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We love to hate them! Social media-based anti-brand communities in professional football

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Executive Summary

Social media have promoted anti-brand communities, which are based on common aversions to brands (Hollenbeck & Zinkhan, 2006). This study contributes to previous research by investigating this phenomenon in the context of social networking sites. In particular, the researchers examine the nature of social media-based anti-brand communities opposing a professional football team and consider the effects on the team sports brand in question. Anti-brand communities are of particular importance for sport teams, as spectators deliberately distance themselves from other brands and their fans to enhance their enjoyment of sports-related activities (Uhrich, 2014). Moreover, anti-brand activism is fostered by football's social components and its important role in the everyday lives of many fans who are regularly highly involved (Sutton, McDonald, Milne, & Cimperman, 1997).

The researchers conducted a qualitative study of Facebook-based anti-brand communities that oppose FC Bayern München. The netnographic study shows that oppositional brand loyalty, "schadenfreude" and the desire to dissociate from a brand are important drivers in football-related anti-brand communities. Negative posts, media and comments lead to a reinterpretation of brand meaning and the formation of what has been referred to as a doppelgänger image (Thompson, Rindfleisch, & Arsel, 2006). The ability to like, share and comment reinforces the interaction by deepening and spreading negative brand-related communication. In doing so, anti-brand community members negatively influence brand meaning and generate negative perceptions of the sports team within the community and among other users of the social network who witness the negative interaction.

This research establishes the relevance of social media-based anti-brand communities for sports brands as we demonstrate that this phenomenon can really harm a rival brand. Therefore, the researchers provide recommendations for team sport brands on how to deal with this phenomenon. In particular, managers of football teams are advised to monitor anti-

brand activism on the internet to prevent damage to their brand. In so doing, they can obtain useful information on the weaknesses of their brand, which may help them take actions to strengthen their own brand.

Abstract

This research investigates social media-based anti-brand communities and their effects on the sports team brand in question. A netnographic study of Facebook-based anti-brand communities that oppose a professional football team reveals characteristics and drivers of this phenomenon. The research further identifies co-destructive behaviours of anti-brand community members that harm the brand. However, the findings also reveal that anti-brand communities may play a positive role in sport, as they strengthen the relationship between fans of the opposed brand and this brand and foster rivalry among football fans. Recommendations are made for team sport brands.

Introduction

In recent years, consumers have been increasingly using social media to create, share and discuss brand-related contents (Laroche, Habibi, & Richard, 2013). Websites that are accessible all over the world have created new opportunities to express consumer-brand relationships, and consumers regularly use brands to convey meaning to website visitors (Schau & Gilly, 2003). This development facilitates the creation of brand-related consumer networks such as brand communities, which are built around common favourable interests in specific brands (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). Given that sport teams are among the most powerful brand communities in society (Heere & James, 2007), it is not surprising that many strong brand communities focus on sport brands. Empirical studies in the sports context demonstrate the positive effects of brand communities on various brand objectives, including participation, attendance, purchase, and positive word-of-mouth (e.g., Hedlund, 2014; Jahn & Kunz, 2012; Pongsakornrungsilp & Schroeder, 2011; Woolf, Heere, & Walker, 2013). For this reason, football fan communities are considered 'as platforms for value co-creation' (Pongsakornrungsilp & Schroeder, 2011) and marketers thus try to build and maintain brand communities (Jahn & Kunz, 2012).

However, mass use of the internet has also amplified negative brand-related communication. In particular, online interaction has facilitated the emergence of anti-brand communities that are based on common aversions to brands (Hollenbeck & Zinkhan, 2006). Researchers now highlight the facilitative role of the internet in anti-consumption and emphasize that online interaction has created an empowered consumer in terms of access to information, instant publishing power and an active audience (Bailey, 2004; Krishnamurthy & Kucuk, 2009; Kucuk, 2008). Indeed, the more easily opponents of a brand can unite, the more powerful they become (Fournier & Avery, 2011). Therefore, the rise of the internet has strengthened anti-brand activism (Bailey, 2004; Hollenbeck & Zinkhan, 2010), and social

media currently provides an even more powerful platform. Simultaneously, mobile technologies increasingly integrate online and offline contexts (Weijo, Hietanen, & Mattila, 2014).

Current social movements, combined with the above-described possibilities of the internet, make these communities extremely powerful and relevant (Krishnamurthy & Kucuk, 2009). Although anti-brand communities can be found for many brands in all types of businesses, (e.g. Wal-Mart, Apple, Procter & Gamble, and Shell), the context of team sports has several distinctive features that make it especially vulnerable. First, sport is characterized by social components, public consumption and interactive components which increase the potential for brand-related communication (Uhrich, 2014). Second, sport fans are highly involved with the sport, and identify with the teams, and sport plays an important role in the everyday lives of many fans (Sutton et al., 1997). Third, group-building processes are particularly likely for sport brands, since football is characterized by brands with a strong and well-defined image, either very low or very high market shares, and long-lasting traditions. Fourth, team sports are not only characterized by competition, but by an intense rivalry that often develops over a long period of time and goes beyond the usual animosity between fans of different teams (Kilduff, Elfenbein, & Staw, 2010). Spectators deliberately distance themselves from other brands and their fans, so as to enhance their enjoyment of sports-related activities (Uhrich, 2014). Being part of an anti-brand community allows fans to distance themselves from their rivals beyond the traditional offline realm of fandom, which is limited to non-match days. Therefore, team sport brands are particularly at risk of facing anti-brand communities and not surprisingly, there are many examples of small and large-scale online communities that oppose major team sport brands, such as Real Madrid, Chelsea FC, Borussia Dortmund, and Inter Milan.

Because of the rapid advance of social media and mobile technologies, social media

platforms such as Facebook have increasingly been used to develop anti-brand movements. At present, 1.49 billion people actively use Facebook each month, making it the world's largest social media platform. This demonstrates the potential for all kinds of consumer-brand interaction in social media. Despite this, emerging research on anti-brand communities has so far only investigated online anti-brand communities that have operated via traditional websites (Bailey, 2004; Hollenbeck & Zinkhan, 2006; Krishnamurthy & Kucuk, 2009). This is a significant shortcoming. Since user interaction on social networking sites differs significantly from traditional online communities (Jahn & Kunz, 2012), previous findings may not accurately reflect the nature of social media-based anti-brand communities or their impact on brand meaning (Escalas & Bettman, 2005). In contrast to traditional anti-brand websites, social media-based anti-brand communities are embedded in a larger network of relationships between social media users, and communities are becoming delocalized (Weijo et al., 2014). Hence, brand-related interaction among social media users is not limited to members of the community and also affects the consumer-brand relationships of other social media users and regularly even spills over to other channels and mass media. As a result, scholars are now calling for a closer look at social media-based anti-brand communities, highlighting a lack of knowledge on the potential negative effects of social media (Laroche et al., 2013). Moreover, they see a need for companies to gain a better understanding of this phenomenon, especially in the light of increasing consumer power (Fournier & Avery, 2011).

In this article, we aim to close this research gap by studying the nature and consequences of social media-based anti-brand communities that oppose a particular professional sport team. Accordingly, we present a netnographic study that investigates the principles of two Facebook-based anti-brand communities that oppose a German Bundesliga team. Subsequently, we discuss the findings of this research and derive implications for sport management.

Conceptual framework

Co-creation of sport brands

Our research applies the common notion that sport teams are considered brands that many fans spend time and money supporting (Hickman & Ward, 2007). They thus convey meanings and values that enable fans to develop and communicate their identity and distinguish themselves from others (Escalas & Bettman, 2005). People select brands based on long-term, emotional relationships with them (Fournier, 1998). This is even more important in the context of team sports, as loyalty to a club brand ensures enduring fan loyalty, even in hard times for the team (Gladden & Funk, 2001).

However, sport team brands not only influence their fans' relationships with the sports club, they are also an important means through which fans can interact with other fans, including those of the rival team (Underwood, Bond, & Baer, 2001). Social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) provides an important theoretical framework for explaining the corresponding psychological processes and group cohesion. These insights have led to extensive research on brand communities, which have been defined as 'specialized, non-geographically bound communities, based on a structured set of social relationships among admirers of a brand' (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001, p. 412).

However, recent publications have confirmed the need to take a closer look at brand-related interaction that opposes a brand; they have emphasized that communities built around a specific brand do not necessarily have to be based on *positive* brand associations (Ewing, Wagstaff, & Powell, 2011; Hollenbeck & Zinkhan, 2006; Kucuk, 2008). Rather, brands may also symbolize negative perceptions associated with organizations. Hollenbeck and Zinkhan (2006, p. 479) thus refer to the antithesis of a brand community namely 'anti-brand communities', i.e. communities which are based on common aversions to brands. This kind of community shares many characteristics with brand communities (e.g., consciousness of kind,

shared rituals and traditions, and a sense of moral responsibility) (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). However, rather than favourable feelings serving as the common denominator, a joint aversion to a brand serves as the central link between community members.

Anti-consumption, brand avoidance, and anti-brand activism

Emerging research on anti-brand communities has so far focused on the reasons why such communities generally take shape, and on the impact they have on the opposed brand (e. g., Hollenbeck & Zinkhan, 2006; Kucuk, 2008). In many cases, anti-brand communities develop as a result of resistance against global or dominant brands, or of dissatisfaction with a brand (Hollenbeck & Zinkhan, 2010). In contrast to consumer boycotts, where activists are generally willing to resume their relationship with a brand after their requests have been granted (Klein, Smith, & John, 2004), anti-brand activists are permanently committed on principle to rejecting the opposed brand (Sandıkcı & Ekici, 2009).

The establishment of anti-brand communities can be viewed as an instance of the broader movement of anti-consumption, which has gained significant attention in the literature in recent years (Iyer & Muncy, 2009; Lee, Motion, & Conroy, 2009). Whereas some anti-consumers generally want to reduce their overall level of consumption, some are particularly interested in reducing the consumption of specific brands (Iyer & Muncy, 2009). This so-called brand avoidance, a situation in which 'consumers deliberately choose to reject a brand' (Lee et al., 2009, p. 170), may lead to membership of an anti-brand community. Lee, Motion and Conroy (2009) draw a distinction between experiential, moral and identity brand avoidance. Identity avoidance, which occurs when the brand image is incompatible with the individual's identity, is closely connected to aspects of the social identity theory mentioned above. It is particularly important in the context of sports-team-related anti-brand communities. Moreover, moral avoidance, or ideological incompatibility, applies to a large number of sport fans, who, for instance, can justify their opposition to a certain team on the

basis of local patriotism or resistance to the dominance of the opposing team.

Oppositional brand loyalty

Moreover, 'oppositional brand loyalty' strengthens anti-brand communities that oppose sport teams (Muniz & Hamer, 2001). This phenomenon covers the widely observed phenomenon that sport fans generally define their favourite club and sense of belonging, in terms of their perceptions of competing clubs. In particular, fans playfully express their loyalty to a specific club by opposing the rival club. As a result, oppositional brand loyalty strengthens individual loyalty to their favourite club, but also constitutes an important element of the coherence of brand communities (Thompson & Sinha, 2008).

Hickman and Ward (2007) study this 'dark side' of the brand community by using the example of two college football teams. The authors demonstrate that identifying with a brand community provokes negative views not only of rival brands, but also of their users. Moreover, the term 'trash talk' refers to negative communication about a rival brand that is provoked by a sense of inter-group rivalry. This is reinforced by intergroup stereotyping, which emphasizes the negative aspects of out-groups and leads to active taunting. Finally, the authors reveal that the community members (of both a sports community and an automotive community) experience a sense of pleasure at the rival's misfortune and refer to this community-strengthening phenomenon with the German term 'schadenfreude'.

Re-interpretation of brand meaning

Anti-brand communities are generally characterized by high levels of interaction related to the opposing brand. As a consequence, members influence and negotiate the meaning of the rival brand in brand-related discourses, joint activities and interpretation (Hollenbeck & Zinkhan, 2010). Hollenbeck and Zinkhan (2010) emphasize that learning processes as the fundamentals of social movements in anti-brand communities relate mainly to (1) counterfactual thinking, (2) discursive storytelling and (3) non-compulsory observation.

Anti-brand communities thus influence the brand's personality and its role, both within the anti-brand community and in society. These findings are in line with a service-dominant logic perspective of brands, which assumes that brand meanings are interpreted and produced by many actors (Pongsakornrungsilp & Schroeder, 2011).

In addition, mainly based on social identity theory, extant research has studied the role of dissociative out-groups, i.e. those with which a person wants to avoid being associated (White, Argo, & Sengupta, 2012). Researchers point out that socially constructed values, beliefs and definitions of brands can be even more important in conveying meaning for the brand than the firm's own marketing efforts (Escalas & Bettman, 2005).

Empirical study

Method and research context

Taking the above theoretical foundations and previous findings into account, our empirical research aimed at gaining a comprehensive understanding of social media-based anti-brand communities in the context of team sports, in particular football. This includes how individuals engage in an anti-brand community so as to oppose a sports team, and describes the consequences of the observed phenomena. Following key principles of qualitative research, a qualitative study that focuses on in-depth insights into the phenomenon, based on reasonable coverage was deemed appropriate (Altheide, 1987). In particular, we made use of techniques known from the netnographic approach (Kozinets, 2002) and analysed computer-mediated communications of online anti-brand communities. Netnography has been shown to be especially useful for experiencing and studying online environments (Ewing et al., 2011).

As proposed by Kozinets (2002), once we had formulated our research questions, we started with an initial keyword search for relevant anti-brand communities on Facebook. In a multi-stage process, we evaluated anti-brand communities that opposed certain sports brands on the basis of activity, number of likes and comments, and duration of existence. We then

observed nine communities for a period of two months. At the end of this observation phase, we asked the administrators of the five most relevant and representative communities for permission to participate in their communities and to conduct a netnographic study. Two administrators agreed to support our research. Both communities oppose the German Bundesliga club FC Bayern München (FCB). However, given the results of our initial screening of Facebook-based anti-brand communities, we consider both these communities to be representative of most Facebook-based anti-brand communities that oppose a specific football team.

We studied two Facebook-based anti-brand communities over a period of six months. More specifically, we conducted continuous participant-observation fieldwork in the communities called 'Click 'like' if you think FC Bayern is a shit club' (C1) and 'Anti Bayern!!!' (C2) (see Figure 1). Data collection was conducted mainly in the first half of 2012, which was the second half of the Bundesliga 2011/2012 season, in which Bayern München finished second. The researchers confined themselves to participating passively and simply observing both communities, in order to avoid any bias that might arise from actively commenting on or liking posts. In addition, we also analysed previous interaction, starting from when each of the communities were founded, in June 2011 (C1) and May 2010 (C2).

The communities unify opponents of FCB and enable them to live out their strong contempt for the club out by posting and sharing posts, comments and other disparaging media about FCB. Each of the anti-brand sites has several thousand members from all over Germany, indicating that regular communication among the members (e.g. daily interactions) mainly takes place online. Moreover, unlike some 'closed' anti-brand communities on Facebook or most traditional online communities, where administrators or members of the group control access to the community, both anti-brand pages we studied are open and publicly accessible. Nevertheless, the social media websites have administrators who organize

the community and initiate discussions. Our qualitative approach thus also included semi-structured interviews with administrators of the anti-FCB Facebook pages. These were used to complement and validate the findings retrieved from observing the anti-brand communities' Facebook pages. This approach follows Kozinets' (2002) call for triangulation of "netnographic" data through interviews by making use of administrators as key informants for qualitative research (Krishnamurthy & Kucuk, 2009).

- Insert Figure 1 around here -

Findings

Similarities to brand communities

Our findings demonstrate how Facebook-based anti-brand communities that oppose a professional sports team share many of the characteristics of brand communities and anti-brand communities outside the sports context and social media. In both anti-FCB communities, members share their aversion to the team with anti-brand discussions, jokes, photos, etc. The conversations among members clearly reveal that the anti-brand community is characterized by consciousness of kind, shared rituals and traditions, and a sense of moral responsibility. However, we observed that social cohesion of individuals does not seem to be as strong as in anti-brand communities outside the sports context, as members not only jointly oppose the brand, but also simultaneously support several other teams that also compete with each other. Like most communities in social media, the anti-FCB communities in our sample have flat hierarchies. However, the administrators play a leading role in the community. Whereas 'likers', Facebook users who simply click the 'like' button of a specific post, are not remembered by users of the anti-brand community, the administrators are indeed well perceived and kept in the user's memory. They initiate discussions and their posts regularly receive more replies and likes than member posts.

Rivalry and oppositional brand loyalty

The main motivations for participating in both anti-brand communities originate from rivalry with the team and its fans (out-group). Furthermore, the netnographic analysis shows that members of both communities are driven by identity and moral avoidance (Lee et al., 2009) of the opposed brand. This is particularly attributed to FCB's transfers that aim to damage competitors, the arrogance of FCB players and officials, geographic issues, and a general aversion to the mainstream FCB brand.

Participants aim to provoke and damage the opposed brand and to glorify the in-group (i.e. members of the anti-brand community). An important part of their social identity is based on the anti-FCB identity derived from the anti-brand community. Throughout the interaction, social comparisons with the FCB fans out-group can be found, which supports the theoretical consideration of social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). In particular, members of the online anti-brand community use dimensions in which the in-group is superior to the out-group. They use stereotyping to attribute negative characteristics to the out-group. This raises both the status of anti-brand community members and group cohesion.

However, our qualitative analysis of both anti-brand communities also illustrates a dilemma among community members. In the case of international matches, some members of the national FCB out-group become members of the 'German football' in-group. Members of the anti-FCB community justify this with FCB's role as representative of Germany and its relevance for the UEFA season country coefficient rankings. The following posts demonstrate that some rival fans are ambivalent about the brand they are generally opposed to if the rival team plays international matches:

02/22-KA: For once, a Bayern victory would be a good thing for Germany and the

*   rankings :-).*

02/22-ST: When they play internationally, I support Bayern. [2 Likes]

02/22-ST: For international matches, I make an exception and support Bayern.

[2 Likes]

This phenomenon puts the anti-FCB communities at risk, both by decreasing the motivation to be against the club and by reducing the cohesion of community members. However, the majority of community members oppose FCB even for international matches. Thus, negative communication about the rival brand also prevails in this context.

Online interactions also reveal the relevance of oppositional brand loyalty (S. A. Thompson & Sinha, 2008), which unites consumers regardless of the (different) brands they support. Likewise, we observed that FCB fans increasingly sought confrontation with members of the anti-brand communities after their team won. They commented on anti-brand site posts site using standard slogans such as '*Your envy just shows that we're the best'* or *'Your hatred as a source of pride.'* Although this was intended to harm and mock the anti-FCB communities, it actually vitalized them and contributed to their cohesion. Our findings support Heider's (1958) balance theory and the empirical work of Aronson and Cope (1968), which demonstrated the importance of joint anti-brands ('my enemy's enemy is my friend'). Moreover, the observed contacts between members of the anti-FCB community and FCB fans are essential for the community, as the out-group's shared perception strengthens the joint social identity of the 'anti-FCB fan'.

01/19-DS: ANTI-BAYERN FANS UNITE...Your club or team doesn't matter. As long as

you're AGAINST BAYERN!! [12 Likes]

09/07-SB: At least we all have something in common!!! We all hate Bayern [8 Likes]

01/23-FL: I never root for those dirt bags, no matter where they play! I'm a club fan and

a fan of any team that plays against Bayern! [1 Likes]

Despite this shared animosity toward FCB and its fans, this member interaction clearly reveals the profound divisions among the members that are the result of their strong

identification with different, rival teams. A thread dealing with feedback for the administrators shows this:

01/02-FR: *Ideally, the other teams here in the group wouldn't fight with each other. [13 Likes]*

01/02-RC.   *@felix: No fighting?! So should Dortmund and Schalke fans send each other chocolates? Should the scumbags [FC St. Pauli fans] and the real Hamburg fans have a love fest?...it's never been that way, and it never will be. And that's a good thing! [8 Likes]*

01/02-JW: *Kick people out for insulting other people's clubs. This is anti-Bayern. It's not anti-werder, anti-schalke, or anti-anything else. [2 Likes]*

That the members of both anti-FCB communities are made up of sport fans from rival Bundesliga clubs which unite, shows the enormous strength of their animosity toward the FCB brand. Interviews with administrators of the communities further revealed that conflicts between members supporting rivalling teams rarely occur. However, in the event of conflicts, the administrators try to calm members down by posting reprimands, deleting posts, or barring users from the communities.

Glorifying the in-group and bashing the out-group

Interaction on the anti-brand websites reveals that members of the anti-brand communities explicitly try to dissociate themselves from FCB fans, as they consider themselves to be true football fans with rituals, traditions and absolute loyalty toward their clubs. In contrast, fans of FCB are described in a disparaging manner as supporters whose loyalty can be reduced to FCB's wins. This means that FCB fans are considered as basking in reflected glory (BIRGing) (Cialdini et al., 1976) and cutting out reflected failures (CORFing) (Wann & Branscombe, 1990).

C1-01/07:   *Football is passionate, a fight, the will to achieve something as a team, to*

stick together through thick and thin, fans and a team, an electrifying

atmosphere. All of THAT is football. And that's exactly what you don't have.

You might have money and expensive players. You've got more records than

any other team. You think you're cool. Well good for you. We don't need any

of it! [19 Comments – 189 Likes]

03/11-CS: They're all fair-weather fans: When the team wins, they all say 'WE won.'

When they lose, it's 'THEY lost again'. Those are the Bayern fans. What a

complete lack of pride. [4 Likes]

03/11-LS: Bloody Bavarians. They're all just fair-weather fans. Bayern doesn't have any

fans, just spectators.

While glorifying the in-group and bashing the out-group is common in anti-brand

communities, we see an important difference between members of anti-brand communities

related to team sports and conventional anti-brand activists: the latter usually try to convince

the fans of rival brands of their own position, and members of the anti-FCB communities do

not reveal this motivation. Rather, they prefer to criticise the FCB fans for their egocentric,

benefit-oriented manner, thereby clearly dissociating themselves from FCB fans (Escalas,

2004).

Schadenfreude

Considering that FCB has been very successful in recent years, the majority of fans of

other Bundesliga teams clearly consider FCB superior to their favourite clubs, and this has a

negative effect on their self-confidence. However, anti-FCB community members try to

compensate for this by experiencing the positive emotion of schadenfreude, a German term

denoting pleasure at another's misfortune (Hickman & Ward, 2007). Confirming previous

research outside the context of anti-brand communities (Dalakas & Melancon, 2012; Hickman

& Ward, 2007), our netnographic analysis revealed that schadenfreude plays an important role

for some sport fans. In particular, social media features are used to express this emotion. For example, users call for 'likes' when announcing the loss of a rival team.

C2-03/03:   *How many likes is this going to get: Leverkusen 2. Bayern 0. [462 Likes]*

03/03-VK: *YESSSS! If BVB wins, they'll have a 7-point lead on Bayern and Hoeneß, [former president of FCB] and Heynkes [Jupp Heynckes, former FCB trainer]. Hahahaha! [3 Likes]*

03/03-MR: *Too bad you can only click the like button once!!! [9 Likes]*

03/03-PE: *I always love it when Bayer 04 wins, but the victory is even sweeter when it's against Bayern ;). [1 Likes]*

Some members even explicitly state that something would be missing if FCB did not exist, as there would be no team to hate, and no reason to feel schadenfreude. Moreover, in light of FCB's major achievements in recent years, it is important to note that schadenfreude is not limited to the team's athletic performance. Rather, anti-FCB communities clearly illustrate that community members also experience positive emotions as a result of other club-related issues, such as the criminal prosecution of players or managers or other negative headlines about the club.

C2-03/17:   *Who likes this sentence: football would be better off without Bayern. [3 Shared – 20 Comments – 300 Likes]*

03/17-SK: *Hmmm....no....I don't agree ....football is GREAT when THEY lose... and they couldn't lose if they didn't exist. ;-). [3 Likes]*

03/17-MR: *No way!!! If they didn't exist, there wouldn't be a team I could hate so much and can laugh at when they lose against bad teams!!!!!!*

Besides expressing schadenfreude on the website, both anti-FCB communities occasionally organize activities against the team they oppose. However, this activism, which is driven mainly by the administrators, is limited to the virtual world. It consists of spam

attacks, concerted negative posts and criticism on pages positively related to FCB, and has a playful character. These activities are often a reaction to the previous spam attacks of FCB fans toward the anti-FCB community, or are intended to spark reactions from FCB fans. They can be seen as a provocation of the out-group, rather than an attempt to change the balance of power.

Influence on brand meaning

Our findings demonstrate how the anti-brand community influences the opposing brand, whether positively or negatively, as well as the way in which it is interpreted. The meanings, relations and ideologies that members of the anti-brand community form around FCB are completely different from those which FCB has intended. This confirms previous findings which show that the brand has little control over socially constructed, co-created brand meaning in communities (Escalas & Bettman, 2005; Hollenbeck & Zinkhan, 2010). In line with Hollenbeck and Zinkhan (2010), community interaction is characterized by counterfactual thinking and discursive storytelling. In particular, most members describe FCB in a manner that is completely contradictory to the FCB's brand communication and that of its supplier adidas. For example, anti-FCB community members describe FCB as 'arrogant', 'reckless', 'unfriendly' and 'commercialized', whereas the brand's communication aims to create an image of a 'successful' and 'self-confident' brand that is 'rich in tradition'.

This was reflected in comments in the anti-FCB communities about an interview with FCB captain Philipp Lahm after the team lost Germany's cup final:

C1-05/12:   *Philipp Lahm, you cry baby! 'Bayern was clearly the better team'. Yeah,*
              right. You clearly were, because you lost 5-2. You morons! [50 Shared –
              86 Comments - 1.237 Likes]

05/12-MB: *Now he'll say that it was the grass's fault. :D [24 Likes]*

05/12-RH: *Could you be any more arrogant? :DD [3 Likes]*

05/12-SG: *So typical. Bayern are such sore losers [1 Likes]*

05/12-ML: *Exactly! Classic Ph. Lahm, classic Bavarian pretension. That kind of arrogance makes me sick. [5 Likes]*

Posts from anti-brand community members are regularly foul-mouthed and members use offensive language in order to express their extreme views:

12/20-NB: *It's always the same with these arseholes - so many things make them unappealing. - And as a Vfl fan, I should know. Especially when they beat us. [20 Likes]*

05/02-JS: *I don't care how often your red pigs have won the title!*

Shared pictures opposing FCB and showing a half-empty stadium with the words 'No Fans – no atmosphere – FCB' also illustrate counterfactual thinking within the anti-brand community, as the club's home games are at 99.9 per cent capacity.

30/12-DW: *How is it possible that the Bavarians have such big mouths, but the atmosphere at their Arrogancearena [a derogatory reference to FCB's home stadium, the Allianzarena] is about as much fun as a funeral? It just doesn't make sense. [85 Likes]*

Moreover, anti-FCB fans question the success of the team, asserting that they're generally just lucky:

12/20-NH: *F*cking w*nkers! They're always winning at the last minute! It's like they can't do anything else! Twats! [35 Comments – 285 Likes]*

12/20-CH: *If every game was only 85 minutes long, they'd be in the regional league:D [15 Likes]*

12/20-DL: *Bayern's always lucky. The ref whistles the same way at every match, and that's how they keep winning..*

We also observe that discursive storytelling plays an important role in the anti-brand

websites and leads to a reinterpretation of brand meaning. Members substantiate their statements about FCB and its fans by providing anecdotes and experiences from their personal environment that reinforce stereotypes.

C1-05/08:   *I have three Bayern 'fans' in my class (boys) and not one of them has been to the stadium this season. Just goes to show you what kind of fans this club has.... [2 Shared - 58 Comments – 315 Likes]*

The role of humour, jokes, and graphics

Moreover, humour and jokes about the opposed brand are an important aspect of anti-FCB communities, and in a number of ways. First, they are entertaining and contribute to the socialization of the community. Second, they convey negative brand meaning both to members of the anti-brand communities and to other internet users who witness the mocking on the internet.

04/15-LR: *Question. How do Bayern fans drink their tea? That's right. WITHOUT A CUP...10 Likes]*

12/08-MB: *What do you get when you cross a Bayern player with a pig? Nothing. There are things even pigs wouldn't do. [7 Likes]*

12/08-RH: *What's the difference between a talented Bayern player and Bigfoot? People have seen Bigfoot before. XD [3 Likes]*

Besides written communication among the anti-brand activists, user-generated graphics, pictures and products are important means of conveying FCB brand meanings. These often originate with the explicit wishes of community members for products that help them demonstrate their disdain for FCB. This is illustrated by reactions to an anti-FCB graphic (see top-right of Figure 2), which was shared 122 times and received 34 comments as well as 843 likes.

- Insert Figure 2 around here -

05/14-SW: You should make stickers out of it :D [3 Likes]

05/14-TS: Stickers are a good idea. I want one too...[4 Likes]

05/14-JW: You have to produce stickers: they'll be a huge hit in Germany!!!!!!!!!!!!

[1 Like]

05/14-JU: Make stadium banners, patches, and stickers. They'll be so popular that you

won't be able to produce them fast enough. [1 Like]

These anti-FCB graphics regularly include the brand's logo either in its original form, or in a modified version. Such graphics are particularly effective in influencing the FCB brand's meaning for members of the community, but also for non-members who are exposed to the graphics on Facebook, third-party webpages or via e-mail.

Involvement of sponsors

Moreover, the disparaging images often include not only FCB's logo, but also those of other brands or objects related to those brands. This means that, although members of the anti-brand communities have not explicitly offended the sponsors of FCB via community interaction, the anti-FCB contents also affect organizations related to FCB, including sponsors and suppliers. For example, anti-FCB activities shared a picture showing a burning jersey of FCB with the logo of Bayern München's main sponsor 'Deutsche Telekom' (see Figure 3). Another user-generated picture modified the sponsor's advertisement that showed FCBs players using mobile phones, adding the derogatory statement 'All girls?'. We further observed images that had a negative impact on other major FCB sponsors. In particular, several pictures depicted the FCB stadium as a symbol of the club, and the negative images could thus also be associated to Allianz, which owns the naming rights to the stadium. The company's logo was visible in some of the pictures. Hence, brands that are the focus of anti-brand communities are faced with negative brand communication that damages both their brands as well as their sponsors.

- Insert Figure 3 around here -

Discussion and implications

Our findings clearly demonstrate the relevance of social media-based anti-brand communities for both football teams and their sponsors. We identify motivations as to why their members oppose a brand, and identify behavioural manifestations that harm the opposed brand and even the affiliated actors (e.g. fans, sponsors). As with anti-brand communities in general, Facebook-based communities that oppose a football team are driven by rivalry, oppositional brand loyalty and schadenfreude. In line with social identity theory, the cohesion in anti-brand communities plays an important role in fulfilling self-definitional needs by opposing a specific brand. The community members share media that harm the opposed brand and its fans. They therefore glorify the in-group (community members) and mock the out-group (FCB and its fans). Hence, the creation of anti-brand communities is a customer-to-customer value co-creation practice (Uhrich, 2014; Woratschek, Horbel, & Popp, 2014) that is inherent in football fan behaviour. This gives rise to the assumption that this phenomenon is of particular importance in the football context.

The findings reveal the particular relevance of social media-specific characteristics, such as the opportunity to like, share and comment on posts that help to spread and deepen interaction within the community and beyond. In contrast to communities organized on a stand-alone website, the open nature of social media and the exchanges among a diverse group of users (not necessarily opponents of the brand) mean that brand-related communications are disseminated to a much broader audience, even beyond the anti-brand community. Hence, our research extends previous studies which indicate the delocalization of communities (Kozinets, 2010; Weijo et al., 2014).

By sharing comments, links, pictures and other media mocking the brand being opposed, the communities co-create brand meaning. Consequently, anti-brand communities in

general compete with the brand management's attempts to strengthen the brand and load it with emotional meaning. In particular, members of the anti-brand community disseminate negative brand meaning within the community and among other users of the social network who witness the negative interaction. In doing so, anti-brand communities contribute to the emergence of a 'doppelgänger brand image' which has been defined as 'a family of disparaging images and meanings about a brand that circulate throughout popular culture by a loosely organized network of consumers, anti-brand activists, bloggers, and opinion leaders in the news and entertainment media' (Thompson et al., 2006, p. 50). In social-media based anti-brand communities, doppelgänger images develop from brand-focused parodies and criticism that plague the original brand and can add up to a coherent alternate brand image. Thus, the anti-brand community introduces a competing set of brand meanings that can potentially influence consumer attitudes and behaviour (Giesler, 2012). In contrast to conventional brand management theory, which generally assumes that consumers avoid brands with negative associations, our empirical findings on two FCB communities demonstrates that their members contribute to doppelgänger images in order to reinforce their self-identity (Thompson et al., 2006). These countervailing images and meanings influence the perception of the opposed brand, both for members of an anti-brand community and consumers in general. They undermine the identity value the brand gives to consumers and therefore may be considered as 'value co-destruction' (Stieler, Weismann, & Germelmann, 2014). However, in line with research on the role of a doppelgänger brand image, we propose that rival fans are not only a threat that should be monitored and managed, but that anti-brand communities can also benefit a brand by providing early warnings and information that can be used to strengthen it. For example, members of the anti-brand communities analysed in our empirical study repeatedly criticised the atmosphere in the Bayern München stadium, which could be considered a wake-up call to club managers to make improvements. Therefore, anti-brand

communities may play a dual role, as they not only threaten the opposed sport brands, but also provide helpful information.

Moreover, our findings demonstrate that they also may serve as a means strengthening both rival fan relationships with their favourite team and the opposed team fan relationships with their team. In particular, anti-brand communities are not only not used by opponents of the club, but also by fans from the opposed club, who post and reply in the anti-brand community, thereby expressing their support of the opposed team and reinforcing their relationship with it. Hence, anti-brand communities can be seen as an important means of fostering rivalry and as a crucial source of motivation for fans in team sport. Particularly in times of increasing regulations and tighter security guidelines within and around the stadia which constrain the fans' expressions of support and rivalry (Stieler et al., 2014), social media is the perfect alternative or complementary place to live out fandom and rivalry. In contrast to being part of a highly standardized experience in the stadium in which the football association, clubs, and police dominate the hardcore fans, social media offers an open platform for expressing things they are no longer allowed to express in the stadium. Therefore, anti-brand communities seem to be a particularly valuable, unrestricted platform for value co-creation in football.

Given the both negative and positive consequences of social media-based anti-brand communities and the ever growing number of social media users, brand managers must be aware of this phenomenon. Our findings suggest that team sport brands should monitor anti-brand activism on the internet to gain insights that can be used for brand management purposes. As anti-brand interaction often includes information on the weaknesses of opposed brand, brands should pay attention to this and make the necessary improvements and changes. In so doing, they can turn co-destructive behaviour into value co-creation for the benefit of the brand.

Particularly in the context of sports, anti-brand communities can be considered as a double-edged sword, as they not only threaten the opposed sport brands, but also serve as a means of strengthening both rival fans' relationship with their favourite team and the opposed team's fans relationship with *their* team. Spectators deliberately distance themselves from other brands and their fans to enhance their enjoyment of sports-related activities (Uhrich, 2014). Thus, being part of a social media-based anti-brand community constitutes for some fans an important aspect of their fandom, as they are able to distance themselves from their rivals beyond the traditional offline realm of fandom, which is usually limited to non-match days. Given these positive effects of anti-brand communities on supporters of the opposed brand, football teams are advised to encourage their supporters to use social media and enable them to respond to anti-brand communities. Moreover, they should foster brand communities that unite fans of their brand. This includes the creation of official brand websites on social media platforms with possibilities for fan interaction and user-generated contents.

Nevertheless, brand owners may be able to initiate civil legal proceedings for trademark infringement against anti-brand communities. However, prior to doing so, they should weigh up the pros (e.g., rivalry, market research) and cons (e.g., negative brand meaning, negative effects on sponsors) of anti-brand communities and possible joint strike-backs that such action could trigger. Our empirical research demonstrates a lack of user restraint in expressing controversial or provocative opinions, and consequently, online anti-brand activism is very dynamic and flexible and thus difficult to stop. Therefore, clubs in the firing line of anti-brand communities should critically assess whether they should take measures in response to anti-brand communities in team sports. In any case, team sport brands must find a strategy that incorporates anti-brand communities into brand management and sponsorship. The further proliferation of social media will increase the importance of this phenomenon, and the relevance of anti-brand communities, as individuals are more likely to

express extreme views online, and the internet allows people with similar views to find each other (Patton, Eschmann, & Butler, 2013). As a result, our findings are not only of relevance for sport brands, but also for other actors involved in organizing sport events (e. g. football association, police, security) or supporting them (e. g. sponsors).

Limitations and further research

To the best of our knowledge, our study is the first to provide an in-depth understanding of social media-based anti-brand communities that oppose specific professional sport teams. It thus contributes to previous research on co-created brand meaning, which has become one of the most important new fields of research among brand management practitioners and scholars. However, further research on this topic is needed to demonstrate the general applicability of our results and address new issues that arise from our research.

Firstly, our empirical research focuses on an online anti-brand community related to football. Therefore, we can only make assumptions about the extent to which these findings are applicable to other sports that do not possess all characteristics required for the cohesion of anti-brand communities (e.g. long-standing rivalry between clubs, huge number of fans). Future studies could address other team sports in order to broaden our knowledge of anti-brand activism in sports in general.

Secondly, we found evidence of negative effects of anti-brand communities on club sponsors. Subsequent quantitative studies could substantiate these findings and investigate whether they can be proven statistically.

Thirdly and finally, the empirical part of our research studies an anti-brand community organized on Facebook. As social media is growing as a conduit for brand/consumer interaction and sponsorships (Meenaghan, McLoughlin, & McCormack, 2013), this is surely a step in the right direction. However, both online anti-brand communities and social media are very dynamic phenomena, and our findings should thus also be investigated in the context of

social media channels other than Facebook.

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Figures and Tables

Figure 1:   Screenshot of Facebook-based anti-brand community and findings

Foundations and topics of social-media based anti-brand communities opposing a sports brand:
- Joint hate of a brand, oppositional brand loyalty
- Dissociating in-group from out-group (e.g. support, rituals and traditions vs. basking in reflected glory)
- Schadenfreude
- Virtual anti-FCB activism
- Disparaging the anti-brand, reinterpretation of brand meaning

Initial activities:
- Posts
- Graphics, pictures and collages
- Links

Reinforcing interactive elements:
- Likes
- Comments
- Shares

Figure 2: *User-generated graphics in an anti-FCB community*

Dissociating in-group from out-group

Disparaging and stereotyping of anti-brand and its fans

Schadenfreude

Figure 3:   Anti-brand communities and sponsors of opposed brand

Deutsche Telekom (main sponsor of FCB)

(burning jersey with sponsor's logo)

Geschlechterdiskussion im Sport geht weiter:
Alles Mädchen?

('all girls?' – disparaging use of sponsor's products and advertisements)

Allianz AG (name sponsor of FCB stadium 'Allianzarena')

ARROGANZ ARENA
ICH BIN EIN LÖWE
Holt Mich Hier Raus!

('get me out of here')

Ich scheiß auf den FC Bayern München

('I shit on FCB')