the club. *Commoditizing* can enhance brand community cohesion and encourage active participation while gauging and exhibiting brand community members attachment and support for the brand. Finally, *co-presenting* practices (i.e., jointly organized activities of two or more actors) majorly influenced the structural expansion of the brand community and thereby evidently affected the density of the community.

We also identified differences among engagement practices on the four digital EPs. In particular, the social media EPs were more likely to foster public discussions (e.g., *welcoming*, *evangelizing*, *requesting*, *intensifying*, *commoditizing*) and involved sharing of content (e.g., *requesting*, *documenting*) among the brand community. In addition, through its wide reach and inclusivity in terms of access and participation, it fulfilled more likely the aim to inform the community about certain aspects of the brand and emotionally connect them. Contrastingly, the fan app placed much stronger emphasis on engagement practices that

ensured direct brand-fan interactions through asking for engagement behavior in particular activities that involve actors and enhance their bonds with the brand through participating in games (e.g., *entertaining*), feedback opportunities through the bear-o-meter (e.g., *commoditizing*) or participating in light shows (e.g., *staking*). Finally, the business app allowed for sponsor-related engagement behavior and offered focused networking opportunities (e.g., *connecting*, *presenting*), while it tried to engage sponsors to enhance their bonding with the club through games (e.g., *entertaining*), participation in discussions (e.g., *intensifying*) or by mutual emotional support of sponsors (e.g., *empathizing*). In summary, each digital EP enabled or facilitated the shaping of social norms and rules within their brand communities, either by reinforcing and changing existing norms or introducing new ones. Thus, each practice within these digital EPs can have a distinct impact on the enforcement and evolution of social norms and rules within brand communities. While some practices directly enforce or change existing norms (e.g., *staking*), others may introduce new or changed norms (*governing*) or provide opportunities for community members to engage themselves (e.g., *entertaining*), which may increase community belonging.

Overall, the engagement practices serve as cultural-cognitive or normative rules that provide a certain governance to engagement behavior within the brand communities that goes beyond the formulation of regulations, and which happens particularly in two ways. First, the central role of the sport clubs as focal actors on the studied digital and institutional EPs (Brand et al., 2023) becomes evident. The sport clubs define boundaries by hindering non-welcomed actors' engagement (Koskela-Huotari & Vargo, 2016), for example by preventing non-sponsors to access the business app (*staking*) or by reporting fake accounts on social media. Accordingly, they govern which actors have access to participate in the brand community by enforcing behaviors through rules and norms or specifying platform functionalities (Koskela-Huotari & Vargo, 2016). Second, the data shows the previously discussed physiology of practices and its interconnectedness (cf. Figure 1 in Schau et al., 2009). In particular, there are certain engagement practices that foster the emergence of others, such as *requesting* that either fosters *documenting* practices (e.g., by posting pictures and share experiences in the business app or posting pictures with the championship trophy on social media), *entertaining* (e.g., by participating in games on the fan app) or *commoditizing* practices (e.g., by giving feedback about the clubs' activities using the bear-o-meter app). Similar applies when sport clubs inform their community members about upcoming games and detail stadium openings (i.e., *informing & sharing*) that help (i.e., *organizing*) them to plan their journey to the stadium. To give one more example (among many others existing), *grooming* practices describe brand community members on how they can maximize their engagement behaviors in engagement practices (e.g., in *entertaining*, *commoditizing, connecting*) in order to increase their experiences within the brand community or to enhance their community involvement. Overall, it becomes evident that through these interconnected chains of engagement practices, norms within the community are reinforced and behavioral patterns are more likely to be standardized, which means that breaking predominant use patterns (i.e., demonstrating forms of engagement behaviors that are not aligned with the norms and rules within the brand communities) is impeded (Schau et al., 2009).

Regarding the enabling and facilitating of engagement practices on digital EPs, we inductively identified three engagement practices (i.e., *presenting*, *connecting*, *co-

presenting) that were disconnected from the established four categories of engagement practices. Therefore, we introduce a separate engagement practice category in sport brand communities, which we suggest calling *linking* (LI). LI refers to structurally enhancing connections between networks of actors and therefore, to establish contacts between the "right" actors. It either can increase the size of the network (scope), the number of interactions between already connected actors (scale), or directly connect actors in the network who are not directly connected (density). LI practices are meant to actively connect actors on EPs and in sport brand communities that initially may only have vague or no contact. Thus, engagement in LI is guided by norms that aim to influence the structural dimension of interactions within sport club brand communities to potentially empower actors to engage in other forms of engagement practices. LI is in line with service provisioning described in the value creation configuration of value networks (Stabell & Fjeldstad, 1998), which describes "activities associated with establishing, maintaining, and terminating links between [actors]" (p. 429).

Therefore, LI adds a new perspective towards Schau et al. (2009) framework of engagement practices in brand communities. Although SN is defined as creating, enhancing, and sustaining ties and bonds within sport brand communities (Schau et al., 2009), it does not include LI as described above as it only addresses relational aspects. As described in Schau et al. (2009), practices within SN are understood as "beckoning [new members] into the fold, and assisting in their brand learning and community socialization" (*welcoming*; p. 43) or "I often tell users 'The Garmin is a great product, but it takes time to really use it well […]'" (*empathizing*; p. 43). Thus, SN is understood as instructing members in tacit or formalized knowledge within sport brand communities (Schau et al., 2009). Therefore, it fosters and promotes the substance of relationships by socializing new or existing members with social norms and rules within sport club brand communities.

In summary, while both LI and SN practices contribute to the vitality of sport brand communities, they differ in their primary focus, objectives, and the nature of norms they embody. LI practices are concerned with the structural expansion of the community and facilitating contact between actors who may not have prior connections. LI practices are majorly facilitated through digital EPs. SN practices prioritize the relational aspects of community development through *welcoming*, educating (i.e., *empathizing*) and *governing* members to ensure their integration and understanding of community norms and values. Both sets of practices play crucial roles in building and sustaining sport brand communities, but they operate in distinct ways.

In our second main contribution, we have developed a consolidated framework of engagement practices in sport brand communities (cf. Table 2 for an overview with definitions and examples) based on findings from this study and previous sport management research. For SN, we identified three forms of engagement practices. *Welcoming* as greeting and assisting new members in their brand community socialization is based on earlier research, which has similarly described it as "greeting new members … " (cf. Grohs et al., 2020; Schau et al., 2009, p. 43) or as "welcoming new members" (as *greeting* in Zanini et al., 2019, p. 794) and so particularly subsumes the idea of providing a welcome to new members of the sport brand community and helping them with their initial socialization. *Empathizing* can be defined based on earlier research (Grohs et al., 2020; Schau et al., 2009, p. 43) as "lending emotional and/or physical support to other [brand community] members … ", which is in line with other engagement practices identified from Zanini et

Table 2. Consolidated framework of social practices in sport brand communities.

Practice category	Practice	Definition	Consolidated framework Examples (from this and previous research)	References
Social networking	Welcoming	Greeting and assisting new members in their brand community socialization	Reacting to posts of new players or coaches on social media; handing over information about rules and regulations to new members; handing over welcome bags;	Grohs et al. (2020); Schau et al. (2009); Woolf et al. (2013); Zanini et al. (2019); this study
	Empathizing	Lending emotional or physical support to other brand community members	Supporting dissatisfied sponsors; give technical advice to athletes or sponsors;	Grohs et al. (2020); Schau et al. (2009); Woolf et al. (2013); Zanini et al. (2019); this study
	Governing	Articulating behavioral expectations among members within the community	Restrict trolling on social media; communicate norms regarding racism or inclusivity in the brand community; teach sport's ethos or rules	Grohs et al. (2020); Schau et al. (2009); Seo and Jung (2016); Woolf et al. (2013); Zanini et al. (2019); this study
Impression management	Informing & sharing	Disseminating and sharing knowledge and information related to the brand or its community	Post new player acquisitions or information about injured players; share recent results with other fans; discuss currents with other sponsors	Stieler and Germelmann (2018); Uhrich (2014); this study
	Evangelizing	Sharing the brand good news to inspire others (e.g., brand community members or externals) to participate in the brand community	Volunteers share positive impressions from events; club posts last game or championship celebrations; fans sharing positive news with each other; sponsors praise the positive atmosphere at games	Grohs et al. (2020); Schau et al. (2009); Woolf et al. (2013); this study
	Justifying	Developing and communicating rationales for devoting time and effort to the brand and its community	Fans arguing why they travel to away games; sponsors justify their sponsorship expenses;	Grohs et al. (2020); Schau et al. (2009); Woolf et al. (2013)
	Intensifying	Interacting with other brand community members or externals (e.g., through friendship or rivalry) to increase excitement	Foster rivalry through social media posts; discuss upcoming games with friends; provoke rival fans through choreographies or posts on social media;	Uhrich (2014); this study

(Continued)

Table 2. (Continued).

Practice category	Practice	Consolidated framework		
		Definition	Examples (from this and previous research)	References
Community engagement	Staking	Recognizing variance within the brand community through associating or dissociating to particular groups	Sponsors recognizing exclusive access to hospitality area or apps; fans recognizing (non-)participation in light shows; fans recognizing heterogeneity towards other sub-brand communities in tailgating; die-hard fans wear supporter fan club merchandise	Grohs et al. (2020); Katz and Heere (2013); Schau et al. (2009); Stieler and Germelmann (2018); Uhrich (2014); Zanini et al. (2019); this study
	Milestoning	Noting seminal events in brand ownership and consumption	Recognizing the first contact with a brand community as a young child; recognize event start and finish	Grohs et al. (2020); Schau et al. (2009); Woolf et al. (2013)
	Requesting	Asking brand community members to engage beyond transactional exchange	Speaker asks fans to chant for the team; club is asking fans for their opinion or feedback; head of the fan club asks die-hard fans to participate in silent protest; sponsor is asking players to participate in commercial; sport club is asking sponsors to communicate event participation	This study
	Appreciating	Displaying thankfulness and gratitude to other brand community members	Fans applauding players on the field; sport club is posting pictures of away fans' support; catering give away unsold food for free; sponsors thank other sponsors for their help; fans posting thankful comments or posts about the brand or its members on social media	Zanini et al. (2019); this study
	Badging	Translating milestones in the brand community membership into symbols	Buying a merchandise article to remember a special event or game; getting a present from an athlete; taking pictures of the winner podium	Grohs et al. (2020); Reifurth et al. (2018); Schau et al. (2009); Woolf et al. (2013)
	Documenting	Detailing the brand relationship journey in a narrative way towards brand community members or externals	Posting brand community experiences on social media or in private group chats; athletes resuming on the last game or event; sport club posting recent content of games; sponsors describing best experiences in a sponsor-related app	Grohs et al. (2020); Schau et al. (2009); Uhrich (2014); Woolf et al. (2013); Zanini et al. (2019); this study

(Continued)

Table 2. (Continued).

Practice category	Practice	Definition	Examples (from this and previous research)	References
Brand use	Organizing	Providing assistance in organizing other brand community members planning in brand use	Sport club provides a downloadable event calendar; sponsors receive digital event invitations; fan club communicates meeting points and times for away games; sport club informs about door opening at the next game; fans share train departures with other fans	Zanini et al. (2019); this study
	Grooming	Caring for the brand or systematizing optimal use patterns of brand use	Guiding fans through a sport event; Giving other information on how to use digital tickets; sport club providing a light at players' introduction; sport club offers sponsors chat functions and access to other sponsors in an app	Grohs et al. (2020); Schau et al. (2009); Woolf et al. (2013); this study
	Entertaining	Using the brand and engaging with it beyond the core products and services	Sport club offers pregame quiz, live statistics; sponsors distribute goodies at a game; sponsors use prediction game in an app; musicians perform before the game; sponsors show entertaining ads on the event screens or social media related to the brand community	This study
	Customizing	Modifying the brand offerings to suit group-level or individual needs of other brand community members	Enabling personalization of newsfeed in apps; providing different brand community members with personalized information about the brand	Grohs et al. (2020); Schau et al. (2009); Woolf et al. (2013); this study
	Commoditizing	Directing valenced behaviors at other brand community members or the brand itself	Fans, sponsors, or other brand community members giving feedback about positive or negative brand experiences with core or additional products or services; complain about athletes' performance on social media; traffic on social media	Grohs et al. (2020); Schau et al. (2009); Woolf et al. (2013); Zanini et al. (2019); this study
	Performing	Augmenting the core product or services of the brand through activities of brand community members	Athletes, fans, sponsors, or other actors competing in an event, game or competition related to the core product or service of the brand	Seo and Jung (2016); Stieler and Germelmann (2018); Uhrich (2014)
	Watching	Using the brand's core offerings by drawing on tacit knowledge about the rules of competition to follow the happenings in the game	Brand community members observe other brand community members performing activities to the core product or services of the brand	Seo and Jung (2016)

(Continued)

Table 2. (Continued).

Practice category	Practice	Definition	Consolidated framework	
			Examples (from this and previous research)	References
Linking	Presenting	Showing and demonstrating new brand community members to other members of the brand community	Sport clubs presenting new players or coaches on social media; fans bring friends to gatherings and introduce them to other brand community members; sponsorship managers present new sponsor at business events; sport club posts about new sponsors on social media; sport club presents new public transportation in their colors on social media;	This study
	Connecting	Facilitating and providing the connection of brand community members that were initially not connected yet	Sport clubs provides platform for sponsors or fans to get in touch with each other; sponsor connect other sponsors with each other; fan introduces two members of distinct fan groups with each other; providing apps or digital platforms for fans to connect with other fans;	This study
	Co-presenting	Engaging in shared behaviors between two or more brand community members to at least one additional member to structurally extend the brand community	Sponsors distribute goodies and flyers at the game; club organizes an autograph session with injured players; two sport clubs produce a joint offering or activity; sport club invites a player to write a personal blog or a sponsor to give a presentation about its brand at business events;	This study

al. (2019) that describe *empathizing* (as "showing support or understanding of other community members' feelings", p. 794) and *assisting* ("as helping other community members", p. 794). It appears that Zanini et al. (2019) differentiation between the two forms of engagement practices can be subsumed under what we would suggest as *empathizing* (cf. Grohs et al., 2020; Schau et al., 2009). Finally, we suggest articulating behavioral expectations among members within the community as a definition for *governing*. Several other studies have identified similar engagement practices that describe the communication and reinforcement of norms and rules such as *governing* in Schau et al (2009, p. 43; "articulating the behavior expectations … "; cf. Grohs et al., 2020), or in Seo and Jung (2016, p. 647; "the institutionalization of competitive gaming") and *regulating* as "providing rules and guidelines" (Zanini et al., 2019, p. 794).

For IM, we overall identified four engagement practices. The first, *informing & sharing*, includes disseminating and sharing knowledge and information related to the brand or its community. It subsumes the results of this study with earlier research that has described similar forms of engagement practices, particularly *exchanging* defined as "customers exchange unique information with other customers … " (Uhrich, 2014, p. 36) and *informing and discussing* described as "the transfer of information between two or more actors" (Stieler & Germelmann, 2018, p. 15). Furthermore, we found *intensifying* defined as interacting with other brand community members or externals (e.g., through friendship or rivalry) to increase excitement, which is in line with Uhrich (2014, p. 36; "customer create friendship or rivalry […] to increase excitement … "). Additionally, under IM we suggest subsuming established practices from Schau et al. (2009, pp. 43–44), specifically *evangelizing* (defined as "sharing the brand good news to inspire others, [for example, brand community members or externals to participate in the brand community]") and *justifying* (defined as "developing [and communicating] rationales for devoting time and effort to the brand [and its community]"; cf. Schau et al., 2009, p. 44).

For CE, we suggest including six forms of engagement practices. First, we identified forms of *staking* in various studies, for example, Schau et al. (2009) have described *staking* as "recognizing variance within the brand community … ", p. 44 while others like Uhrich (2014) suggested the practice of *associating and dissociating* described as "customers demonstrate […] their belonging […] and/or distinctiveness from particular groups … " (p. 35). Stieler and Germelmann (2018, p. 16) suggested *signaling* defined as "to show others something through symbols, gestures, behaviors or mere presence" and Zanini et al. (2019, p. 794) identified *ranking*, which means "members investments in the development of their status". Overall, these definitions can be subsumed within the engagement practice of *staking*, which we would define as recognizing variance within the brand community through associating or dissociating to particular groups. Furthermore, we identified Uhrich's (2014) *engaging and sharing* ("customers involve other supporters in their […] consumption experiences", p. 35) and Zanini et al. (2019) *celebrating* ("noting and commemorating milestones", p. 794), which could be described as specific forms of *documenting* ("detailing the brand relationship journey in a narrative way … ", Schau et al., 2009, p. 45). Thus, we include *documenting* as an engagement practice within CE defining it as detailing the brand relationship journey in a narrative way towards brand community members or externals. Additionally, our study provides evidence for the practice *appreciating*, which has also been identified in earlier research by Zanini et al. (2019, p. 794;

"display of thankfulness and gratitude to other members"). Finally, we identified *requesting* ("asking brand community members to engage beyond transactional exchange") in our data as a new practice for CE. *Milestoning* ("noting seminal events in brand ownership and consumption", p. 44) and *badging* ("translating milestones into symbols", both in Schau et al., 2009, p. 45) form the last two engagement practices in CE within our consolidated framework, which we did not identify in our study, however.

For BU (seven engagement practices), our data showed evidence for *organizing* (defined as providing assistance in organizing other brand community members), which extends the notion of *mingling* described as "specific online or offline interactions […] that can be seen in tweets that invite fans to meet before a match" (Zanini et al., 2019, pp. 794, 798). Additionally, we recognized *entertaining* from our data defined as using the brand and engaging with it beyond the core products and services as a new engagement practice within BU. We also found *commoditizing* defined as directing valenced behaviors at other brand community members or the brand itself. The engagement practice builds upon the notion of Schau et al. (2009, p. 46), who described *commoditizing* as "a valenced behavior […] directed at other members […] or at the firm", and particularly extends Zanini et al. (2019, p. 800) identified practice of *complaining* described as "when fans tweet [share] a negative message" (Zanini et al., 2019, p. 800). *Grooming* ("caring for the brand or systematizing optimal use patterns", Schau et al., 2009, p. 45) and *customizing* ("modifying the brand [offerings] to suit group-level or individual needs [of other brand community members]", Schau et al., 2009, p. 45) could be identified within our study as well. The practice *performing* (cf. Stieler & Germelmann, 2018), which we define as augmenting the core product or services of the brand through activities of brand community members relates to *competing*, which means "customers engage in contests with other […] customers" (Uhrich, 2014, p. 35) and *playing* as a "competitive form of gaming" (Seo & Jung, 2016, p. 643). Furthermore, *watching* as "[using the brand's core offerings by drawing on] tacit knowledge about […] the rules of competition in order to follow the happenings in the game" (Seo & Jung, 2016, p. 646) complements BU in the consolidated framework.

Finally, LI, the newly identified practice category with three inductively derived forms of engagement practices completes the consolidated framework. More specifically, the first engagement practice *presenting* is defined as showing and demonstrating new brand community members to other members of the brand community. The second engagement practice of LI *connecting* can be defined as facilitating and providing the connection of brand community members that were initially not connected yet. Finally, the third engagement practice *co-presenting* should be described as engaging in shared behaviors between two or more brand community members to at least one additional member to structurally extend the brand community.

Managerial implications

The present study has three implications for sport management practice. First, the study has shown that distinct digital EPs foster different engagement practices. Accordingly, sport managers should clarify their aims when using digital EPs and tailor the features according to their needs. Going further, they need to ensure that they consider how

different digital EPs (and apparently also physical EPs) foster engagement behaviors among their brand community (Buser et al., 2022). Sport club brands should foster the communities' vitality and the community members' identification. To do so, they should acknowledge the interconnectedness of engagement practices (Schau et al., 2009) and make sure to use the rippling effect of engagement practices to be more effective, e.g., by *requesting* practices that promote *documenting* or *commoditizing* practices. Fostering *documenting* alongside other engagement practices such as *evangelizing* are helping the sport club brands to be promoted by voluntary brand ambassadors sharing their experiences within the brand community on social media EPs. Sport club brands should make use of feedback mechanisms (*requesting*). This allows community members to voice their opinions and suggest improvements as forms of *commoditizing*, which increases their identification with the brand. Additionally, sport club brands should ensure that they offer strategies and initiatives in how community members could engage with the brand beyond its primary purpose (*grooming* and *entertaining*), which consequently should lead to higher satisfaction, increased attendance, brand exposure and merchandise sales (e.g., Stroebel et al., 2021). Finally, the study has shown that it could be valuable for sponsors to receive networking opportunities through an exclusive business app, which enhances collaboration and emotional bonds among sponsors (Buser et al., 2020).

Second, regarding the development of strong and vital brand communities, the sport club brand should ensure its role as brand owner by governing the digital EPs (i.e., institutional EPs; cf. Brand et al., 2023). They can engage in setting boundaries either through platform functionalities or through rules and social norms leading to certain engagement practices and preventing undesirable behavior. Furthermore, they should engage in both, fostering LI in order to expand the structural dimension of the brand community through increasing its size, scale and density as well as engaging in SN to socialize actual or new members with the predominant social norms and rules. In addition, sport brand community managers should be aware that brand community norms may change over time. They should involve stakeholders, in debating norm changes (e.g., Schmidt & Koenigstorfer, 2022).

Third, sport clubs must equip their employees (communication managers, community managers, brand managers) with the required knowledge and skills to ensure that they are able to develop measures that enable engagement practices.

Limitations and future research

The present study has limitations to be addressed. First, we focused on four digital EPs in two sport club brand communities and neglected any other EPs (sport venue, hospitality area, tokenization). To better understand the emergence of engagement practices, its role on the development of social norms and rules and the shaping of sport club brand communities, and to identify differences between digital and physical EP's (e.g., regarding the speed of information dissemination) it is necessary to study additional digital and physical EPs of sport club brands within the same study. Second, this study is the first to solely investigate engagement practices on digital EPs in sport club brand communities using a network-oriented approach, so it was appropriate to apply a qualitative study design. However, future research should quantify engagement behaviors and test for constraints on how engagement could be fostered on different EPs. In this context, it

would be highly valuable for sport management practice to understand how to trigger engagement practices to enforce or change prevailing norms and rules. Third, the study only focuses on institutionalized EPs while neglecting emergent EPs within sport brand communities. Accordingly, it may fall short in understanding how sport brand communities are able to govern themselves by social norms and rules within subgroups of brand communities (e.g., Katz & Heere, 2013). Thus, future research should consider emergent (digital) EPs to deepen the understanding of the dynamics in sport brand communities. Finally, the study follows a network-oriented approach by focusing on engagement practices rather than mere engagement behavior. Therefore, it claims to study a limited network of actors' engagement behavior driven by social norms and rules and enforcing or changing social norms and rules (Schatzki, 1996). However, the scope of the study is limited by the data collection, which does not collect primary data from all the actors involved within the study design. Including further actors in primary data collection rather than only interpreting and deriving engagement practices from observations could have led to engagement practices. Accordingly, future research applying a network-oriented approach should acknowledge the integration of primary research data from additional actors.

Conclusion

To conclude, the present study is among the first to study engagement practices on digital EPs of sport club brand communities applying a network-oriented approach. We studied and identified how digital EPs foster different engagement practices among sport club brand communities and how these engagement practices can enforce social norms and rules. In line with McDonald et al. (2022) describing digital EPs as an "exciting vehicle for [engagement behavior]" (p. 296), our results indicate that digital EPs allow sport club brand communities to increase the number of interactions, the speed of information distribution, and the complexity of interactions. The results show evidence that different digital EPs foster varying forms of engagement practices. In addition, based on our results and comparison with previous literature, we derived a consolidated framework of 23 engagement practices in sport brand communities (five categories). Finally, we derived implications for sport management practice on how practitioners can use digital EPs to foster engagement practices to shape their brand communities.

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ORCID

Pascal Stegmann http://orcid.org/0000-0002-8948-2186

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