

A Review and Research Agenda for Brand Communities in Sports

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Abstract

Research on brand communities has burgeoned over the past two decades. Today many, if not most, sport organizations are entertaining dedicated brand communities. This article traces the development of community thinking in the field of sport management and marketing. Key articles on brand communities from leading journals in the field are identified, reviewed, and their core contributions distilled. By drawing on literature from adjacent fields, seven areas of future research are proposed: Make or buy community, getting value from community, building a community capability, solving the community engagement puzzle, focusing on effective community engagement practices, analyzing the full community lifecycle, and community for web 3.0. The article provides a number of recommendations for future research on brand communities in sport management and marketing, enabling scholars to advance knowledge for both research and practice.

Keywords: Online Brand Communities, Social Media Brand Communities, Sport Communities, Fan Communities, Review, Research Agenda

Introduction

This special issue on social media in sports would not be complete without some thoughts on community. It is an indispensable concept for the sport domain: On one hand, most sport organizations are by default membership-based and community-driven organizations (think of the 50+1 rule in the German Bundesliga, for example, which helps club members to retain control). On the other, sport marketers are increasingly turning to social media and related information technologies to build community. The skillful management of communities by sport industry professionals can significantly help them to maintain or strengthen existing, and form new stakeholder relationships (Abeza et al., 2013, 2015; Achen & Abeza, 2021), which, in turn, drive critical business outcomes, such as increasing (club) memberships, spectator attendance, fan loyalty and identification, ticket or merchandise (re-) purchases, or enhancing product development, innovation, and many more (Füller et al., 2007; Wagner, 2021; Yoshida et al., 2015). Major sport brands across all sport disciplines are now entertaining brand communities; prominent examples include those of FC Bayern, Manchester United, Toronto Raptors, Formula 1, Grand Slam Tennis, Nike, or Transfermarkt.

The concept of community has a long tradition in philosophy and social theory (e.g., Tönnies, 1887; Weber, 1922). Historically, theorists of community have been concerned with the sense of belonging by individuals to a wider collective, based on certain commonalities. The need to belong, i.e. a desire to form and maintain interpersonal relationships, is commonly viewed as a fundamental human motivation (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). With the rise of the internet in the late 1990s, virtual communities came into the center of attention (Wellman et al., 1996; Wellman & Gulia, 2002). Marketing scholars quickly adopted the community idea and coined the concept of brand or consumption communities, where consumers become “admirers

of a ... branded good or service” (Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001, p. 412). Brand communities have since become a prominent area of research in the field of marketing and brand management (Bhattacharjee et al., 2022; Huang et al., 2021; Santos et al., 2022). The relevance of community-thinking has frequently been highlighted in the *Harvard Business Review* (Bussgang & Bacon, 2020; Kane et al., 2009; Mintzberg, 2009) and comprehensive business guides for practitioners have been published (e.g., Spinks, 2021). This is turning the psychology of belonging into a vast business of belonging, ushering in what some call the “rise of community-driven business” (Spinks, 2021, p. 3).

Scholars of sport management and marketing have, of course, been influenced by the above developments and have adopted a community perspective in their work. Popp and Woratschek (2016, p. 192) suggest that sport “marketers should increasingly integrate communities into their branding strategy”. Lupinek (2019, p. 298) asserts that “building fan relationships through brand community will continue to grow in importance”. Ultimately, Wagner (2021) introduces a variety of community types found in sports contexts: brand communities, themed or branded communities, service communities, innovation communities, and internal communities – all of which merit further research, while broadening the traditional focus on just fans to a variety of internal and external stakeholders, as well as (more) diverse business outcomes.

The remainder of this article is structured as follows: In the first section, key articles on brand communities in the field of sport management and marketing are identified, reviewed, and their unique contributions extracted. Next, seven areas of future research on brand communities in the sport context are proposed, based on research in adjacent fields, such as marketing, service management, strategy, and organization.

The State of the Scholarship

As stated earlier, the concept of community has attracted scholarly attention in the social sciences for a long time – it has been a prominent research topic for at least 100 years. Keeping in mind the focus of this special issue on social media, the review will center on brand communities in sport, as they have emerged over the last decades, mainly as a result of the rise of social media. For this purpose, selected articles, published in leading peer-reviewed journals at the intersection of sport management and sport marketing, have been reviewed. The review can thus be considered a narrative review (Baumeister & Leary, 1997). The goal of this section is to trace important developments of community thinking in sport.

Muniz and O’Guinn’s (2001) foundational paper is often cited as a key reference for work on brand communities. In it, they define a brand community as a “specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relations among admirers of a brand” (Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001, p. 412). Translated into a sport context, this means sport consumers - or fans - with an affinity for a specific sports entity (i.e., the brand; e.g., a sports club) would be given the opportunity to connect and interact (i.e., create social relations) with like-minded individuals (i.e., a specialized focus; usually around the products of the brand), normally in an online environment (hence, the lack of a geographic focus). Given that passion and identification play an important role in sports (Smith & Stewart, 2010), it is easy - and possibly easier than in many other industries - to imagine fans as “admirers of (a) brand” to come together in brand communities. Hence, community researchers in sport management are uniquely positioned to contribute to the debate around brand communities.

Following the rise in popularity of brand communities in the wider marketing and brand management literature (Bhattacharjee et al., 2022; Huang et al., 2021; Santos et al., 2022), sport

management and marketing scholars started to study brand communities in sports contexts, too. In an early piece, Devasagayam and Buff (2008) examine membership and integration of a basketball community at a small college campus in the northeast of the United States. With help of a survey among college students, they propose and test a three-dimensional model of brand community, based on spatial, temporal, and exchange dimensions. Interestingly, there is no online environment in which the basketball community interacts. It could thus be conceived of as a more traditional, geographically-focused brand community with the university campus as a community hub. Nonetheless, with this piece, they do introduce the brand community concept to sport management. For future research, they recommend to further test their multi-dimensional model, extend the sample size and population beyond the student sample, and compare communities of tangible and intangible products (i.e., services).

In a study of minor league soccer in the US and Canada, Warren and Brownlee (2013) analyze brand community integration of online and offline community members from eight soccer teams. They find that community members engage primarily online or offline (but not in both spheres), that community integration is stronger among online community members, and that higher community integration leads to a higher intent to attend future games. They also emphasize the relatively low costs of grassroots community marketing, making brand communities a tool of choice for financially distressed sport marketers, which is often the case in minor leagues and niche sports. With this article, the analysis of online brand communities is initiated. The link to consumption, i.e., the intent to attend games, is established. Going forward, they recommend to further analyze brand community involvement in both online and offline settings, thereby capturing the entire (fan) community. They further call for context-specific

analyses, e.g., for niche sports or specific leagues, that will help to develop meaningful recommendations for industry professionals.

In another survey-based study of MyFootballClub.co.uk, a failed brand community for soccer fans in the UK, Guimaraes and colleagues (2016) find that motivations to join a brand community and the realization of the brand promise (by the host organization) predict brand loyalty. Guimaraes and colleagues (2016) call for further research analyzing all aspects of loyalty, e.g., linking loyalty with fan affiliations, affective relationships with brand(s), fan profiles/segments, and financial outcomes. They also call further research into brand promises and an evaluation whether fans feel these (implicit) promises are being kept.

In a survey-study of a German soccer community, Popp and Woratschek (2016) scrutinize brand loyalty as well. They identify subjective relevance and perceived quality of the community as additional predictors of loyalty. The findings of both loyalty studies above are important because they highlight that in order to retain loyal community members, host organizations are well advised to collect relevant data about their members. Doing so will allow the host organizations to design attractive value propositions, which address members' motivations to join, and adjust content to match members' interests and quality expectations. Popp and Woratschek (2016) further contend that brand communities may offer an attractive playing field for innovative sponsorships and activations beyond native sports venues, such as stadiums. More specifically, they introduce the notion of *branded* communities, where a sponsor gets involved with a non-branded or themed community, a novel approach that may work particularly well at the discipline-level (e.g., for associations who try to promote a certain sport discipline). The authors encourage future research that scrutinizes the relevance and perceptions

of sponsors in the context of branded communities. They also call for research comparing communities in different industries, specifically in sports and non-sports contexts.

In a netnographic study of Facebook-based anti-brand communities, specifically two communities opposed to the German Bundesliga club FC Bayern Munich, Popp and colleagues (2016) analyze one of the dark sides of brand community. They find that anti-brand communities may have detrimental effects on the target brand and its sponsors, as brand meaning is negotiated through the discourse of all conversants around a brand. However, they also note that anti-brand communities are a source of cohesion among fans of the opposed brand, thereby fostering brand identity and competitive ambitions. The analysis starts an important conversation about how to handle antagonism in sport community settings, which can also be observed in other online arenas where hate-speech or radicalization take place. Oshiro et al. (2021), for instance, analyze cyber racism on TexAgs.com, a top 10 global football website focused on the fandom of Texas A&M University athletics. They do find evidence of racially charged language around four black NFL athletes, namely Michael Bennett, Mike Evans, Myles Garrett, and Von Miller. Popp and colleagues (2016) suggest that future research focus on how anti-brand communities affect sponsoring relationships, for example. Oshiro et al. (2021) call for further studies that critically analyze the discourses taking place on brand communities (e.g., regarding race), how community hosts manage hate-speech online, and reflect on - and possibly challenge - established institutional (sporting) structures that shape interactions in brand communities.

Lupinek (2019) provides a comprehensive and relatively recent summary of research conducted on brand communities in sport. Based on theories of attachment and identification, he develops the Attachment to Brand Community (ABC) framework which comprises nine attachment dimensions: team success, star players, coaches, style of play, fan culture, team

symbols, family influence, geographic location, and media coverage. The framework is a practical tool for sport marketers to adjust their marketing activities in order to leverage specific brand elements and maximize (fan) attachment. Lupinek (2019) calls for future research into each of the nine attachment dimensions of the model. He further suggests social network analysis as an innovative method to shed light on community structures, identify subcommunities, and analyze leader-follower relationships among different fan groups,

In a study of a brand-related campaign called #WeTheNorth, initiated by the Toronto Raptors, an NBA team, Naraine et al. (2019) analyzed a sample of 1,627,349 tweets over a 2-year period, using social network analysis. The tweets represent a communication network of those using the Twitter hashtag above. The authors inspect the network characteristics over time, reflecting peak activities towards the end of the season and the approach of the playoffs, for example. They further present a cluster analysis of subcommunities using the hashtag. More specifically, individuals using the hashtag were categorized as basketball fans, Raptor fans, Torontonians, but also hip hop fans or social media marketers, among others. The study by Naraine and colleagues bridges the social media and the brand community literatures, and nicely illustrates how the two areas of research may be connected. While Twitter by itself is no brand community, it is used by brands to facilitate relevant conversations (through dedicated campaigns, for example). The authors of the study recommend to explore other geographies beyond North America, conduct further analysis on sub-groups in the community, and to extend the analysis to other social media platforms, e.g. Instagram.

In a netnographic study of a mixed martial arts community, Kirkwood and colleagues (2019) scrutinize the different fan roles in a community, yielding a typology of four distinct roles assumed by community members: Oracles, Hollywoods, Jokers, and Rookies. They are

positioned in a matrix, based on the dimensions of social exchange (expert vs novice) and type of social interest (group vs self). The typology may well be transferred and adapted to other sports, which future studies should attempt to do. The authors further highlight the need for future research to investigate how these roles may be targeted with adequate content and opportunities, and how industry professionals can help community members grow from one role to another (e.g., developing a novice into an expert).

In a panel-based survey of soccer fans, Alon and Shuv-Ami (2021) apply a novel customer-centric model to study brand communities. They investigate four types of relationships, i.e., those between fans and other fans, fans and management, fans and team, and fans and product. They show that these relationships significantly predict team identification and loyalty which, in turn, predict the intent to attend games. They further provide a tool for team sport clubs to systematically assess these relationships. The authors call for longitudinal studies that will focus on whether and how different fan relationships affect team identification and loyalty. They further suggest segmenting and analyzing fan collectives with different relationship anchors. Table 1 provides a summary of the reviewed papers, including their core contributions.

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Looking at and reflecting on the contributions above, it becomes clear that there has been a steady development and growing sophistication of research on brand communities in the sports domain. Looking at their reference list, Devasagayam and Buff (2008) did not have a single source on brand communities in sports to cite from within the field. Much has changed since then. Many leading journals in the field of sport management and marketing, such as *Sport Management Review* (e.g., Popp & Woratschek, 2016), *Sport Marketing Quarterly* (e.g., Devasagayam & Buff, 2008), the *International Journal of Sport Management and Marketing*

(e.g., Warren & Brownlee, 2013), the *International Journal of Sports Marketing and Sponsorship* (e.g., Lupinek, 2019), and the *International Journal of Sport Communication* (e.g., Kirkwood et al., 2019) have published articles on brand communities.

Seven out of ten studies in the present review conceptualize brand communities by using Muniz & O’Guinn’s (2001) definition, which was also presented above. This means it is the dominant mode of conceptualizing brand communities. One noteworthy exception is the study by Alon and Shuv-Ami (2021), who build on Cova and Pace (2006), by viewing the brand community as a social universe “with its own myths, values, rituals, and hierarchy” (Cova & Pace, 2006, p. 1089). The studies presented above use a variety of theoretical lenses; social exchange theory and identity theory seem to be particularly prevalent. They draw on international samples from countries such as Canada, Germany, Israel, Korea, the United Kingdom, and the United States, reflecting a research endeavor by the international sport management and marketing community. They cover several sport disciplines, ranging from soccer to football to basketball to martial arts. While quantitative, survey-based research seems to be a standard, innovative approaches, such as social network analysis and netnography, have also been employed (more recently).

Nevertheless, there are many issues that remain unaddressed to date and require further analysis, as the authors of the above studies point out. Much progress, however, can also be made by looking to adjacent disciplines, taking a broader view of the phenomenon of brand communities, and focusing on emerging issues or approaches that will likely gain traction in the next few years. In the next chapter, seven areas of future research will be presented, which are meant to inspire the next generation of studies on brand communities in sports.

Future Directions

To make or buy community?

There is strong tendency in sport marketing to work closely with agencies, who supply anything from marketing strategies to rights management to sponsorship to specific operational services (Dietl et al., 2017; Lee & Walsh, 2011; Li & Burden, 2002; Manoli & Hodgkinson, 2017). Digital marketing is likely outsourced, too, given the lack of expertise of many traditional sport marketing departments (Thukral & Ratten, 2021).

In a study of digital marketing outsourcing in small and medium sized enterprises in Germany, Viana and colleagues (2020) find that more than half of the 700 industry respondents outsource certain activities to external agencies. More specifically, they distinguish between three broad service categories: interaction, analysis, and management/integration. The bulk of the outsourcing budget, i.e., 50-75%, is spent on the first category, interactions, which includes the management of exchanges on different social media platforms and community management by the agency (on behalf of the client). Yet, it appears that no study in the field of sport management and marketing has addressed the aspect of outsourcing social media and community activities. Future research on community outsourcing should investigate which activities are considered core (and done in-house) and which peripheral (and outsourced). What are the opportunities and barriers associated with the outsourcing of community activities? How are outsourcing relationships between sport entity and agency nurtured and professionally developed? What are the most effective governance modes of such collaborations? Longitudinal studies that take a dyadic approach to the outsourcing relationship (i.e., involving both sport entity and agency) are likely to be highly insightful in this regard.

Another important issue concerns the question of where companies cultivate their brand communities – on existing social media platforms or on proprietary, i.e. owned, platforms. While some researchers focus on social media brand communities (e.g., Fenton et al., 2021), Wagner (2021) points out that sport organizations may build their own brand communities “on-domain”, giving them greater discretion about design, governance, and monetization/sponsorship, among other things. In essence, this is another choice about make or buy, weighing in on using existing information technology infrastructure of established social media platforms or building and maintaining such infrastructure in-house. The studies by Guimaraes and colleagues (2016) and Popp and Woratschek (2016), reviewed above, are examples of such on-domain communities, as they were designed, built, and run by their owners. Future research should investigate how and why sport entities go for one or the other option (make vs. buy), compare and contrast both approaches, ideally in a quasi-experimental set-up, and observe how sport entities develop the digital capabilities required for building a community in-house (Westerman et al., 2014).

Getting value from community

Any major investment in an organization will have to prove its worth in terms of business value. In a survey of more than 300 social media and community managers, conducted by the *German Association of Community Management* (Clauss et al., 2019), professionals stated different objectives for their activities: increasing reach (78%), customer engagement (61%), and brand awareness (54%) seemed to be dominant motives. However, these outcomes are often considered “soft” outcomes by senior management. Researchers and practitioners should thus strive to establish community value by linking community outcomes more prominently to relevant business outcomes, e.g., sales. Admittedly, this can prove challenging in operational terms, as conversations and sales often happen on distinct technological platforms (for example,

the community vs. the web shop). Hence, different data sources need to be tapped and integrated, which may pose a technical barrier.

Manchanda and colleagues (2015), for example, show that, after the introduction of a customer community by a multichannel retailer, additional customer spendings were significantly driven by more active and better connected community members. The community broke even on the initial investment after about 33.000 members joined – yet the organization managed to onboard more than 260.000 new members in the first 15 months of operation. The community was thus considered a “very profitable investment” (Manchanda et al., 2015, p. 384). Such research is currently still rare and more of it is urgently needed.

In the future, sport management and marketing researchers will need to customize generic community objectives to the sport context, e.g., by taking account of new membership requests, merchandise or ticket purchases, game attendance, rankings on search engines. Researchers should also pay closer attention to community value as an outcome variable (and there may be multiple relevant outcomes, e.g., revenues generated, innovations developed, increased collaboration; see also Wagner (2021) for an in-depth discussion of community types), so that high-impact communities can be more closely analyzed and contrasted with others. This requires more in-depth, case-based research. Furthermore, obtaining a broad view of what industry professionals are trying to accomplish, requires frequent updates and better international collaboration of industry bodies, such as the *German Association of Community Management* (e.g., Clauss et al., 2019) and *The Community Roundtable* (e.g., Happe & Storer, 2020), among others (an international dialogue has recently been initiated; see also Wagner et al., 2021).

Building a community capability

In the strategy literature, dynamic capabilities have emerged as an important concept. Dynamic capabilities describe an organization's capacity to adapt to a changing business environment. In light of the ongoing digital transformation of sport (Ströbel et al., 2021), it is worthwhile to look at the capabilities that will support or drive the adaptation of sport organizations (see also Merten et al., 2022). Lefebvre (2020), for example, has made use of dynamic capabilities to analyze esports implementations of professional football clubs.

Social media and brand communities may support organizations in this digital transformation process, too. Trainor and colleagues (2014), for instance, suggest that the social media use of organizations positively influences the social customer relationship capabilities and performance of organizations. Wagner et al. (2017) show how communities help organizations to sense changes in customer preferences, seize business opportunities, and reconfigure organizational resources. They emphasize that "successful digital business strategies ... integrate IT-enabled social experiences through online communities into organizations' core products and competencies" (Wagner et al., 2017, p. 32).

Research into a community capability should scrutinize what characterizes an organization's community approach, i.e., the anchoring of community in organizational strategy, organizational structures that support community (e.g., budgets, teams, responsibilities), activities that foster community, and the value that organizations can capture with help of community (see also preceding section). Given the natural community set-up of many sport organizations, they may serve as insightful destinations for an emergent community capability research program.

Solving the engagement puzzle

Customer engagement has been a key research area for scholars in marketing over the past decade (Pansari & Kumar, 2017). It is highly relevant for both researchers and practitioners. Customer brand engagement can be defined as “a consumer's positively valenced cognitive, emotional and behavioral brand-related activity during, or related to, specific consumer/brand interactions” (Hollebeek et al., 2014, p. 154). Sport marketing scholars have analyzed fan engagement in brand communities for soccer (Alonso-Dos-Santos et al., 2018; Vale & Fernandes, 2018; Zanini et al., 2019) and cricket (Agrawal et al., 2018), for example. In a sense, an engaged community is the ideal state.

Returning to the survey of social media and community professionals by Clauss et al. (2019), increasing engagement is an objective named by 61% of the respondents, which is the second most frequently named objective overall. However, only about half of them also have the ability to track the business impact of it (33%). One major challenge here is the measurement of the engagement construct. Many practitioners work with simple interaction statistics (e.g., views, comments, likes) to track engagement. This, of course, falls short of capturing the more complex “cognitive, emotional and behavioral brand-related activities”, as suggested by Hollebeek et al. (2014). Several scholars have been working on providing researchers and practitioners with standardized measurement instruments (e.g., Baldus et al., 2015; Dessart et al., 2016; Schivinski et al., 2016). It would be great progress to see more practitioners make use of these scales to evaluate engagement in a more sophisticated way – and for these efforts to be captured by sport management and marketing researchers. Since many of the scales are generic in nature, they will need to be carefully customized to fit the sport context in which they are applied. To date, no

brand engagement scale has been introduced in the field of sport management and marketing, making this a potential innovation in its own right and worthy of a dedicated study

Focusing on effective brand community practices

Another theme that is related to the prior theme of engagement, yet relevant in its own right, is the focus on effective community (engagement) practices. Practice theorists focus heavily on the practices that guide human activity, normally by looking at the following three layers: practices, practitioners, and praxis (Whittington, 2006). Marketing-as-practice (MAP) has emerged as a novel approach in the field of marketing, with a dedicated research agenda (Skålén et al., 2022).

In an early piece of research using practice theory, Hollebeek and colleagues (2017) scrutinize the engagement practices of a luxury brand community, a handbag forum. They identify eight generic practices that help to foster community engagement, namely greeting, regulating, assisting, appreciating, empathizing, mingling, celebrating, and ranking. Zanini et al. (2019) adapt Hollebeek's typology to their analysis of a soccer brand community, that of São Paulo FC soccer club, on Twitter. This is likely the first piece of research to transfer practice theory into the sport marketing domain. There is considerable room to conduct further practice-based research in the field of sport management and marketing, more generally, and on brand communities, more specifically.

Moreover, it may be worthwhile observing how senior corporate leaders act as ambassadors and active members of brand communities. For example, Heavey et al. (2020) assess the presence of 275 strategic leaders from various industries of the Fortune 100 list and derive six archetypical social media engagement practices of corporate leaders: conveyance, evangelization, dialogue, mobilization, obfuscation, and celebrityization. In the sport context,

Parent and colleagues (2018) acknowledge the critical role of social media skills for senior executives and boards of national sport organizations, calling for further research in this arena. This point is also noteworthy in that it shifts the focus of community and engagement practices to employees and other stakeholders, beyond fans. Exactly how sport organizations are preparing their leadership teams to achieve this would be a laudable research effort.

In a cautionary note, Kozinets (2021) warns brand community scholars that established notions of community engagement practices need to be quickly updated, as algorithmically driven social media companies are increasingly integrating and automating ‘social networking’ and ‘community management’ functionalities into their platforms. Evaluating options and applications for automating community management practices, e.g., through artificial intelligence, may thus provide another insightful avenue for future research.

Analyzing the full community life cycle

Many studies in the field of brand communities are undertaken when the communities are already established and successful or, in other words, mature. Scholars in sport management and marketing should carefully scrutinize the full community lifecycle, from nurturing communities to maturation to dissolution. Young (2013), in the context of health-related communities, for example, introduces a community lifecycle approach that comprises four lifecycle stages, i.e. inception, establishment, maturity, and mitosis. Each of the stages merits further research in the field of sport management and marketing.

Resnick and colleagues (2011, p. 231), in a chapter dedicated to starting new communities in their classic book, acknowledge that “most online communities never really get off the ground”. According to them, marketers frequently fail to address important challenges, such as identifying the right niche, the careful screening of the existing community ecosystem

(and, thus, competition), or acquiring a critical mass of members. Research on how sport entities navigate these challenges, particularly those that do not constitute love brands with an existing global audience, such as minor league teams or niche sports, is much encouraged.

The speed of development of the social media ecosystem is clearly a challenge for industry professionals (Wagner, 2021). It is intuitive to research the rise of new platforms, e.g., TikTok, and the adoption by sport organizations. However, communities may split up into smaller subcommunities, be absorbed by larger communities, or die. The phase of decline is currently under-researched and requires further scrutiny. For example, it would be insightful to study the processes around how brand communities are abolished on declining social media platforms (of which Twitter seems to be a timely example in early 2023, having halved its market value after the takeover of Elon Musk in late 2022 and witnessed an exodus of users). The article by Guimaraes and colleagues (2016) is an example of a study in the sport context that explicitly addresses the reasons for failure of a brand community that is ultimately dissolved, caused by a failure to deliver on member motivations and brand promises.

Moreover, future research may study how communities are migrated from one platform to another, which appears to be difficult, due to coordination and network effects (Fiesler & Dym, 2020). Even for on-domain communities, host organizations (i.e., brands) are frequently switching vendors (Young, 2013), providing an opportunity for sport management and marketing scholars to study such community migrations.

Community for Web 3.0

While Web 1.0 was mainly characterized by static web pages, Web 2.0 allowed users to create content and interact with each other. Much community-building in previous years was done around the infrastructure of Web 2.0 (Wagner, 2021). Web 3.0 describes a broad range of

emerging internet applications based on blockchain technology. Underlying this move to Web 3.0 is a trend to decentralize the Internet, allowing users to re-gain control over data and information. It also provides a means for creators to be rewarded for their content, thereby providing an opportunity of monetization for the creator economy. Four of these blockchain-based applications are fungible tokens, non-fungible tokens, decentralized autonomous organizations, and metaverses (Murray et al., 2022). Each of these applications has implications for sport organizations in their own right and may be discussed in future research works.

One example of Web 3.0 in the field of sport is Budweiser's 2022 Super Bowl commercial titled "Zero in the Way of Possibility". Originally destined to promote a new beverage, Bud Light Next, the commercial has a segment that features a man in a museum in front of a classical painting of a woman wearing an animated pair of blue glasses. These animated glasses, often gone unnoticed, came about through a partnership of Budweiser with Nouns DAO. Nouns DAO gifted Budweiser a digital artwork of a pixelated beer mug wearing glasses ahead of the Super Bowl. Budweiser, in turn, agreed to change its Twitter profile to that of a pixelated beer mug and feature a pair of Nouns glasses in the Super Bowl commercial (Murray et al., 2022). Ahead of the Super Bowl commercial, in 2021, Budweiser started to sell the Heritage Collection, an NFT collection composed of 1,936 unique digital cans, representing 1936, the year the first Budweiser can was created. Another NFT collection was issued by Budweiser for the 2022 FIFA World Cup (*Budverse NFT*, 2023). Likewise, the National Basketball Association (NBA), another innovative player in the sports arena, has started to issue digital collectibles, the NBA Top Shot NFTs, to commemorate players and game highlights. FANZONE, an NFT agency based in Berlin, Germany, is partnering with several high-profile sport organizations, such as the Team Deutschland, Deutscher Fussball-Bund, FC Bayern

Munich, and Schalke 04, among others, to offer digital collectibles (*FANZONE, 2023*). Future research should carefully review how sport entities are developing innovative, digital products with help of blockchain, more generally, and NFTs, more specifically, including the additional income generated. Future studies should also illuminate how NFTs are used in innovative sponsorship arrangements, as in the case of the Super Bowl. Ultimately, brand community activations - to support sponsorships and sales, and reach younger target groups - are another area for investigation.

Communities will play a major role in the development of Web 3.0. Murray and colleagues (2022) recommend companies heed special attention to stakeholders and communities when considering how to make Web 3.0 work for them. More specifically, they state that “the rise of digital and decentralized ownership emphasizes stakeholder management, increasing the importance of shared success or win-win value systems ..., [thereby] becoming a way for organizations and firms to strategically attract users and build tighter relationships with stakeholder communities” (Murray et al., 2022, p. 10). Furthermore, “DAOs [are] becoming the next generation of online communities, subreddits, and forums,” as they allow collectives to form and collaborate around shared interests (Murray et al., 2022, p. 7). Accordingly, sport organizations are well advised to pursue so called community-based strategies (see also preceding section on building a community-capabilty).

Conclusion

Online brand communities have been discussed in the literature for about two decades. Originating in the field of marketing and consumer research, they are now a popular phenomenon for study in the field of sport management and marketing, too. Today many - if not most - sport organizations do entertain their own brand communities. This article traces the

development of community thinking in the field of sport management and sport marketing. Key articles, published in leading sport management and marketing journals, were identified, reviewed, and their core contributions distilled. Not only have more and more studies appeared over time, research has also grown more diverse, e.g., in terms of sport disciplines and geographical areas covered, and more sophisticated, e.g., in terms of theories or methods employed in the studies.

Next, seven areas of future research were outlined that are meant to inspire the next generation of studies on brand communities in the field of sport management and marketing. More specifically, these areas are: 1) Make or buy community?, 2) getting value from community, 3) building a community capability, 4) solving the community engagement puzzle, 5) focusing on effective community engagement practices, 6) analyzing the full community life-cycle, and 7) community for web 3.0. These research areas were derived from adjacent fields, such as marketing, service management, strategy, and organization.

The areas cover both strategic dimensions (i.e., community outsourcing, community value, and community capabilities) as well as operational dimensions (i.e., community engagement practices and community life-cycle). Ultimately, the section on community and Web 3.0 addresses how the community space could be impacted by the evolution of technology, thereby shedding light on future developments. By addressing these areas further, sport management and marketing scholars have the opportunity to conduct meaningful research that may find its way into the field's top journals. At the same time, they could shed light on the big picture that will help industry professionals to position community at the executive level, e.g., on management boards of sport organizations, as well as to provide a more nuanced view of and guidance on community operations (Jaworski, 2011).

Brand communities are here to stay. In fact, they are likely to grow in importance, as several of the researchers cited in this commentary have attested (e.g., Lupinek, 2019; Popp & Woratschek, 2016; Wagner, 2021). If we are to observe a new class of community-driven organizations, as Spinks (2021) suggests, exciting times are ahead for community researchers. Given the fact that many sport organizations are by definition membership-based and community-driven, characterized by a high degree of fan passion, identification, and loyalty (Smith & Stewart, 2010), there are good reasons why sport management and marketing scholars should be at the forefront of this movement. What is more, instead of following the general marketing research, as was previously done, preconditions described above may present an opportunity to leapfrog over adjacent disciplines and leverage the unique nature of the sport context to advance the field of communities, both theoretically and empirically.

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Table 1*Important Milestones for the Development of Brand Communities in Sport Management and Marketing*

Author(s)	Year	Title	Journal	Key contribution(s)
Devasagayam, P. R., & Buff, C. L.	2008	A Multidimensional Conceptualization of Brand Community: An Empirical Investigation	Sport Marketing Quarterly	Introduce brand community to sport
Warren, C. J., & Brownlee, E. A.	2013	Brand community integration in a niche sport: A league-wide examination of online and offline involvement in minor league soccer in North America	International Journal of Sport Management and Marketing	Start researching online (vs. offline) populations of brand communities
Guimaraes, G., Stride, C., & O'Reilly, D.	2016	Brand community, loyalty and promise in myfootballclub.co.uk	Sport, Business and Management: An International Journal	Establish relevance of user motivations and keeping of brand promise; scrutinize failure of community
Popp, B., & Woratschek, H.	2016	Introducing branded communities in sport for building strong brand relations in social media	Sport Management Review	Establish relevance of topic relevance and information quality; introduce notion of <i>branded</i> communities
Popp, B., Germelmann, C., & Jung, B.	2016	We love to hate them! Social media-based anti-brand communities in professional football	International Journal of Sports Marketing and Sponsorship	Use a novel methodological approach (netnography); open dialogue around the

Lupinek, J. M.	2019	Tracing the ABC's of brand community	International Journal of Sports Marketing and Sponsorship	dark side of brand communities, specifically brand negativity Puts forward a framework for sport practitioners to leverage brand-specific attachment dimensions
Naraine, M. L., Pegoraro, A., & Wear, H.	2019	#WeTheNorth: Examining an Online Brand Community Through a Professional Sport Organization's Hashtag Marketing Campaign	Communication & Sport	Use a novel methodological approach (social network analysis); analyze communication network over time, incl. segmentation of network
Kirkwood, M., Yap, S.-F., & Xu, Y.	2019	An Exploration of Sport Fandom in Online Communities	International Journal of Sport Communication	Provide a typology of user roles in sport communities
Alon, A. T., & Shuv-Ami, A.	2021	Applying the Customer-Centric Model to the Investigation of Brand Communities of Professional Sports Teams	Sport Marketing Quarterly	Establish a novel model and measurement of fan-centric relationships

Oshiro, K. F., Weems, A. J., & Singer, J. N.	2021	Cyber Racism Toward Black Athletes: A Critical Race Analysis of TexAgs.com Online Brand Community	Communication & Sport	Introduce the topics of hate speech, cyber racism; analyze how sport environments mirror political/societal structures
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