Building brand and fan relationships through social media

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Abstract

Purpose – As the popularity of social media increases, sports brands must develop specific strategies to use them to enhance fan loyalty and build brand equity. The purpose of this paper is to explore how two social media platforms were utilised by the Grand Slam tennis events to achieve branding and relationship marketing goals.

Design/methodology/approach – A content analytic design was employed to examine Twitter and Facebook posts from the official accounts during, and post-, each respective event.

Findings – Both sites were utilised to cultivate long-term relationships with fans and develop brand loyalty, rather than to undertake short-term marketing activations. However, these sites appear to serve a different purpose, and therefore unique strategies are required to leverage opportunities afforded by each. Interestingly, brand associations were utilised more frequently during the post-event time period.

Practical implications – This study offers practitioners with useful insight on branding and relationship-building strategies across two social platforms. These results suggest that strategies appear dependent on the event, timeframe and specific platform. Moreover, the events’ differences in post use and focus may also indicate some differences related to event branding in an international context. Furthermore, sport organisations should look to leverage creative strategies to overcome limitations that platform-specific functionality may impose.

Originality/value – This study offers unique insights brand-building efforts in an international event setting, which differ in a range of contextual factors that impact on social media utilisation.

Keywords Branding, Consumer-brand relationships, Social media, Sport events

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Given that prior research has linked social media use with increased opportunities to build fan bases, through fans’ identities and consumptive behaviours (e.g. Kassing and Sanderson, 2010), they represent important tools for future brand and relationship-building endeavours. Therefore, as the popularity of social media increases, sports events must look to develop specific strategies to enhance fan loyalty, develop strong consumer-brand relationships and ultimately build brand equity. The impact of these emergent technologies in the professional sports setting uncovers the need for sports marketers to understand how they can maximise the full potential of this media.

Branding is an increasingly important concept for many sports organisations (Wallace et al., 2011). Brands are considered to evoke a certain personality, presence, and product or service in consumers’ minds (Aaker, 1991), and are intangible assets, considered to be one of the most important to an organisation (Kaynak et al., 2007), a source of sustained competitive advantage providing value to both the organisation and consumer. This benefit is conceptualised in terms of brand equity (Aaker, 1991).
Sport events have not traditionally been regarded as “brands” within their own right. However, Bouchet et al. (2013) state that sports events are now widely considered and managed as such, as they develop into legitimate global brands. Given the increasing commercialisation of sports, it is perhaps not surprising that events are propelled into the branding spotlight. Sports events are now seen as prime opportunities to generate further revenue for stakeholders (e.g. sponsors, investors). Therefore, the branding of sports events is seen as an important part of ensuring both their success and maximising extra financial revenue (Bouchet et al., 2013).

The current study explores how two specific social media platforms: Facebook and Twitter, were utilised by professional tennis events to build their brands and relationships with fans. Specifically, the objectives aimed to examine the nature and extent of content posted during each respective Grand Slam event (i.e. Australian Open, Roland Garros, Wimbledon and US Open), and in the time between each respective 2013-2014 event. To achieve this, a content analysis was conducted on the posts collected from each event’s Facebook and Twitter feeds, during these two timeframes.

The paper begins with a review of literature relevant to the current study and then outlines the methodological approach. Results are presented, followed by a discussion to illustrate how this study contributes to and extends, the current body of knowledge relating to social media use in the context of building brands and relationships with fans. Finally, directions for future research are suggested.

Literature review

Within the extant literature, the concept of branding is well established. Marketers consider brand management itself as a process in which brand-building strategies should uniquely cultivate brand equity. By developing exclusive traits, brands are able to leverage a competitive advantage through short- and long-term brand initiatives enabling the development of a distinct brand identity (Gladden and Funk, 2001).

Brand awareness, the first step in this process, serves as the foundation for developing strong brands and is the necessary catalyst for the creation of brand associations and resultant brand image (Keller, 1993). These brand associations comprise of three distinct dimensions: attributes, benefits and attitudes (Bauer et al., 2008; Kaynak et al., 2007; Ross et al., 2006). The extant literature posits that consumers obtain and develop these brand associations through experiences with a brand (Gladden and Funk, 2002). Scholars have studied various brand association factors in a range of sport contexts (cf. Gladden and Funk, 2002; Ross, 2007). Through the development of such brand associations, fans build brand knowledge allowing them to more readily identify with specific brands, leading to higher levels of brand loyalty (Kaynak et al., 2007; Ross, 2007). This, in turn, results in identifiable preferences and attitudes, as well as increased customer-based brand equity (Gladden, 2014; Gladden and Funk, 2002; Ross, 2007). The portrayal of these unique brand associations enables sport brands to cultivate a specific brand image, and develop stronger consumer-brand relationships (Fournier and Avery, 2011).

Research demonstrates that branding and brand-based differentiation are powerful means for creating and maintaining a competitive advantage. In addition, scholars recognise the importance of relationships in creating brand differentiation. This is of central importance to brand marketers since consumer attachment to a brand is reinforced by relationships that enhance a consumer’s self-concept and help them to express their own identity (Fournier, 1998). Development of consumer-brand relationships provides numerous advantages to both brands and consumers. Research indicates that as relationships with customers develop, so does their loyalty, leading to repeat business, lower marketing costs and, ultimately, increased profit (Williams and Chinn, 2010). In the sporting context,
Stavros et al. (2008) explain that sport organisations seek to build relationships with fans in order to enhance fan loyalty.

Therefore, in the process of building a brand, it is also necessary to build relationships with consumers. According to Keller (2003), brand development includes building consumer-brand relationships. Research linking these two ideas together notes that many of the tactics and strategies utilised to accomplish one will succeed in helping with the other (Keller, 2003). Moreover, research suggests that employing strategies to build brand knowledge, and thus brand equity, will also enhance consumer-brand relationships.

Branding, relationship building and social media

Within specific industries such as sports, the advantages of social media appear well suited to brand and relationship building with fans (Wallace et al., 2011). Specifically, social media offer considerable shifts in the interaction and consumption of sport, whereby sport brands now have the opportunity to foster personal relationships with consumers through increased brand interaction (Ross et al., 2008). It has been suggested that through such increased interaction, brand associations and symbolic and experiential benefits (i.e. fan identification, escapism and entertainment) can be reinforced (Bauer et al., 2008; Yan, 2011).

Scholars note that social media may enable sport organisations to build their brands as part of a long-term relationship marketing approach (Achen, 2016; Eagleman, 2013). As part of this, research suggests (see Clavio and Miloch, 2009; Zimmerman et al., 2011) that sport organisations should cultivate a communication approach that generates content in a favourable way thorough agenda-building strategies (McCombs and Shaw, 1972). In their seminal work on the use of Facebook as a brand management tool in sports, Wallace et al. (2011) noted that agenda-setting strategies of particular brand associations were evident in social media content, offering unique opportunities to manage a favourable public perception. They concluded such activity might ultimately influence fan satisfaction with the brand. Subsequent research into sport organisations’ use of Facebook though has revealed that it is often an underutilized brand management tool, with little evidence of its use to create or maintain a relationship dialogue with fans (Abeza and O’Reilly, 2014; Walden and Waters, 2015).

In contrast, research suggests that Twitter is a particularly worthwhile platform for sport entities seeking to deliver time specific content and facilitate a more direct and conversational link with fans as part of their branding efforts (Pegoraro, 2010). Twitter usage is most often reported to fall into one of three primary purposes: interpersonal (i.e. two-way communication), informational (i.e. information dissemination) and promotional (i.e. relating to upcoming activities as a marketing function; Dittmore et al., 2013; Gibbs et al., 2014). Kassing and Sanderson (2010) also found that athletes were using Twitter for the “cultivation of insider perspectives” (p. 113) for fans which may aid in developing stronger emotional connections. The inclusion of so-termed behind-the-scenes content is often promoted as a worthwhile strategy sport organisations should look to utilise across all social media channels.

Principles in brand management are largely focussed on establishing identity, positioning and marketing actions. However, while previous research in a non-sports setting questions the success of marketing activity on social media (Fournier and Avery, 2011), Underwood et al. (2001) suggest that highly identified sports fans are more likely to process marketing from the team as “personally relevant, processing it deeply, relating it to existing brand knowledge” (p. 3). This is vital to sports brands, as research suggests marketing also results in strengthened brand associations, ultimately aiding in brand-building endeavours. Nonetheless, sport organisations appear reluctant to include marketing-related message content (Eagleman, 2013; Hambrick et al., 2010; Hull, 2014).

Such previous research also identifies social media as sites that allow for, at least theoretically, sports properties to develop brand relationships with sports fans (Abeza and O’Reilly, 2014; Abeza et al., 2013; Achen, 2016). Accordingly, Gladden and Funk (2002)
indicate that this is vital in order to develop brand equity and foster long-term loyalty. Keller (2001) suggests that the consumer-brand relationship is the last step in building brand equity and is, therefore, an important concept in enabling marketers to build their brands. For sports event brands, this is essential as they seek to turn equity into the purchase of event merchandise, tickets and repeat event attendance.

As part of these brand-building efforts, scholars argue that social media offer potential opportunities to build relationships with sports fans (Abeza and O’Reilly, 2014; Williams and Chinn, 2010) by providing opportunities for direct communication, overcoming traditional geographical and temporal barriers to fan access (Pegoraro, 2010). Both Simmons (2007) and Ashley and Tuten (2015) posit that high-quality, frequent interactions play a central role in this process, such that consumers develop positive brand associations that may lead to increased brand loyalty and identification. Such interaction helps to elevate a brand to the status of relationship partner (Aaker and Fournier, 1995). Therefore, while establishing their presence on social media and engaging in more conversations, marketers ultimately try to enhance consumer-brand relationships.

Scholars also argue that a variety of communication types contribute to increased interaction and engagement, along with enhancing online consumption (Pedersen et al., 2007), and suggest that the type of communication used in online communication impacts on the consumption habits of sports fans. With specific reference to social media, Wallace et al. (2011) indicate that the type of communication influences the way users interact with Facebook content and note that this may enable brand managers to develop relationships with fans that could positively affect consumer behaviour. In addition to considerations related to forms of communication, sport organisations are recognising the bi- or multi-lingual makeup of their geographically dispersed fan bases, and now also maintain a social media presence in multiple languages (Thompson et al., 2018).

However, while social media may provide sport organisations with many brand-related benefits, scholars have also identified a number of challenges in achieving these. The lack of control over brand-related messaging is a central concern to many as sport fans now have influence in the online space (Abeza et al., 2013; McCarthy et al., 2014). In addition, the lack of comprehensive training and social media understanding (Eagleman, 2013; Thompson et al., 2014) and allocation of sufficient resources (McCarthy et al., 2014; Naraine and Parent, 2017; Thompson et al., 2014) have also been identified.

While such prior research indicates that social media, and Facebook in particular, provides certain sports brands (i.e. leagues and teams) with opportunities to utilise brand management strategies in order to manage brand perceptions (i.e. Achen, 2014, 2016; Walden and Waters, 2015; Wallace et al., 2011), research of the same nature on professional sports events is scant. Moreover, a review of the literature denotes a lack of empirical research in understanding sports brands’ use of specific relationship-building strategies, in particular through social media. Further, research to date has considered usage by athletes, teams, leagues and organisations, and consequently, the area of sporting events remains largely underresearched (see Filo et al., 2015). This is significant as these contextual differences may necessitate unique strategic management approaches. For example, current research has not examined contexts with a limited duration that may result in a heightened challenge of maintaining fan relationships in an extended “offseason”. In addition, events may find themselves competing with “star players” when attempting to build fan loyalty (Bouchet et al., 2013).

Many previous studies also limit the number of posts examined by restricting the sample to a selection of the most recent posts, or by considering season-specific content or defining a particular timeframe. As a result, the findings from these studies only present a partial view and narrow our understanding of social media utilisation as a continual process. For example, if a collection of 20 tweets began on a game day, the sample may be heavily
weighted towards game day activities, thus presenting the possibility for a potential bias. Due to the real-time nature of Twitter, and thus the potential for content to change often, it seems appropriate to examine larger samples taken from a wider timeframe in order to provide a complete picture of how a producer of content uses this medium.

Therefore, this study employed a content analytic method to explore the nature and extent of strategies used by professional sport events within their posts on Facebook and Twitter. Based on this the following, research questions were posed:

RQ1. What forms of communication are utilised by events on Facebook and Twitter?
RQ2. What brand associations are evident in content posted by events on Facebook and Twitter?
RQ3. What types of marketing themes are evident in content posted on events’ Facebook and Twitter accounts?
RQ4. What relationship marketing strategies are evident in content posted on events’ Facebook and Twitter accounts?
RQ5. Does the nature and extent of content posted on Facebook and Twitter differ in the time between respective annual events?

Study context
The Grand Slam tennis events were selected as part of a larger study, utilising a purposive sampling approach. Collectively, these four events represent the four most prestigious annual events in tennis and have been acknowledged as achieving global brand status (Bouchet et al., 2013). Specifically, they occupy an important place in the global sports landscape, geographically and temporally dispersed throughout the year – in the Asia/Pacific region (Australian Open, January), Europe (Roland Garros, May; Wimbledon, June/July) and North America (US Open, August/September).

While a plethora of scholarly research exists on other sports, there is a dearth of tennis related social media research. Emerging studies have explored social media strategy development of a tennis national governing body (e.g. Thompson et al., 2014), promotional and self-presentation strategies of individual athletes’ use of Twitter (e.g. Hambrick and Mahoney, 2011; Lebel and Danylchuk, 2012), and social media marketing (e.g. Schoenstedt and Reau, 2010). In one of the first social media event-related tennis studies, Schoenstedt and Reau (2010) noted that lucrative marking opportunities could be achieved due to the popularity of the event. However, they concluded that further research in this context was required.

Methodology
Undertaking a content analysis, this study examined particular strategies across four critical dimensions (i.e. forms of communication, brand associations, marketing themes and relationship-building strategies), on the respective Facebook and Twitter posts for the Australian Open, Roland Garros, Wimbledon and the US Open.

Sample selection
For the during-event data set, all Facebook posts and tweets posted from the official accounts of each Grand Slam tennis event during the respective event periods were collected, resulting in 14 days of continuous event coverage, representing a purposive, consecutive-day sample (Riffe et al., 2008). This yielded a total of 950 Facebook posts and 13,012 tweets across the four events. Foreign language posts were removed from the sample...
prior to data analysis due to an inability to accurately categorise them, resulting in a final during-event data set of 927 Facebook posts, and 12,633 tweets. In addition to capturing and analysing posts during each event, a secondary purpose of this study was to examine posts between the respective annual events to gain insight the events' use of Twitter and Facebook outside of the event time to expose their fans to brand, marketing and relationship-building content. In order to infer a year's coverage for the timeframe between each brands' events, a two-week sample was constructed (Riffe et al., 2008), whereby 14 dates were randomly selected from the remaining 351-day period between each respective event (henceforth referred to as the between-event data set). To ensure comparability between the sports event brands, the authors employed the same approach for all. Once again, foreign language tweets were removed from the sample, wherein 67 Facebook posts and 187 tweets remained as the final between-event data set across all four events.

Unit of analysis. The unit of analysis was the individual Facebook and Twitter posts (or tweets) from the respective events' social media accounts. Retweets were also included for analysis, as these are a form of interaction between the brand and the original poster. In the case of the retweets, although event personnel did not originally construct the tweet, the retweet represents a conscious decision on the part of personnel to redistribute the content to their followers, potentially exposing fans to any brand management strategies included in these tweets. Content embedded into a post and subsequently viewable on either Facebook or Twitter directly was determined to be codeable. Consistent with this approach, while the presence of links was codeable, the resulting linked content was not coded.

Coding procedures
Categories were initially developed based on previous studies (e.g. Pegoraro, 2010; Wallace et al., 2011), and existing branding and marketing literature (Gladden and Funk, 2002; Kaynak et al., 2007; Kwon and Sung, 2011; Ross, 2007; Ross et al., 2008). The lead author piloted these categories on another professional tennis event not used in the current study and were modified and expanded where necessary. Event personnel's interview responses to questions related to their respective social media strategy (conducted as part of a parallel study, see Thompson et al., 2017) that informed the nature of marketing and relationship-building approaches was incorporated where appropriate. In total, four categories were coded: forms of communication, brand associations, marketing themes and relationship building (see Table I).

The first author and a second, independent coder analysed a data subset in order to establish inter-coder reliability. The second coder has a post-graduate degree in sport management, and has extensively experience in the communication and marketing field. The agreement between the coders in each of the measures was between 97.26 and 100.00 per cent, well within the acceptable standards for content analysis (Riffe et al., 2008).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Variables</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Form of communication (based on Wallace et al., 2011)</td>
<td>Picture, link, question, status update, video, interaction(^a)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brand association (based on Ross et al., 2006; Ross et al., 2008; Wallace et al., 2011)</td>
<td>Brand mark, commitment, stadium, history, organisational attributes, event characteristics, social interactivity, rivalry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marketing themes (Pegoraro, 2012; Wallace et al., 2011)</td>
<td>General information, information on where to catch games, in-game coverage, merchandise, player coverage, sponsor coverage, ticket information, contests, customer service(^a)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship building (based on Kwon and Sung, 2011; Pegoraro, 2012)</td>
<td>Become a fan on other social media, behind the scenes, fan poll or survey, follow (stay tuned), join us, share your content(^a)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: \(^a\)New variable added to this study based on event personnel's responses

Table I. List of categories and variables
Consistent with previous studies analysing branding and marketing-related content on social media, it was apparent that some categories elicited multiple strategies which were coded against all applicable variables and were therefore not mutually exclusive (see Wallace et al., 2011). For example, a post could include ticket information, sponsors and general information (i.e. the event’s draw), and thus be coded to each of these variables. The coders achieved a range of 0.97-1.00 $\kappa$ for mutually exclusive variables and a $\kappa$ level of 0.40 was used non-mutually exclusive categorical items (related to branding, marketing and relationship-building; Banerjee et al., 1999; Wallace et al., 2011). Thus, the ranges of $\kappa$ and percentage agreement were deemed acceptable.

Data analysis
Statistical analysis was conducted on the coded data using SPSS (Version 21). Initial data analysis included the calculation of descriptive statistics. More specifically, frequencies and percentages were reported for all categories derived from the conceptual framework and previous research. In addition to frequencies and percentages, advanced statistical analyses using analysis of variance (ANOVA) tests were conducted to examine if statistically significant differences existed in the number of daily posts between-events.

Results

Sample characteristics
Overall, of the four events, the Australian Open had the largest number of both total Facebook posts ($n = 316$, 34.09 per cent of total posts in this time period), and tweets ($n = 4,419$, 34.98 per cent) in the during-event period. Roland Garros had the least amount of Facebook posts ($n = 158$, 17.04 per cent), and the US Open had the least amount of tweets ($n = 2350$, 18.60 per cent). Concerning the between-event time period, while the Australian Open had the highest number of tweets ($n = 109$, 58.29 per cent of posts in this time period), the US Open had the highest number of Facebook posts ($n = 22$, 32.84 per cent), and Wimbledon had the lowest number of both Facebook posts ($n = 15$, 22.39 per cent) and tweets ($n = 17$, 9.09 per cent).

A one-way ANOVA was used to compare the number of daily posts on Twitter between the events during the event period. Results revealed a statistically significant difference between the number of daily posts in the during-event period for these events ($F(3, 52) = 22.953$, $p < 0.001$). A Tukey HSD test indicated that the number of daily posts for the Australian Open ($315.64 \pm 62.98$) was significantly different from Roland Garros ($242.5 \pm 44.40$, $p = 0.004$), Wimbledon ($176.36 \pm 61.65$, $p = 0.00$) and the US Open ($167.86 \pm 47.56$, $p = 0.00$):

RQ1. Form of communication.

RQ1 sought to explore the type of communication tool used by the events. The frequencies and percentages among the communication category are presented in full in Table II.

Facebook. While Facebook provides a range of forms of communication (see Table III for examples of posts), these were not utilised in equal proportions. Notably, while Facebook is not widely regarded as a visual platform, collectively, over half of all Facebook posts during the events were of a visual nature ($n = 615$, 66.35 per cent of total posts). This platform was then used to direct users away using links ($n = 79$, 8.52 per cent), most frequently to news articles on the events’ official website. Interestingly, the US Open had a higher proportion of posts categorised as interaction ($n = 133$, 53.85 per cent) compared to the other three events. Part of this difference can be explained by the US Open’s use of “Player Q&A’s”[1] on the official US Open Facebook account; a strategy unique to this event and most often utilised by other sport organisations on Twitter. Roland Garros was the only other event to prominently utilise interaction with over one fifth ($n = 36$, 22.78) of posts coded as this form of communication. For Roland Garros, the interaction was largely customer service-focussed
Table II. Frequencies and percentages of events' posts by form of communication

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Form of communication</th>
<th>Australian Open</th>
<th>Roland Garros</th>
<th>Wimbledon</th>
<th>US Open</th>
<th>Total during</th>
<th>Total between</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>FB</td>
<td>Twitter</td>
<td>FB</td>
<td>Twitter</td>
<td>FB</td>
<td>Twitter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Picture</td>
<td>172</td>
<td>(56.58)</td>
<td>581</td>
<td>(13.15)</td>
<td>714</td>
<td>(21.03)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Link</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>(14.14)</td>
<td>532</td>
<td>(12.04)</td>
<td>783</td>
<td>(23.06)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>(6.25)</td>
<td>113</td>
<td>(2.56)</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>(5.03)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Status update</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>(0.66)</td>
<td>1,605</td>
<td>(36.32)</td>
<td>1,259</td>
<td>(22.78)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Video</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>(19.08)</td>
<td>195</td>
<td>(4.41)</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>(1.77)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interaction</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>(3.29)</td>
<td>1,393</td>
<td>(31.52)</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>(22.78)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Notes:** FB, Facebook; f, frequency. aInteraction on Facebook refers to posts made replying to comments left by fans. On Twitter, this includes retweets, replies and quoted tweets; bthis represents the total across all events for the during-event time period; cdue to low frequencies from individual events, results from the between-event time period have been combined. For ease of reading, 0 (0.0 per cent) values have been removed from the table. The percentage is calculated from total posts within each event and timeframe.
n = 30, 83.33 per cent of events’ interaction posts). Furthermore, the Australian Open and Wimbledon were the only two events to utilise a greater range of forms of communication leveraging the interaction opportunities afforded through Facebook.

**Twitter.** By comparison, and perhaps arguably reflective of its nature, two-thirds of the four events’ collective Twitter posts were interaction (n = 3,946, 31.24 per cent of all during-event posts) and status updates (n = 3,763, 29.79 per cent). In contrast to Facebook, less than a quarter of all posts included visual media (e.g. videos or pictures; n = 2,426, 19.20 per cent), indicating that Twitter was used more for text-based communication. During the analysis, it became apparent that the events posted pictures frequently on other sites, or apps, such as Twitpic and Instagram. Once again, the US Open used interaction (n = 1,299, 55.28 per cent) proportionately more than the other three events. By comparison, the Australian Open and Roland Garros utilised status updates the most frequently (n = 1,605, 36.32 per cent and n = 1,259, 37.08 per cent, respectively). This was most often in the form of live in-match updates, resulting in Twitter feeds that were more information rather than interaction driven. In addition to the forms of communication used, each respective event’s social media posts were analysed to determine the nature and extent of brand associations, marketing themes and relationship-building strategies evident in their posts. As it is possible that one post could contain multiple factors, these categories are not mutually exclusive. Frequencies and percentages are reported for all categories, and represent the number of times these factors occurred throughout the content (see Table IV):

**RQ2.** Brand associations.

RQ2 investigated the nature and extent of brand associations included within events’ social media posts. 70.98 per cent (n = 658) of all event posts on Facebook included some form of brand association and this was similar to Twitter (n = 7,801, 61.75 per cent), offering evidence that both platforms allow events to display brand-specific content.
### Table IV.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Australian Open</th>
<th>Roland Garros</th>
<th>Wimbledon</th>
<th>US Open</th>
<th>Total during</th>
<th>Total between</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>FB f (%)</td>
<td>Twitter f (%)</td>
<td>FB f (%)</td>
<td>Twitter f (%)</td>
<td>FB f (%)</td>
<td>Twitter f (%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Brand association</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brand mark</td>
<td>14 (4.61)</td>
<td>131 (4.03)</td>
<td>12 (7.92)</td>
<td>61 (18.01)</td>
<td>90 (3.65)</td>
<td>12 (8.09)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commitment</td>
<td>28 (9.21)</td>
<td>466 (1.55)</td>
<td>13 (8.03)</td>
<td>531 (15.64)</td>
<td>22 (10.69)</td>
<td>544 (22.03)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stadium</td>
<td>37 (12.17)</td>
<td>396 (8.96)</td>
<td>13 (8.23)</td>
<td>347 (10.22)</td>
<td>59 (27.06)</td>
<td>336 (13.61)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>History</td>
<td>16 (5.26)</td>
<td>113 (2.56)</td>
<td>36 (22.78)</td>
<td>187 (5.51)</td>
<td>35 (16.06)</td>
<td>201 (8.14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organisational attributes</td>
<td>21 (6.91)</td>
<td>190 (4.30)</td>
<td>6 (3.80)</td>
<td>24 (0.71)</td>
<td>5 (2.29)</td>
<td>29 (1.19)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Event characteristics</td>
<td>90 (29.61)</td>
<td>826 (18.69)</td>
<td>89 (56.33)</td>
<td>944 (27.61)</td>
<td>90 (41.28)</td>
<td>714 (28.92)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social interactivity</td>
<td>24 (7.89)</td>
<td>1579 (35.05)</td>
<td>47 (29.75)</td>
<td>699 (20.59)</td>
<td>69 (27.06)</td>
<td>919 (37.22)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rivalry</td>
<td>14 (4.61)</td>
<td>19 (0.46)</td>
<td>19 (0.56)</td>
<td>2 (0.92)</td>
<td>10 (0.41)</td>
<td>2 (0.41)</td>
</tr>
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<td>826 (18.69)</td>
<td>89 (56.33)</td>
<td>944 (27.61)</td>
<td>90 (41.28)</td>
<td>714 (28.92)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Social interactivity</strong></td>
<td>24 (7.89)</td>
<td>1579 (35.05)</td>
<td>47 (29.75)</td>
<td>699 (20.59)</td>
<td>69 (27.06)</td>
<td>919 (37.22)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Rivalry</strong></td>
<td>14 (4.61)</td>
<td>19 (0.46)</td>
<td>19 (0.56)</td>
<td>2 (0.92)</td>
<td>10 (0.41)</td>
<td>2 (0.41)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Marketing theme</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General information</td>
<td>112 (36.84)</td>
<td>869 (19.67)</td>
<td>68 (43.04)</td>
<td>579 (17.05)</td>
<td>114 (62.29)</td>
<td>395 (16.00)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information on where to catch games</td>
<td>13 (4.28)</td>
<td>108 (2.44)</td>
<td>6 (3.80)</td>
<td>24 (0.71)</td>
<td>5 (2.29)</td>
<td>10 (0.41)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In-game coverage</td>
<td>64 (21.05)</td>
<td>1015 (22.97)</td>
<td>17 (10.76)</td>
<td>1590 (46.83)</td>
<td>12 (5.50)</td>
<td>614 (24.87)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Merchandise</td>
<td>1 (0.33)</td>
<td>22 (0.50)</td>
<td>4 (2.23)</td>
<td>2 (0.60)</td>
<td>13 (5.96)</td>
<td>33 (1.34)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Player coverage</td>
<td>155 (30.99)</td>
<td>213 (48.72)</td>
<td>105 (66.46)</td>
<td>2663 (78.44)</td>
<td>104 (47.11)</td>
<td>1470 (59.54)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sponsor coverage</td>
<td>22 (7.24)</td>
<td>214 (8.49)</td>
<td>16 (10.13)</td>
<td>351 (10.34)</td>
<td>31 (14.22)</td>
<td>81 (27.06)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ticket information</td>
<td>4 (1.32)</td>
<td>36 (0.81)</td>
<td>7 (4.49)</td>
<td>7 (0.21)</td>
<td>5 (2.02)</td>
<td>6 (2.02)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contests</td>
<td>6 (1.97)</td>
<td>96 (2.17)</td>
<td>2 (1.27)</td>
<td>14 (0.41)</td>
<td>6 (2.02)</td>
<td>47 (1.70)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Customer service</td>
<td>9 (2.96)</td>
<td>65 (1.45)</td>
<td>35 (22.15)</td>
<td>77 (22.72)</td>
<td>2 (0.92)</td>
<td>117 (4.74)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Relationship building</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Become a fan on other social media</td>
<td>30 (9.87)</td>
<td>178 (4.03)</td>
<td>4 (2.53)</td>
<td>127 (3.74)</td>
<td>22 (10.09)</td>
<td>144 (5.83)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behind the scenes</td>
<td>38 (12.50)</td>
<td>897 (20.30)</td>
<td>33 (20.89)</td>
<td>2699 (78.44)</td>
<td>71 (35.67)</td>
<td>2663 (78.44)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fan poll or survey</td>
<td>85 (27.96)</td>
<td>142 (3.21)</td>
<td>16 (10.13)</td>
<td>351 (10.34)</td>
<td>31 (14.22)</td>
<td>81 (27.06)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Follow, stay tuned</td>
<td>4 (1.32)</td>
<td>36 (0.81)</td>
<td>7 (4.49)</td>
<td>7 (0.21)</td>
<td>5 (2.02)</td>
<td>6 (2.02)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Share your content</td>
<td>9 (2.96)</td>
<td>89 (2.01)</td>
<td>1 (0.63)</td>
<td>72 (2.12)</td>
<td>5 (2.02)</td>
<td>87 (3.52)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Notes:** FB, Facebook; f, frequency. aThis represents the total across all events for the during-event time period; bdue to low frequencies from individual events, results from the between-event time period have been combined. For ease of reading, 0 (0.0 per cent) values have been removed from the table. The per cent total within each category will not equal 100 per cent as not all Facebook posts had utilised these factors and posts with multiple factors were coded multiple times.
Facebook. Across the events, the two most frequently used brand associations during the events were event characteristic ($n = 331, 35.71$ per cent) and social interactivity ($n = 306, 33.01$ per cent). For three events (Wimbledon, Roland Garros and the US Open), brand associations were present in nearly three-quarters of all posts, while over half of Australian Open posts included no identifiable brand association elements ($n = 155$). However, the Australian Open posted proportionately more content related to organisational attributes ($n = 21, 6.91$ per cent) than the other events. For the US Open, it the most frequently coded brand association was social interactivity, and is perhaps reflective of their higher number of interactive communication posts (e.g. player Q&A sessions).

Twitter. When viewed collectively, social interactivity ($n = 4,673, 36.99$ per cent) was the most frequently coded brand association element in Twitter posts during the respective event periods. Meanwhile, history ($n = 566, 4.48$ per cent), brand mark ($n = 307, 2.43$ per cent), organisational attributes ($n = 291, 2.30$ per cent) and rivalry ($n = 47, 0.37$ per cent) were used less frequently across the four events. Compared to the other events the USA. Open utilised brand associations in more than 85 per cent of their Twitter posts ($n = 2,002$) and had more posts related to social interactivity ($n = 1,506, 64.09$ per cent), commitment ($n = 848, 36.09$ per cent) and stadium ($n = 494, 21.02$ per cent) than the other three events. Roland Garros was the only event to use event characteristics ($n = 944, 27.81$ per cent) as the most frequent strategy during this time period, which may suggest efforts to distinguish its brand from the others. In addition, perhaps reflective of Wimbledon’s long-standing link with history and tradition, while not the most frequently used element, posts by Wimbledon were more likely to include information relating to history ($n = 201, 8.14$ per cent) than those by the other events:

RQ3. Marketing themes.

RQ3 investigated the nature and extent of marketing themes evident within events’ social media posts. Over three-quarters of all Facebook and Twitter posts included some form of marketing theme ($n = 716, 77.2$ per cent and $n = 9,539, 75.5$ per cent, respectively) offering evidence that both platforms allow events to post marketing-related content.

Facebook. Across the four events, Facebook appeared to be used to promote the players and respective events, more so than to engage in other marketing-related activity. This is evidenced by the fact player coverage ($n = 436, 47.03$ per cent of total posts) and general event information ($n = 370, 39.91$ per cent) were the most frequently utilised marketing themes during the event period. Further, sales promotion related posts such as ticket information ($n = 22, 2.37$ per cent) and merchandise ($n = 21, 2.27$ per cent) were used infrequently. The presence of these factors, although minimal, demonstrates the potential for posts to feature this marketing content. However, low usage suggests that they are perhaps being underutilised. The four events were comparable in the nature of marketing themes used during the particular event periods, with Wimbledon the only event not to utilise all themes coded (i.e. ticket information).

Twitter. Overwhelming, player coverage ($n = 7,228, 57.22$ per cent) was the most frequently used marketing theme followed by in-game coverage ($n = 3,616, 28.62$ per cent). Results illustrate that a large proportion of content on Twitter was information- or news-based. The four events were comparable in the range of marketing themes used, with each one focussing on three main strategies (i.e. player coverage, in-game coverage and general information). Perhaps indicative of different events’ different emphasises on marketing-related efforts, Roland Garros used in-game coverage ($n = 1,590, 46.83$ per cent) and the US Open used customer service ($n = 336, 14.30$ per cent) proportionately more than the other three events:

RQ4. Relationship building.

RQ4 sought to explore the nature and extent of relationship-building strategies used by the events in their respective posts (see Table V, e.g posts). Interestingly fewer posts provided
content that supported relationship-building endeavours on Twitter ($n = 4,247$, 33.6 per cent) than on Facebook ($n = 486$, 52.4 per cent), which may suggest a platform-specific approach to such efforts.

**Facebook.** Of the previously identified relationship-building related strategies, behind-the-scenes content ($n = 216$, 23.30 per cent of total during-event posts) and fan poll or survey ($n = 186$, 20.06 per cent) were the most frequently used. Interestingly efforts to encourage fans to contribute, as evidenced by share your content ($n = 26$, 2.81 per cent) posts were low which may be reflective of the limited opportunities available through Facebook. While the frequencies of some elements were low, each event used all of the relationship-building strategies. While the usage of behind-the-scenes content was comparable between three events, the Australian Open used it proportionately less, and for this event unlike the other three, it was not the most frequently used.

**Twitter.** Of the relationship-building strategies examined, the most frequently used on Twitter during the events was behind-the-scenes ($n = 2,484$, 19.66 per cent). The nature and extent of relationship-building strategies used by three events (Australian Open, Roland Garros and Wimbledon) in the during-event period were comparable. This highlighted an observable difference between these three events and the US Open who used fan poll or survey ($n = 241$, 10.26 per cent), follow or stay tuned ($n = 271$, 11.53 per cent) and share your content ($n = 131$, 5.57 per cent) proportionately more. Posts from the US Open were also less likely to feature behind-the-scenes content ($n = 213$, 9.06 per cent) or information on becoming a fan on other social media ($n = 36$, 1.53 per cent) than the other events:

**RQ5.** Content differences during- and between-events.

RQ5 sought to explore whether there were any differences in the during- and between-event content. On Facebook, visual communication (e.g. pictures and videos) was once again used proportionately more than other forms of communication during the between-events time period. A comparable proportion of pictures were used between the respective annual
events \((n = 38, 56.72)\) vs during-event. However, some notable differences in the forms of communication were observed during the between-event period. Proportionately, more posts included links \((n = 15, 22.39\text{ per cent})\), and the proportion of interaction posts \((n = 6, 8.96\text{ per cent})\) was less than half of those used during the respective events. However, on Twitter, interaction was used proportionately more in the between-event period \((n = 97, 51.87\text{ per cent})\) than during the events \((n = 3,946, 31.24\text{ per cent})\), perhaps reflective of efforts to maintain continued engagement with fans.

On Facebook, in the between-event time period, the events actively managed brand perception with over 90 per cent of posts \((n = 63)\) containing some form of brand association. This time period was used to draw attention to core-value brand associations (i.e. brand mark, history and event characteristics), with these associations used proportionally more than during the events. Rivalry \((n = 10, 14.93\text{ per cent})\) was used proportionately more, but this is not surprising given the prevalence of other tennis events held during the year. As was seen with Facebook, brand association elements were utilised frequently during the between-event period on Twitter, with nearly 90 per cent of posts \((n = 168)\) featuring some form of brand association.

During the between-event period on Facebook, despite the low frequency, merchandise \((n = 4, 5.97\text{ per cent})\) and ticket information \((n = 5, 7.46\text{ per cent})\) were used proportionately more during this time period compared to during the events. However, on both Facebook and Twitter player coverage \((n = 30, 44.78\text{ per cent})\) and \(n = 54, 28.88\text{ per cent}\), respectively) was the most frequently used theme. Surprisingly, fewer posts on Twitter during this time period featured any marketing-related content, which may signal a missed opportunity for these events.

Relationship-building strategies were being utilised proportionately more during this time period, and proportionately more on Facebook. Surprisingly, with respect to Twitter, less than half of posts during this time featured posts related to relationship-building efforts \((n = 76, 40\text{ per cent})\), suggesting that events are not leveraging opportunities to support build and develop relationships with fans outside of the event time period. As was evident with the during-event posts, behind-the-scenes content was the most frequently used relationship-building strategy on both Facebook \((n = 25, 37.31\text{ per cent})\) and Twitter \((n = 38, 20.32\text{ per cent})\). When compared to the nature and extent of strategies used in the during-event period, it was observed that two strategies (i.e. asking fans to become a fan on other social media and fan poll or survey) were used proportionately more between-events on Twitter than during.

Discussion
The present study sought to investigate the use of Facebook and Twitter as a brand management tool in the context of the Grand Slam tennis events. The findings reveal that Facebook and Twitter allow these tennis events to utilise strategies that focus on cultivating long-term relationships rather than short-term marketing activations. Moreover, the events' posts demonstrated a focus on providing information, displaying product-related brand associations and building their image. In order to differentiate their brand from the competition, and appeal to their respective fan base, the tennis events leveraged unique approaches to the management of their social media account, indicating international differences in social media branding. In addition, it was apparent that different strategies exist in the use of these two platforms, illustrating the need for platform-specific management approaches. Furthermore, fewer posts during the post-event timeframe represent a missed opportunity to maintain a prolonged connection with fans. The present study adds to the body of knowledge regarding social media utilisation by sport organisations with respect to branding and the consumer-brand relationship marketing theory.
Management of brand perceptions

The current study illustrates that sports event brands highlight brand associations on social media. The strong presence of these associations in the events’ posts is important as brand-building benefits related to strategic coverage of positive brand associations include: building positive fan perceptions, development of loyalty in both brand preference and consumptive behaviours (Ross et al., 2008), and further product differentiation. Furthermore, these are vital in order to increase brand loyalty and develop long-term relationships with fans (Aggarwal, 2004; Gladden, 2014). Interestingly, brand associations featured prominently in posts during the between-event time period. Given the transient nature of sports events, brands would be wise to continue using content featuring brand associations during this time period to ensure fans and followers develop and build their brand knowledge outside of the event period when they are less likely to be exposed to event-related content through other media outlets.

Consistent with findings from Wallace et al. (2011) and Zimmerman et al. (2011), the current study found evidence of agenda-setting strategies of particular brand associations among the four events examined. For example, Roland Garros and Wimbledon leveraged history and event characteristics across both Facebook and Twitter more so than the other two events. These elements are particularly relevant to help fans understand some of the unique features of these two events (e.g. the tradition of wearing white at Wimbledon and French culture), and such use may serve to help develop the brand image and fans’ social identification with the event (Underwood et al., 2001).

This agenda-setting approach, while limited in its ability to tell fans what to think, may be successful in telling fans what to think about (McCombs and Shaw, 1972). Given the abundance of information available through social media and potential “clutter” fans may be exposed to, brands need to be strategic in their use. Although agenda setting has received significant scholarly attention in other contexts, there is scope for its application in the area of brand communication and brand communities.

There was one brand association that was surprisingly underutilised, particularly in light of findings from previous studies. Emphasising rivalry has been identified as a key strategy for increasing brand associations with sports properties (Ross et al., 2006); however, it was the least frequently used strategy in this study. This finding is contrary to those reported in other social media related sports studies (e.g. Pegoraro, 2010; Wallace et al., 2011), suggesting that the inclusion of this content type should, perhaps, be reconsidered by the tennis events under examination in this study. That said the low use of rivalry in this context might also indicate that this brand association element is not as applicable or as easily expressed for events as it is for other sports properties (i.e. leagues and teams). Therefore, the relevance of this brand association in relation to sports events would be worthy of further examination. Indeed, future studies may look to examine brand association elements with specific reference to sport events.

Furthermore, as evidenced, Facebook and Twitter provide an opportunity for sports event brands to feature visual imagery containing certain brand association elements more readily. During the content analysis, brand marks and event characteristics featured prominently, through various creative methods. Examples of such tactics include editing in-game photos into custom graphics displaying the event’s brand mark and photos capturing specific event characteristics. These unique visual strategies ensure that fans are exposed to these brand associations in novel ways, providing opportunities to further strengthen their identification of these brand-related aspects (Gladden and Funk, 2002).

Relationship building is an essential part of brand management (Gladden, 2014) and this study suggests that these tennis event brands appear to be using social media to initiate and maintain relationships with consumers. Through the utilisation of imperative verbs, these event brands are endeavouring to initiate relationships with fans (Kwon and Sung, 2011).
They also offer fans a glimpse of the action that would not normally be available by providing behind-the-scenes content. The inclusion of this unique and exclusive content gives fans a reason to follow the brand on social media as it is content that cannot be attained from any other means (Ashley and Tuten, 2015).

However, as one of the first known studies to attempt to analyse content posted outside of the event period findings related to the between-event timeframe may have important implications for other annual events and seasonal sport. We acknowledge that there is only a small data set examined during this period, but believe that this, in its own right, represents a noteworthy finding. One thing that emerges clearly from our study is that these events do not appear to be frequently posting to either Facebook or Twitter outside of their respective events. Arguably, given that previous research has indicated that continued engagement is central to relationship-building endeavours (Brodie et al., 2011) should be ensuring that their social media activity encourages this (Ashley and Tuten, 2015). In doing so, they may help to elevate the brand to the status of relationship partner (Aaker and Fournier, 1995). Moreover, continued exposure to brand associations through sustained engagement during non-event (or off-season) timeframes may also serve to reinforce knowledge further (Gladden and Funk, 2002). In light of this, we suggest future research should consider a longitudinal approach in order to examine how events may use social media during such times as part of a continuing brand and relationship-building strategy.

Unique management approaches
Results from this study also indicate that unique management approaches appear to drive social media content and strategies. Notable differences were observed in the nature and extent of strategies used during various time periods (e.g. during-event and between-event), and the content was based on time-relevance across both social media platforms. This is perhaps not unexpected as marketing effectiveness is associated with promotional timing (Boyd and Krehbiel, 2003), and may further signal the use of agenda-setting strategies. Accordingly, tailored marketing themes, for each of the respective events, would be expected as sports event brands seek to offer time-relevant products and services. Arguably such an approach is an important strategy for sport marketers, given that scholars have noted that a one-size-fits-all approach to social media management is no longer appropriate (Naraine and Parent, 2017; Thompson et al., 2014).

The disproportionate overall frequency of coverage during each event indicates that these events are using Facebook and Twitter at different rates. While this finding is consistent with previous studies indicating differences by sports leagues and athletes (Pegoraro, 2010; Wallace et al., 2011), the current study is the first to provide evidence of this by professional sports events. The statistically significant difference in the number of daily posts between-events provides further evidence of a different approach to the management of daily postings, which may result from a range of social media management strategies supported by these events’ unique organisational structure (i.e. staff, marketing plan, time and money). Given managers often tout the issue of resourcing as one of the foremost challenges associated with social media use (Abeza et al., 2013; McCarthy et al., 2014), this raises concerns regarding the frequency of posts and the management of social media accounts. As no known study has provided empirical support for an optimum number of daily posts, it would be a worthy area for future research to explore.

Unique to this study is the observed differences in the nature and extent of strategies used on Facebook and Twitter by four professional tennis events. This leads to important implications for the use and management of social media accounts for sports events, especially in the context of building brands and relationships with fans. A unique approach to social media brand management is required for individual platforms, as each social media platform may be more suitable for various branding and relationship-building goals.
In particular, this study demonstrates that Facebook serves as a site for long-term relationship cultivation through the display of event-related visual imagery and core values, more so than Twitter, which serves to provide fans with an opportunity to experience the brand through real-time online text-based communication and interaction.

The events used Facebook to publish visual content providing fans with coverage of both the event and star players. The use of such content may have additional advantages; offering brands the ability to illustrate descriptive information in visual format (Pedersen et al., 2007). Indeed, this was the case with certain brand associations (i.e. brand mark and event characteristics) and marketing themes (i.e. sponsorship) featuring prominently in pictures. The dominant use of pictures also allowed for the sharing of more behind-the-scenes content, which may aid the relationship-building process. However, given the increased interest and popularity of other picture-sharing social media sites, such as Instagram, it will be interesting to monitor how these event brands manage the use of visual imagery in the future.

To the authors’ knowledge, studies examining forms of communication used on Twitter in the sports event context are absent from the literature, so the findings from this study may represent one of the first attempts to offer insights on the nature and extent of forms of communication used on this platform. In contrast to Facebook, Twitter was utilised more for text-based communication, with interaction and status updates the most frequently used forms of communication. This underscores the real-time nature of this platform (Kassing and Sanderson, 2010), wherein constant posting of in-game or in-event coverage and information is analogous to a news ticker.

Twitter was also more reactionary, partially imposed by the 140-character limit, making it highly suitable for in-game updates or quick messaging. As a result, it is the social media site to use when sharing brief event-update information or engaging directly with fans. Facebook, on the other hand, is a more controlled environment for sports brands, where fewer posts means content is available to view more readily. Arguably, Facebook necessitates more thoughtfulness into the content shared and acts as a site where events are able to highlight the essence of their brand, representing a surrogate website.

The acknowledgement of these points in relation to the current study reinforces previous calls that the management of social media cannot be underpinned by a one-size-fits-all approach (Abaza and O’Reilly, 2014). As social media usage and familiarity with these sites increases (Eagleman, 2013), departing from a “cookie cutter” approach and striving towards niche usage is axiomatic. By doing so, brands can target their social content to best meet the needs of their fans and deliver on their strategic objectives.

**Development of social media use**

The difference in the nature and extent of strategies employed by the four tennis events suggests that social media usage and approaches are no longer just about platform-specific behaviour as suggested by Wallace et al. (2011). Instead, as familiarity with social media increases, such differences may reflect a growing understanding and willingness by media personnel involved with these events to embrace social media use (Eagleman, 2013). Furthermore, the media context is prone to change over time, and therefore brand management on social media should reflect the most current and effective communication, which may require constant adaption by those charged with managing it.

Visual communication via pictures and videos was the most prominent form of communication on Facebook. This finding greatly differs from those reported by previous research and indicates a potential shift in the way sports brands currently use Facebook as they seek to take advantage of opportunities afforded by other online technologies, along with increased attention to sharing of visual content. It is particularly promising in light of research that notes pictures and videos can lead to unique fan involvement and interaction.
(Wallace et al., 2011), and can enhance brand storytelling abilities leading to enhanced consumer-brand relationships (Heaps, 2009).

The strong emergence of interaction as a prominent communication form by these events was an important finding. This is critical, given that through interaction and engagement with followers, sports brands are able to build their relationships with fans. The tennis event brands utilised numerous strategies to encourage engagement and interaction with fans, in an apparent attempt to build a community through social media. This appears consistent with prior research which has revealed brands using multiples appeals to engage with target audiences (Ashley and Tuten, 2015).

Results of the current study also found that more than three-quarters of posts featured identifiable marketing factors, indicating that these events endeavour to make use of social media for marketing-related purposes. This is surprising, given prior indications that marketing is not the sole purpose of a social media account or branding strategy (Eagleman, 2013; Williams and Chinn, 2010). In addition, although sponsorship was only used modestly on both Facebook and Twitter, the events’ deliberate sponsorship activity symbolises a tactical social media branding strategy.

Also unique to this study is that both Facebook and Twitter provide an opportunity for organisations to address customer service issues on an individual basis. Gladden, Irwin, and Sutton (2001) suggest that one of the ways sports teams can enhance their relationships with fans is to seek ways to understand them, and the current findings denote that these tennis events appear to be heeding this advice. This study illustrates that these tennis events adopted this practice to improve the in-game and event experience and to understand customer needs better. Feedback gathered from these fans can then be used to shape future event experiences and marketing strategy, while also equipping brands with valuable information about fans that aids in the development of consumer-brand relationships (Fournier and Avery, 2011).

Conclusions
This study offers evidence that events can communicate a specific brand identity, manage brand perception and foster relationships with followers. The four tennis events utilised both Facebook and Twitter in a variety of ways, but the results indicate that these sites are used to further their brand image and foster long-term mutually beneficial relationships. Specifically, brands can use them to communicate distinct brand associations, through various forms of communication, and help manage brand perceptions through the utilisation of agenda-setting strategies. Thus, it offers confirms assertions that social media provides sports events an opportunity to develop a competitive edge by acting as a site allowing direct communication links to fans. Interestingly, though the events’ differences in post use and focus may indicate some differences related to event branding in an international context. As such, further research should consider multiple geographic locations.

Moreover, building on the earlier work of Wallace et al. (2011) and Walden and Waters (2015), this study revealed marked changes in social media usage, particularly the form of communication used (i.e. increased use of visual and interactive communication). The increases in identifiable marketing and promotional content and the addition of customer service opportunities evident in this study further highlight the need for continuing scholarly research in this area.

Along with its contribution to the existing literature, the results of this study provide sport marketers with worthwhile practical implications. Importantly, it raises the question of whether sport marketers still need to develop a more strategic approach to social media use in order to more aptly leverage the potential opportunities they afford. Understanding the nature and extent of social media strategies enables sports media personnel to develop
an integrated marketing and brand management strategy, to use these sites to build their brand and relationships with fans. While previous research has noted a reluctance to engage in marketing-related activities on social media, this study illustrated a range of marketing themes being utilised by these events. That said, these sites were mainly being used to communicate event-related information (i.e. player and in-game coverage), rather than direct marketing approaches (i.e. sponsor mentions, merchandise and ticket sales) signalling an opportunity to include greater content that may lead to increased revenue generating opportunities.

While the findings suggest that there has been a degree of development in the approach to social media use, and identification of unique management approaches, they still appear to be underutilised with respect to strategic brand management. Notably, a significant reduction in posts between the respective annual events signals a missed opportunity to aid the brand-building process. Given that various brand associations were utilised more frequently during this time period, events are encouraged to consider increasing their post frequency to ensure maximum opportunity for fans to develop brand knowledge.

In addition, whilst a direct comparison of Facebook and Twitter was not originally a key focus, exploring both provided unique insights. Facebook and Twitter serve a different purpose, and therefore unique strategies are required to leverage opportunities afforded by each. Facebook functions as a channel to assist in the development of brand image, with the prolific use of visual imagery offering further opportunities for fans to be subtly exposed to unique brand-related associations. In contrast, Twitter aids in the facilitation of real-time connections leading to opportunities to develop emotional connections and socialisation amongst, and between, the events and fans. Whilst both work to help the events build their brands and relationships with fans, different approaches on each platform are utilised to achieve this.

This research is not without its limitations, and we would be remiss not to acknowledge these here. First, we acknowledge the small sample size in the between-event data set. Second, all of the data are from tennis events; however, it is hoped that the findings will be transferable to other sports and events. Third, these findings are based on content analysed from the respective events’ Facebook and Twitter pages, and hence may neither accurately capture event personnel’s objectives or strategies, nor does it consider the fans’ point of view. Finally, these events occur “once a year”, and as a result, the findings may differ from organisations whose business/events are ongoing throughout the year. However, as acknowledged earlier, this limitation is also an opportunity, as it provides an idea for future research.

That said, there is considerable scope for further research related to the impact of social media on marketing, fan engagement and interaction for sport events. Future studies should examine a larger cross-section of sport organisations, preferably from a range of geographical areas and from organisations with various levels of financial and media support. Using this study as a point of departure for future research, it would be beneficial to monitor trends in social media use, both in above terms and over time. Further research could incorporate wider elements of social media, including other available social media platforms, and the way in which each is accessed. Finally, in order to accurately examine the impact of social media brand management strategies, future research should consider a multi-perspectival approach (i.e. interviews with personnel, content analysis of social media posts and feedback from fans).

Note
1. For the player Q&A, players replied directly to individual fan comments using the US Open account, and thus replies were shown as from the event itself.
References


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