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Publisher citation:

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Online branding of the offline experience: The importance of corporate branding for experiential events

Introduction/Purpose of the Paper

In a recent survey, European music festivals organisers confirmed a lack of available headliners and increasing cost of headline acts were two of the immediate challenges facing the European music festival industry (IQ Magazine, 2016). While practical dialogue has simply recommended a move away from music as the predominant motivational driver for attendance, this only serves to shift the problem elsewhere. While successful differentiation through non-musical activities is straightforward, the problem becomes how to accurately convey this subjective, immersive experience to potential attendees. Relatively easy to achieve during the event itself, it is often the case that tickets are bought many months in advance of the festival; distinctive displays during the festival are therefore of little use to advanced ticket sales. With few other options available, organisers are forced to direct much of their festival marketing activity toward an online context. Such a focus, however, appears fitting; in 2015, 42% of European festival tickets were sold in advance directly from the festival organiser's own website, with a further 39% from 3rd party websites (IQ Magazine, 2016); only 3% were sold from on-the-day walk-ups. With such a dominance of online sales, it is more important than ever that festivals build and maintain a strong online brand presence. However, displaying "*the entire corporation on a single screen*" (Merrilees & Fry, 2002, p. 213) is challenging, especially considering the multitude of stakeholders that the platform must address. Theory, both academic and practical, would suggest organisers focus on designing and delivering an online brand universe – a large online space intended to mimic the experiential place (Kapferer, 2008). However, creating an online space to showcase a corporate brand, especially one so invested in the subjective experience, is fraught with difficulties.

In recent years, one solution has come in the shift from product branding to corporate branding online, with the latter providing an increasingly strategic mechanism for securing the benefits of differentiation, customer involvement, and customer satisfaction (Omar, Williams & Lingelbach 2009). However, the extent of exploration of online corporate branding is still limited and contextually ambiguous – this research responds to calls to extend this scope (Hamzah, Alwi & Othman, 2014). To achieve this, the paper will explore how festival organisers use websites, social media, apps and other representational practices to create online corporate brands, and how these online brands are then interpreted and adopted by potential stakeholders. In doing so, this paper further explores the concept of online corporate branding in a new, more experiential context.

Theoretical Background

A corporate brand is "*the visual, verbal and behavioural expression of an organisation's unique business model*" (Knox & Bickerton, 2013, p. 1013). Corporate brands, unlike product brands, encompass internal and external stakeholders and strategic alliances and "*provides sameness and credibility about its organisation to all its stakeholders*" (Hamzah, Alwi & Othman 2014, p. 2300). This holistic approach to branding has been driven by the associated long-term benefits including, at its most simplistic level, brand differentiation (Hamzah, Alwi

& Othman, 2014) and consolidation of brand positioning when communicating vision, culture and image at the corporate level (Hatch & Schultz 2001). Leveraging the benefits associated with brand value and brand promise is incredibly important for the experience-creating festival that must seamlessly blend entertainment, education, aesthetic design, and escape from day-to-day life into one compelling intelligible message. An ability to emphasise such a transformative brand experience is a prerequisite for long-term brand relationships, stakeholder trust, brand engagement, brand loyalty and brand equity, (Balmer & Gray, 2003; Christodoulides & De Chernatony, 2004; Xie & Boggs 2006 Rowley 2009). To take full advantage of these benefits and build the brand in the minds of all stakeholders, a consistent multidisciplinary approach is required (Balmer & Gray 2003); an especially challenging task given the additional issues faced online, for example the prevalence of unmediated user generated content. Despite the importance attributed to corporate branding, relatively little has been done to transfer this knowledge to an online context.

An online brand experience “*encompasses all the points of interaction between the customer and the brand in the virtual space*” (Christodoulides & De Chernatony 2004, p. 170). Albeit very simply phrased, ‘*all the interactions*’ very deliberately emphasises the inclusive nature of the online brand experience, and in doing so stresses the complex and multi-faceted stakeholder approach required to successfully implement online corporate branding. Addressing varied stakeholders is particularly hard for online corporate branding of modern festivals; whereas previously festivals have been able to focus predominantly on consumer entertainment associated with the music, modern festivals must appease a growing number of stakeholders with messages of sustainability, environmentalism, cultural awareness, and education. To approach the varied messages that an experiential brand must convey, Schmitt (1999) conceptualises five brand dimensions that must be considered: sensory, affective, cognitive, lifestyle and behavioural, and social. Although conceived holistically, studies tend to approach these dimensions as separate entities, with the affective dimension commonly emphasised from the perspective of experiential organisations; the ease by which functional aspects (e.g. search and navigation quality) can be replicated limit the brand’s ability to achieve long-term differentiation whereas unique emotive dimensions facilitate sustainable success (Morgan-Thomas & Veloutsou 2013).

Appealing directly to the consumers’ affective state, current branding research emphasises the value of emotive aspects of the brand experience (Morgan-Thomas & Veloutsou 2013; Mollen & Wilson 2010; Rowley 2004). Applied to a festival context, Anderton (2011) uses affect to explore the carnivalesque aspect of outdoor music events, arguing for the importance of experiential marketing to balance the emotional aspects of the carnival with the competing aspect of commerce. Although conclusions can be drawn – “*festival organisers and sponsors need to understand the history of the sector and of their own events and attendees in order to use corporate sponsorship more effectively*” (Anderton, 2011, p. 145), they do become difficult to implement due to the lack of consideration of the other domains, for example, the cognitive dimension (e.g. functionality and usefulness) is overlooked. Such a focus on brand relationships and brand engagement at the expense of the functional technological characteristics of online use (e.g. search and navigation quality) is not uncommon and can prove problematic (Rowley 2004; Mollen & Wilson 2010; Morgan-Thomas & Veloutsou 2013). Similar to emotion, the social aspect of online branding is often isolated. With

consumer-centric mechanisms now available to facilitate real-time stakeholder interaction online (Simmons 2007), co-construction of brands is a significant means of providing personalised online experiences and interaction (Ibeh et al., 2005) – a necessity when creating successful brands online (Simmons 2007). Again, however, without being connected to the other brand dimensions, implementation of social processes alone holds little value to the overall corporate brand.

In an attempt to realign corporate brand dimensions in an online setting, Hamzah, Alwi & Othman (2014) develop Schmitt's (1999) corporate brand experience to identify: corporate visual identity, emotional experience, functionality, lifestyle, and corporate/self-identity as online corporate brand (OCB) dimensions. However, tested in a weak experiential setting of the banking industry, the relevance and transferability to a strong experiential setting like a festival is unknown. Although it is expected that the online corporate branding components identified by Schmitt (1999) and Hamzah, Alwi & Othman (2014) will be, to an extent applicable to a festival context, it is anticipated that these dimensions can be better developed to reflect a strong experiential OCB. In doing so, this paper will help redefine brand management strategies, specifically corporate brand dimensions to accommodate the rise of the online environment, and capitalise on the new branding opportunities that it presents to festival brand managers.

Methodology (Data collection has not yet been carried out)

It is recognised that OCB is still in its infancy and further exploration is necessary, especially in context-specific studies. In order to accurately reflect and develop previous theory, this study will replicate the exploratory 'directed content analysis' methodology applied by Hamzah Alwi & Othman (2014). Using a series of focus groups populated by a range of music festival stakeholders, individuals will be shown a number of online festival webpages representational of online practices (e.g. websites, social media pages, apps). The dimensions proposed by both Schmitt (1999) and Hamzah, Alwi & Othman (2014) will be used to guide initial conversations, however emerging themes specific to the nuances of the festival industry will be encouraged and explored in depth.

Findings (Findings have not yet been attained)

This paper aims to help overcome the academic ambivalence surrounding the role and importance of corporate brands online, specifically as a strategic orientation for experiential and event brands. By revealing and exploring the dimensions of the corporate brand that contribute value to experiential brands, a model for Online Corporate Experiential Brands (OCEB) dimensions will be proposed.

Originality /Value/ Contribution of Paper

This research advances experiential and corporate branding theory in the online context. Little research has been carried out in this area, especially in the context of music festivals. Focussing on how potential festival attendees interact with experiential brands online, the paper will provide recommendations to industry professionals as to how best exploit resources to accurately convey the festival brand and its experiential offering in a corporate online context.

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